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HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP DEVELOPMENT IN NORTHEAST INDIA: A THEORETICAL INTEGRATION AND CONCEPTUAL MODEL

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Keywords

HRM, Entrepreneurship, Northeast India, Human Capital, Resource-Based View, Social Capital, Institutional Theory.

Abstract

Northeast India has become a key focus of India's inclusive growth policy. The region, which includes eight states – Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura – is seeing a rise in entrepreneurial activities backed by various initiatives of the central and state governments like Start-up India, PM-DevINE and NEDFi. But the failure rate of entrepreneurs is still alarmingly high and it is estimated that 60-70% of startups become dormant within three years. Existing literature has focused on financial limitations and infrastructural gaps as the reasons for failure, but this theoretical paper suggests that the key, but under-researched, factor for entrepreneurial sustainability in the region is Human Resource Management. The paper, which integrates four dominant theoretical lenses (Human Capital Theory, Resource Based View, Institutional Theory and Social Capital Theory), proposes a Community-Embedded HRM Model for Entrepreneurial

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	Growth specific to the socio-cultural context of Northeast India. The paper identifies four HRM dimensions - culturally sensitive recruitment and selection, localized and hybrid skill development, community-based retention and welfare, and participative, council-based leadership - as direct drivers of entrepreneurial performance. Affective commitment and innovative work behaviour mediate the relationship, and institutional support moderates the relationship. This paper contributes to theory by situating mainstream HRM-entrepreneurship linkage in a collectivist and tribal-dominated context and offers practical implications for entrepreneurs, incubators and policy makers.

1. Introduction

The Northeast region of India, which includes Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura, is a distinct socio-economic region of great strategic significance. It occupies an area of 262,230 sq. km. (7.9% of the geographical area of India) and has a population of about 45 million. The region shares 98% of its borders with five countries, Bhutan, China, Myanmar, Bangladesh and Nepal, which is why it is at the heart of India's Act East Policy and its vision of connectivity with Southeast Asia. The area is linked to the mainland India by a thin 22 km long Siliguri Corridor also known as the Chicken's Neck.

Geographical isolation, poor transport and market connectivity, lack of private investment, prolonged insurgency and political instability, and difficult terrain have all been a part of a complex mix of structural and historical factors that have hindered economic development in Northeast India for decades. The economy was agrarian, had little industrialization, and even less private sector. Unemployment, especially educated youth unemployment, has consistently been above the national average. CMIE and periodic labour force surveys have found that states such as Tripura, Nagaland and Manipur have unemployment rates in double digits, much higher than the national average.

There has been a concerted and multi-pronged policy push since 2014 to change this trend and bring the region into the growth story of India. Key initiatives include start-up India, Stand-Up India, North East Entrepreneurship Development Programme implemented by the Indian Institute of Entrepreneurship Guwahati, Prime Minister's Development Initiative for North East with an initial outlay of Rs 6,600 crore, North Eastern Development Finance Corporation Ltd., North Eastern Council, and state-specific startup policies of Assam, Manipur, Nagaland, and others. The establishment of incubation centres at IIT Guwahati, NIT Silchar, Mizoram University, Nagaland Tool Room & Training Centre, and NERAMAC has created a nascent but growing support ecosystem.

As per Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade States Startup Ranking Report 2024, the number of DPIIT-recognized startups in the region has grown exponentially from 179 in 2018 to over 1,284 in 2024. Assam leads with over 823 startups, followed by Manipur with 138, Tripura with 104, and Nagaland with 89. Sectors witnessing growth include agri-processing and organic products based on Joha rice, black rice, Bhut Jolokia, bamboo shoots, handloom and handicrafts based on Eri silk and tribal motifs, eco-tourism and homestays, IT services and ed-tech, and food processing.

Despite this encouraging growth in venture creation, venture sustainability is a major concern and the Achilles' heel of the ecosystem. While data on failure rates is not systematically tracked, anecdotal

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evidence and internal reports from Indian Institute of Entrepreneurship Guwahati and NEDFi suggest that nearly 60-70% of startups become dormant or fail to scale beyond the ideation and early revenue stage within 3 years of inception. The Global Entrepreneurship Monitor India Report 2022-23 highlights that the overall early-stage entrepreneurial activity rate in the Northeast is high, but the rate of established business ownership is low, suggesting a high discontinuation rate.

In-depth diagnostic studies and field interactions suggest that the high mortality is due to a deeper micro-level organizational issue, namely people management, which is not addressed by policy discourse or existing academic literature, which focuses on funding gaps, market access, high logistics costs, and lack of mentoring. Most of the founders in the region are first generation entrepreneurs who are technically proficient in their field, whether it be organic farming, weaving, coding, or tourism, but not necessarily in managerial skills, especially in managing, motivating and retaining people. From the field observations, it is found that most startups have very informal HRM practices, such as hiring family, friends, and clan members, no formal training systems, no performance management, no compensation benchmarking, no leave policy, and no retention strategy. Interpersonal conflicts spill over to community relations, compromising the social legitimacy and market reputation of the venture.

This brings up a basic and under-researched question: What is the impact of HRM practices on entrepreneurial development and sustainability in the Northeast region of India? The purpose of this theoretical paper is to address this by synthesizing theories and literature in context. This paper aims to achieve three objectives: (1) to synthesize dominant theories explaining the linkage between HRM and entrepreneurship; (2) to contextualize these theories in the unique socio-cultural and institutional context of Northeast India; and (3) to propose a Community-Embedded HRM Model for Entrepreneurial Growth with testable propositions and an agenda for future empirical research.

2. Theoretical Underpinnings

A single theory is not enough to explain the HRM-entrepreneurship relationship in a unique context such as Northeast India. We combine four complementary theories that together account for universal and context-specific mechanisms.

2.1 Human Capital Theory

Developed by Schultz (1961) and Becker (1964), Human Capital Theory posits that investment in education, training, health, and experience enhances individual productivity and earnings, thereby contributing to economic growth at both individual and national levels. In entrepreneurship literature, human capital is disaggregated into two components: founder human capital including education, prior industry experience, entrepreneurial experience, and skills, and employee human capital including knowledge, skills, and abilities of the workforce.

Unger et al. (2011) in a meta-analysis of 70 studies found a significant but moderate relationship between human capital and entrepreneurial success with an effect size of $r = 0.24$, with stronger effects for outcomes related to human capital investments than for general education.

The Human Capital Theory argument is even more important and complex in Northeast India. There is little formal industrial experience, due to the historical lack of development of the private sector.

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The workforce is educated but not industry ready. For instance, Assam has more than 15,000 engineering graduates and thousands of MBA graduates every year, but according to the employability survey conducted by NASSCOM and Aspiring Minds, only 20-25% of the engineering graduates and 10-12% of the MBA graduates are directly employable without further training. Thus, the development of employee human capital through structured and localized training becomes more important than the western assumption of ready-made human capital from the labour market. In addition, indigenous knowledge, such as knowledge of local herbs, bamboo craftsmanship, traditional weaving techniques, tribal folklore and biodiversity, is a unique form of human capital that is not measured by the number of years spent in school. Moreover, indigenous knowledge, including knowledge of local herbs, bamboo craftsmanship, traditional weaving techniques, tribal folklore and biodiversity, is a form of human capital that is not measured by the number of years spent in school, and is often included in the human capital of the founder in Northeast India. Ignoring this indigenous human capital leads to undervaluation of local talent.

2.2 Resource-Based View

Barney (1991) suggested that sustainable competitive advantage is based on resources that are Valuable, Rare, Inimitable, and Non-substitutable. In a previous study, Penrose (1959) had suggested that the growth of the firm is essentially constrained by its managerial resources. The Resource Based View has been extensively used in entrepreneurship to account for the fact that some businesses succeed while others fail, even when they have the same amount of financial resources.

Financial and technological resources are easily replicable and are frequently controlled by others in a resource-poor area such as Northeast India, through grants from the central government. Technology is available for sale. But a team that is locally embedded, understands the tribal dialects, has community trust, can navigate customary laws and village council decisions, and is loyal to the founder and community is highly inimitable. For instance, an eco-tourism venture in Meghalaya with the Khasi youth who are familiar with the local sacred groves, caves, biodiversity and can narrate local folklore has a VRIN resource which an outside firm cannot copy by just investing money. Likewise, a handloom enterprise in Nagaland with Ao Naga or Angami weavers who have inter-generational knowledge of traditional motifs and natural dyes has an unparalleled human resource. Therefore, RBV can be used to claim that strategic HRM in the Northeast region of India is not an administrative expense but a competitive advantage and differentiation.

2.3 Institutional Theory

DiMaggio and Powell (1983) and Scott (1995) highlight that there are three types of institutions that influence the nature of organizations: regulative (laws and rules), normative (values, norms, and roles), and cultural-cognitive (shared beliefs and scripts). Isomorphism is the tendency for organizations to become legitimate by adapting to institutional pressures.

Northeast India has a strong presence of informal and traditional institutions that coexist with formal state institutions. Regulative institutions include Sixth Schedule provisions, Article 371A-H which protect customary laws, land ownership, and prohibit outsiders from buying tribal land in many states, Inner Line Permit system, and special labour regulations. Normative institutions include Village

ISSN (ELECTRONIC): 2945-3135

Councils in Nagaland, Dorbar Shnong in Meghalaya, Young Mizo Association in Mizoram, Gaon Burahs in Assam, and powerful tribal student unions such as All Assam Students Union, Naga Students' Federation, and All Manipur Students Union. Cultural-cognitive institutions include collectivist values, clan loyalty, respect for elders, reciprocity norms, and festival-centric calendars. Ignoring these and imposing mainland corporate HR models such as individualistic forced ranking, working on major festivals like Bihu, Hornbill, Sangai, or Chapchar Kut, or direct confrontation with elders, leads to legitimacy issues, resistance, social boycott, and high attrition. Therefore, HRM practices must achieve institutional fit and demonstrate institutional entrepreneurship by balancing modern business needs with traditional legitimacy.

2.4 Social Capital Theory

Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) distinguish between structural, relational, and cognitive dimensions of social capital, and Putnam (2000) distinguishes between bonding social capital within close groups and bridging social capital across groups. Coleman (1988) cautioned against the positive and negative aspects of social closure.

The bonding social capital is high in the Northeast societies because of the presence of strong clan, kinship and village bonds. This facilitates early stage resource mobilization, trust building, informal credit and labour support. A business owner can recruit 10 relatives to launch a business in a short time and secure initial customers from the community. But excessive dependence on bonding capital results in amoral familism, nepotism, inbreeding of ideas, absence of professional accountability, and restricts innovation, which requires bridging capital to the outside world, investors, technical knowledge, and different perspectives. In HRM, this translates to a recruitment process that is only focused on bonding capital, which can lead to trust but not competence or innovation. Entrepreneurs' challenge is to use bonding capital for stability and legitimacy and to create bridging capital for growth by employing a variety of hiring, external mentors, market linkages, and national startup events.

3. Review of Literature

The role of HRM in small and entrepreneurial firms.

In their seminal review, Cardon and Stevens (2004) pointed out that HRM in small and entrepreneurial firms is informal, reactive and founder-driven, as opposed to formal HRM departments in large firms. Heneman et al. (2000) discovered that small companies have liabilities of smallness in attracting talent because they cannot pay high salaries, provide a brand name or provide career paths. According to Hornsby and Kuratko (1990), HR problems are among the top three problems faced by small businesses, along with finance and marketing. Cooke and Saini (2010) reported that HR is not usually formalised in Indian SMEs and that the owner of the business is often responsible for HR.

In Northeast India, this informality is magnified due to lack of HR professionals in the local labour market, low awareness of labour laws, dominance of sole proprietorships and family businesses, and absence of large anchor firms that create HR spillovers.

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3.2 Empirical Linkages between HRM Practices and Performance

Rauch and Frese (2000) found HR planning, staff development, and performance-oriented compensation were positively related to small firm performance. Sheehan (2014) concluded that high-performance work systems such as selective hiring, training and participation contributed to the innovation of SMEs. Recent studies in Indian MSMEs revealed that formal training resulted in a productivity gain of 18-22% and minimized rework.

In the case of Northeast India, empirical studies are limited but growing and are converging. Das and Bezbaruah (2022) reported that there was a shortage of skills in the manufacturing sector in Assam and high attrition rate of 25-30% per year. This is contrary to the prevailing policy discourse that finance is the primary constraint, as Shrivastava and Shukla (2021) reported that women entrepreneurs in Imphal and Kohima found managing employees and balancing family roles as a greater challenge than finance. Bhardwaj and Srivastava (2023) found that startups in Guwahati that invested in structured onboarding had 30% lower early attrition within first six months.

Lal and Singh (2020) documented high out-migration: nearly 30% of graduates from Nagaland and Mizoram migrate to metros like Delhi, Bangalore, and Hyderabad for jobs, creating a severe talent vacuum locally. This makes retention, not just recruitment, the most critical HR function. Singh and Patel (2022) in a study of 400 startups in Bangalore found that ventures with formal HR policies had 1.8 times higher survival after 3 years compared to informal ones.

4. Unique HRM Context of Northeast India

4.1 Cultural Diversity and Tribal Dominance: With over 200 scheduled tribes and 400 dialects, cultural intelligence is a core HR competency, not an optional soft skill. A manager in Arunachal Pradesh may manage employees from Nyishi, Adi, Apatani, and Galo tribes in one unit, each with different communication styles and taboos.

4.2 Collectivism and Community Orientation: Tribal societies are collectivist with high in-group loyalty and low tolerance for individual show-off. Performance appraisal that singles out individuals for public rewards may cause shame as it violates humility norms and disharmony within the group. Group-based incentives, community feasts, and recognition of the team work better than employee of the month.

4.3 Government Job Preference and Risk Aversion: NEC Youth Aspiration Survey (2023) found 72% of youth in Northeast India prefer government jobs due to perceived security, social status, and post-retirement benefits. Private startups are seen as risky and temporary. Startups must counter this not just with salary but also by offering security, respect, flexible work, and community recognition.

4.4 Gender Dimension: States like Meghalaya are matrilineal where lineage and inheritance pass through women. Women have high economic participation. In Manipur, Ima Keithel is run entirely by women. HRM policies must be gender-sensitive and can leverage women's self-help groups and handloom clusters as talent pools.

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4.5 Institutional Voids and Informal Economy: Formal institutions like labour courts and EPF offices are weak or geographically distant. Employment contracts are often verbal. This creates institutional voids where informal community mechanisms fill the gap.

5. Proposed Conceptual Framework: Community-Embedded HRM Model

Based on the theoretical integration, we propose a model where four HRM practices directly influence entrepreneurial performance, mediated by employee-level outcomes and moderated by institutional support.

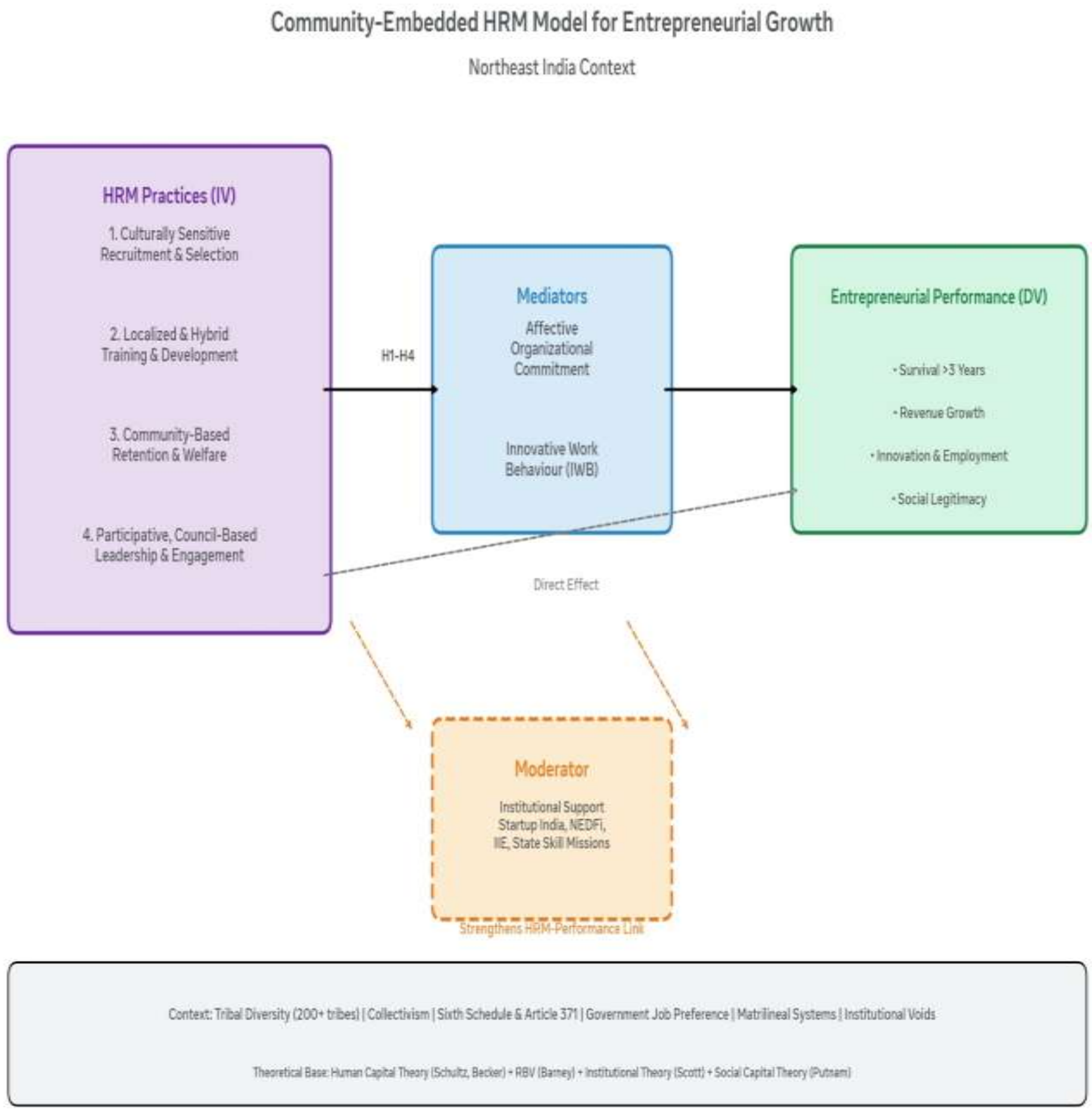

Figure 1: Community-Embedded HRM Model for Entrepreneurial Growth in Northeast India

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Figure 1 depicts the proposed theoretical framework. The four HRM practices are independent variables. Their effect on entrepreneurial performance is both direct and indirect through two mediators - Affective Organizational Commitment (Meyer & Allen, 1991) and Innovative Work Behaviour. Institutional Support acts as a moderator that strengthens the relationship between HRM practices and performance. The entire model is embedded in the unique context of Northeast India characterized by tribal diversity, collectivism, Sixth Schedule, government job preference, and institutional voids, and is grounded in four theories - Human Capital Theory, Resource-Based View, Institutional Theory, and Social Capital Theory.

Proposition 1 - Culturally Sensitive Recruitment and Selection: Recruitment through community networks and local institutions, with competency-based and culturally validated tools for selection will perform better than a purely kinship-based or purely formal selection from the mainland. This is a balance between legality and capability. Practical skill test and structured behavioural interview of practical level in local language while doing sourcing work through student unions such as AASU, Naga Students' Federation, Village Councils, etc., to build trust with them.

Proposition 2 - Localized, Hybrid Training and Development: Training incorporating traditional knowledge with modern skill will improve innovation, minimize training transfer problem and create VRIN human capital. A bamboo craft enterprise training artisans in Tripura with respect to traditional craft motifs and exposing them to the CAD technique. Training to be provided in local language and with local master craftsmen as co-trainers.

Proposition 3 - Community-Based Retention and Welfare: In a low salary capacity context where start-up cannot match corporate salaries, retention through non-monetary, community-aligned welfare will reduce attrition more effectively than only monetary incentives. Components include flexible festival leaves, community recognition, accommodation support, and clear growth pathways from artisan to supervisor.

Proposition 4 - Participative, Council-Based Leadership and Engagement: Leadership style mirroring tribal councils - consultative, consensus-based, and respectful of elders - will lead to higher affective commitment and intrapreneurship. An authoritarian, top-down style imported from mainland corporate culture will lead to high turnover.

The mediators are affective organizational commitment and innovative work behaviour. Institutional support in the form of "Moderator" from Start-up India, NEDFi, IIE and state skill missions. Entrepreneurial performance measured by survival after 3 years, revenue growth, innovation, number of jobs created, and social legitimacy is the dependent variable.

6. Implications and Conclusion

This paper builds on RBV by providing an understanding of how community embeddedness creates imitability of HR and extends the Institutional Theory by illustrating hybrid institutional logics in the context of theory. Training human capital is a step beyond financial support for sustainable entrepreneurship in the Northeast region. Its greatest strength in the region is the social capital and cultural richness. With an effective HRM approach that is culturally sensitive and rooted in the community, it can be a powerful competitive weapon. This model needs to be tested empirically

ISSN (ELECTRONIC): 2945-3135

through survey of 300+ DPIIT recognized start-ups in eight states of the country using SEM and ethnographic qualitative case study of high performing startups and failed startups.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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