



HRM and Indian epistemologies: A review and avenues for future research

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Abstract

India is emerging as a super power, slated to be among the world's five largest economies and viewed by international investors, business conglomerates and tertiary education providers as a land of opportunity. A database search since the opening up of the Indian economy in 1991 reveals a slowly increasing number of scholarly articles on HRM, with a steep rise from the year 2000 onwards. While it is acknowledged that the field of HRM is a broad area, there is currently a dearth of research in specific HRM practices and policies in India to warrant a focus on only one area. Hence the primary objective of this article is to present a scholarly survey of important research literatures in the area of HRM in India, and to offer avenues for future research. To this end this article garners, integrates and discusses research on HRM in India with a focus primarily on the past fifteen years. It is within this complexity that research on India and its workforce is presented by illuminating HRM as embedded in the Indian environment with its intricate epistemologies and transitions in a period of dynamic change.

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1. Introduction

The liberalization of the Indian economy in 1991 has created a raft of challenges for organizations operating in India the world's largest democracy. This country of over a billion potential customers has some of the world's richest individuals, rocket and nuclear technology, and an infrastructure that includes the world's largest slums, with 25% of the population earning less than one USD a day. An IT power house and one of the fastest growing countries for outsourcing, India has the largest area of land under cotton cultivation in the world. Textiles, jewellery and leather produced in this country adorn the top echelons of fashion houses internationally. Indians are born into their castes which creates a social hierarchy that spills over into organizational life. This is the scenario within which Human Resource Management (HRM) is evolving from a primarily industrial relations and personnel function to that of the creation and moulding of strategic and systemic policies and practices aligned with business goals in an environment of intense global competition.

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With its colonial heritage, India has legislative and financial systems that tend to fall within the comfort zones of the West, a large workforce who are conversant with the English language, and a fiercely independent media. Despite increasing numbers of international joint ventures (JV) and multi national corporations (MNC) vying with each other for doing business in India, along with the Indian public and private sector companies, and a growing body of theoretical and empirical literature on the use of strategic and systemic HRM in India, a comprehensive picture of HRM in the Indian context is lacking. Hence the purpose of this paper is to provide a review of the literature on HRM in India and suggest some avenues for future research. A complex challenge exists as the literature pertaining to India and HRM has only more recently been published in international journals, and it is possible that there is much available in the local Indian languages and local publications. The databases accessed included ABI Inform, Business Source Premier, Emerald Fulltext, Informaworld, Management and Organisation Studies, ProQuest 5000 International, Science Direct and Web of Science. Google Scholar was also utilized. These databases typically include research on HRM and the net was cast fairly wide as HRM in India is an emerging area in international journal publications. The reference sections of the journal articles were also examined in order to ensure that relevant research was not excluded.

Based on the existing scholarly literature available on HRM in India, a general framework is offered to structure the relevant topics. The framework is broad for ease of pulling together and navigating the various strands of extant research on HRM in India, despite the knowledge that there are multiple and complex relations between and within each of the delineated areas. See Fig. 1 ‘The mega framework — environmental embeddedness’ and Fig. 2 ‘The conceptual framework — HRM in India’.

This paper is structured as follows: First information about India is presented on the economic and socio-cultural context in which HRM in India is embedded. This is followed by an understanding of how the HRM function is perceived in India. Next the macro HRM configuration is presented through extant research on strategic HRM. Comparative HRM is included in this macro configuration. The next section presents systemic HRM practices and brings together research on acquiring, enhancing and compensating through HRM, and includes recruitment and selection, performance and career management, training and development, compensation, retention, attrition and downsizing. Subsequently, HRM outcomes are offered which include organizational commitment and empowerment, organizational learning and ethical facets pertaining to HRM. The final section presents avenues for future research.

2. HRM embedded in the environment

HRM in India is embedded in its epistemologies which extend back to ancient times. Seven major religions, a pantheon of deities, seventeen official languages, more than a thousand sub-castes, and a patriarchal society are some of the tenets for making meaning and the construction of knowledge in India. While there are variations in Indian epistemologies, there is predominance towards power consciousness, destiny and caste orientation. India has a young population with a median age of 24.8 years, an average life expectancy of 68.59 years, and a GDP of USD 3700 (CIA, 2007). India ranks 70 in the corruption perception index for 2006, which ranks more than 160 countries (Transparency International, 2006). India annually churns out 1.3 million graduates and has 60 million internet users, despite a literacy rate for males at 70.2% and for females at 48.3% (CIA, 2007). The marginalized are increasingly disenfranchised, with wide disparities in income, and the unemployment rate is 7.8% (CIA, 2007).

While IT industries are likely to grow to at least \$60 billion in value by 2010, there is urgent need to have infrastructure developed in both the soft and hard areas in tandem with continued deregulation. India’s working population of 630 million is expected to touch 830 million by 2016, with India having the highest percentage of working people in the BRIC countries (Brazil, Russia, India and China) (Business Today, 2007). Manmohan Singh, India’s current prime minister speaks about a second green revolution in the agricultural sector where 60% of the labour force is employed. Though, with agriculture’s shrinking contribution to the GDP, it would necessitate the absorption of excess labour into the manufacturing and services sectors. In India, manufacturing forms 17% of the GDP, contributes 75% to exports, accounts for over 50% of FDI and employs 11% of the workforce (Business Today, 2007).

2.1. Economic scenario

The world is bullish about India and in 2005–06 the GDP growth rate was 8.4% as compared to 1.3% in 1991–92. Telecom subscribers in 1995 were 0.03 million and in October 2006 they touched 136 million symbolizing tremendous change in India (Business Today, 2007). The long road to these successes has been paved by far reaching and

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