

Identifying Convergence & Divergences in Employment Relations Practices in the Indian SME Sector: in Search of An Integrated Model of Employment Relations

Abhishek Mishra*

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Abstract:

Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) are rightly regarded as the backbone of the Indian economy. Acclimatised as the nurseries for entrepreneurship and innovations, these SMEs are characterised by the absence of traditional Human Resource Management or Employment Relations mechanism which makes the sector being recognised as complex, intricate and autocratic (Ram, 1991). The sector is governed by employment relations practices which are highly fragmented and informal in nature and varies from sector to sector. The present paper aims to highlight the commonalities and divergences in the context of employment relations in the identified sectors under study. Mixed research methodology using questionnaire survey, focus group and non-parametric tests has been ascertained to achieve the research objectives. Finally, an integrated model of employment relations relevant to cross-sectoral SME sector has been developed.

Key words: *Small and Medium Enterprises, Employment relations, convergence, divergence.*

1. Introduction

Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) have started gaining significant importance in the domain of research in recent years. The SMEs have been recognised by the policy makers and researchers as the backbone of Indian economy and the main source of employment provider following the agricultural sector. The sector has also been acclimatised as the nurseries for entrepreneurship and innovations for start ups. The SME sector in India extends its crucial services to different markets in terms of a diversified range of products and services which may include the single artisan producing agricultural product for the local village market, the coffee or tea shop or an internet centre located in the tinsel town of the country to a small modern engineering or a software enterprise

offering its services to the overseas markets or a medium-sized automobile parts manufacturer selling to multinational automakers in the domestic and foreign market (Report of OECD, 2004). However, in spite of its significant contribution and being highly labour intensive in nature, the SME sector is largely devoid of any mechanism (like HRM) to manage human resource or employment relations in the sector. This makes the SME sector employ different sets of indigenous mechanisms and strategies to manage employment relations. Employment relations practices in the SMEs vary from sector to sector. With these considerations in mind, the present paper highlights the convergences and divergences in the context of employment relations in the selected industrial units coming under the definition of SME. On the basis of these convergences and

*Assistant Professor, Institute of Management Studies, Mahatma Gandhi Kashi Vidyapith, (A U.P. State University), Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, E-mail: abhi1234mishra@gmail.com

divergences, at the end, an integrated model of employment relations has also been developed.

2. Employment Relations: Theoretical Perspectives

Employment relations as an academic discipline has gained significant popularity during the last 20 years due to the large scale changes taking place at the organisational level which led to the shifting of relationship between the employers and employees (Shapiro & Shore, 2007). These organisational changes were witnessed in the form of inclination of employers towards hiring 'white collared' employees as against the 'blue collared', diminishing trade unions, emergence of new methods of people management practices like HRM or Personnel management, engagement of atypical workers etc., outsourcing etc. to secure competitive advantage (Lekhi & Blaug, 2009). These changes inculcated deep interest among the researchers to dive deep into the subject of employment relations. Rose (2008) defines employment relations to be the study of both collective and individual relations taking place between the employers and employees with the objective of the determinations of the substantive and procedural issues at workplace. Armstrong (2009: 878) defines employment relations as those workplace relations which include activities like managing of pay-work bargaining, terms and conditions of employment, and other issues which arise out of employment relations like employee voice and collective or individual way of communication between the employers and employees. Thus, this definition too incorporates the aspects collectivist and individualised relations between the employers and employees at workplace.

However, employment relationship as an agenda was included in the general discussion on the work contract during the 85th International Labour

Conference of International Labour Organization (ILO) in 1997 (Working Document No. 28, Labour inspection and employment relationship, ILO, Geneva, 2013: 2). The 91st session of ILO which took place in 2003 defined employment relations as the lawful linkage between an employee (often referred to as the worker) and an employer where the employee offers his or her services to the employer under specified conditions in swap over of some remuneration. The preface to the Working Document No. 28 (ILO, 2013: 2) defined employment relationship as the natural growth and evolution of the earlier model of master-servant at workplace. With the passage of time the term started gaining prominence in academic literature.

3. Contextualising Employment Relations in the SME sector

Although several studies discussed the aspects of employment relations in large enterprises, there was complete dearth of significant studies carried out on employment relations in SMEs. The Bolton Report of 1971 is regarded as the first official document studied and examined employment relations in small enterprises. The report very clearly highlighted the anomalies existent in the SME sector and marked out how employment relations relied on personal approach with complete control by the owners and complete absence of formal management structure (Tonge, 2001). Sisson (1993) went on to define employment relations in SMEs as "Bleak House." Rainnie (1989) in his studies highlighted the exploitative dictatorial practices of the employers along with poor working conditions, unsafe environment, little employee involvement, poor wages etc. Ram (1991) in his research discussed the existence of harsh management regimes like close and direct supervision and control, intensified work process and methods, stringent disciplines, etc in the context of employment relations in the SME sector along with the

existence of unique positive aspects of 'less autocracy' and 'paternalism.' Saini&Budhwar (2008) in their study highlighted the existent anomalies in the Indian SME sector which include employment of child labour in the name of cost cutting, non payment of minimum wages to the works, inappropriate working conditions, violation of labour laws etc. Singh & Vohra (2009) suggested the HRM practices in the SME sector to be very little formalised and employers playing a crucial role in determining the rules of the game in the enterprise.

It is quite surprising that irrespective of the fact that the SME sector is highly labour intensive in nature, the enterprises in the sector generally remain averse to establishing any Human Resource department. Two reasons can be attributed to this practice. Firstly, as the sector largely remains proprietary or single ownership in nature, the human resource practices are performed by the owner or the manager who considers it useless to establish any HRM department. Secondly, keeping in consideration the financial constraints, the employers do not consider it feasible to establish the HR department. Dundonet *al.* (1999) assigned one more reason for the absence of HRM in the sector. The existing 'family culture' or proprietary based ownership in SMEs prevented the employers in the sector to set up a full fledged HR department. Whatever may be the reason, the absence of the HR department definitely has given rise to the workplace anomalies in the sector.

However, it will be a bit prejudiced approach to consider that all is wrong in the SME sector. Several positive aspects of employment relations also remain existent in the sector. Bryson & White (2017) marked out flexibility, responsiveness and informality as distinctive aspects of employment relations in SMEs. The smallness of the enterprise itself offers strategic advantage to the employer in terms of decision making, structural changes etc.

The researchers also highlighted how small enterprises offer better work climate which results in low grievances and disciplinary action. However, this finding needs to be contested as due to the lack of proper grievance handling mechanism the employees refrain from making any complains. Ram (1991) in the same perspective highlighted the advantages of close supervision in small enterprises resulting in the sustenance in the highly competitive market.

Thus, it is quite evident that employment relations in SMEs are driven by several anomalies. However, it needs to be kept under consideration that these anomalies or differences vary from sector to sector and enterprise to enterprise. Under such considerations, it becomes imperative to highlight the converging and diverging employment relations practices across different sectors. Also, the studies in the SME sector are mostly carried out in the context of developed or the European countries. There is dearth of existing literature on employment relations that is being conducted in the context of India. As such, the present study tries to make a sincere attempt in this direction by highlighting the aspects of employment relations in Indian SMEs.

4. Research Methodology

Discussion in previous sections highlights the different workplace anomalies existent in the SME sector. It is important to identify the converging employment relations/HRM related practices in SMEs in India. It also becomes very much important to highlight the diverging employment relations practices in the SMEs so that a mechanism can be developed which equally benefits each and every SME. With this purpose in mind, the present paper aims to dig into the convergent and divergent employment relations practices in the context of SMEs in India. Four sectors namely the rice mill sector, handloom

weaving sector, IT/ITeS sector and the hospitality sector were chosen for the study. A questionnaire survey coupled with focus group interviews was carried out among the employees employed in the four sectors chosen for the study. The questionnaire included questions related to a number of employment relations practices such as prevalence and preferred form of communication, awareness of regulation in view of the absence of unions, employees' attitude and towards employers and expectations from employers, need for collective intervention, etc. For the present research, a mixed research methodology involving qualitative and quantitative techniques was adopted. Qualitative techniques like Focus Group, Content Analysis, etc. have been used for collection and analysis of data which facilitated in understanding the trends, patterns, etc. of employment relations prevalent in the sector. Likewise, quantitative methods like Mean, Medan, Man Whitney & Kruskal Wallis, etc. have been incorporated to analyse the data. A total of 384 responses were obtained from employers, employees, their respective associations and government agencies of the four sectors selected for the study. On the basis of the analysis of the responses obtained important conclusions have been carefully drafted.

5. Identifying Convergence & Divergences in Employment Relations Practices in Indian SMEs:

The present study highlighted the converging and diverging trends concerning employment relations practices in the sectors under study. 'Individualisation' has been highlighted as the most common emerging employment relations practice by different scholars in their studies (Kochan & Lansbury, 1996; Bacon & Storey, 2000; Guest, 2017). It was observed that the employers and the employees prefer to enter into individual bargaining agreements. The reason for this rising trend of 'individualisation' can be assigned to the

rising power of the employers on one hand and the declining power of the employees and the trade unions on the other hand. The political context had also a significant role to play in the promotion of 'individualised' employment relations. For example, in the rice mill sector in West Bengal the decline in the power of trade unions and collective bargaining was largely assigned to the ousting of the earlier government. The present government which came into power in the year 2011 is regarded by the employees as pro management and promoting the cause of individualisation.

Another converging practice observed in the context of employment relations was the existence of strong employers and their associations (except the Handloom and Hospitality sector). The employees in these sectors have not been able to organise themselves in a coordinated manner. Thus, the power balance happens to be more inclined towards the employment giving them an edge when it comes to bargaining, either collectively or individually. One more similarity found across sectors was the absence of orientation towards management concept by the employers. The employers in the sector are generally alien to the concept of 'management'. As the SME sector requires little labour and capital even a single person can start a business. Thus, as the enterprise is run single handily, the concept of 'management' largely seems to be absent in SME sector.

Several researchers have highlighted the exploitative and non-standard employment relations existing in the SMEs across the globe (Sen, 2011; Basole, 2012). This trend exists extensively across all sectors under study. Post globalisation in 1991, when the states started embracing the market economy policies, there was decline in the old beliefs of social contract and welfare state (VenkataRatnam, 2006). As a result, the attention of the government shifted from employees to employers which offered the

employers the required scope to exert their influence on the employees and offered them the scope to hire and fire at will (Ghosh, 2008). It would not be an exaggeration to say that after the period post globalisation, the might of the employers due to the declining intervention of the government authorities became more authoritative and began to influence the terms and conditions of employment. ShyamSundar (2010) described this practice as “labour reforms by stealth”. For example, extensive violation of labour rights was found to be existent in the IT/ITeS sector. But in the name of 'labour holidays', the employers were in a position to skip the labour legislations. Violation of labour legislations was found to be one of the

common employment relations practice in the sector.

John T. Dunlop (1958) in his *Industrial Relations System* (IRS) model identified certain 'actors' who interact with each other in order to influence the patterns of industrial relations. With the objective of making improvisations in the *IRS* model in the context of employment relations, the researcher has identified certain 'emerging actors' who considerably influence employment relations in the sectors under study. The identified 'emerging actors' have been put forward in the following table.

Table 1.1. Emerging Actors in the SME sector

Sector	Emerging Actors
Rice Mill	Sardar
Handloom Weaving Sector	Sardar
Hospitality Sector	Customer
IT/ITeS	Employers' associations

The identified 'emerging actors' in the sectors very significantly affect the employment relations. For example, the credit of providing contractual workers in large number in the rice mill sector can be attributed to the *sardars*. These *sardars* have reduced the dependence of the employers on trade unions for providing workers in large numbers. Also, they serve as the link between the employers and the workers. Both the parties are dependent upon these *sardars* for redressal of their issues. Similar is the case with *sardars* in the handloom weaving sector. They serve as 'links' between the employers and weavers and work for the betterment of employment relations in the sector. In the hospitality sector, the customers have been identified as the emerging actors. The customers prefer hotels which employ staff who are polite,

well mannered and sincere in their services. To acquire such staff members the employers need to focus on employment relations practices which help employees develop a positive approach towards their work thereby resulting in the satisfaction of the customers. It was found during the study that in order to impress and satisfy the customers, the employers/managers try to resort to practices that make the employees to be more customer friendly. In the IT/ITeS sector, the role of employers' association has grown significantly. Employers' associations like FICCI, ASSOCHAM, CII etc. have become very much organised and powerful resulting in determination of employment relations policies and practices in accordance to their personal advantages. They often influence the government to draw policy

framework which are most suited to them. For example, their collective pursuits have resulted in receiving the privileges like 'labour holidays' in the sector. Thus, the 'emerging actors' are found to be another converging aspect on employment relations in the sectors under study.

One of the important common aspects prevalent in all four sectors was the prevalence of close supervision. Close supervision has been considered as an important practice in order to sustain and survive in the market (Ram, 1991; Rainnie, 1989; Atkinson, 2008). This also promotes faster decision making in the enterprises. As the SMEs are run with the help of a small number of employees, this 'smallness' promotes the spirit of cooperation and development of social interaction among the employees. This notion of informality in personal relations helps in fostering better employment relations in SMEs.

Next to come on to the list of commonalities in the context of employment relations in the SMEs are concerned with the issues of grievances. Salary/wage payment formed to be the most critical issue across different SMEs under study. The questionnaire developed for the study consisted of one question which was to elicit response about the most important grievance prevalent in the sector. More or less the employees employed in every sector highlighted their dissatisfaction with the salary structure or the method of payment made to them. It needs to be kept in mind that employees take up a job primarily for their sustenance and survival. The incidents on inequality with respect to wages and salary are bound to create dissatisfaction among the employees which adversely can affect employment relations. Therefore, it is imperative to understand that employees are paid wages and salary in appropriate terms and in a time bound manner.

An important converging aspect in terms of

employment relations across all four sectors under study was found to be technology. Technology was found to very significantly affect employment relations in the SME sector. For example, enterprises operating under rice mill and hospitality sector have started to offer more conducive workplace as compared to earlier times. Technology has replaced traditional workplace and air conditioners, water coolers, television sets etc. are installed to provide the employees better working conditions. Thus, the presence of hygiene factors as proposed by Herzberg (1968) removes the dissatisfaction of the employees due to better working environment. Similarly, in the IT/ITeS SMEs also excellent working conditions have very positively enhanced the productivity level of the employees. The employers have realized the significance of working conditions for the betterment of employment relations. However, the impact of technology in the handloom weaving sector needs to be seen from a completely different perspective. Due to the introduction of powerlooms many weavers have shifted towards them as they not only save money but manpower is also saved bringing down the cost factor in the production process. But as the powerlooms are not able to replace the intricate weaving style and pattern of handloom weaving, the handloom weavers are always in great demand. As such, the employers offer better payments to handloom weavers in order to retain them in the sector. Thus, a competitive approach was adopted by the employers to retain the handloom weavers even in the era of technology.

Moving on to the diverging employment relations practices, the patterns of employment was found to be the most diverging aspect in the sectors under study. While permanent and contractual employees formed a major part of workforce in the IT/ITeS sector and rice mill sector, there a shift towards hiring temporary or casual workers in the hospitality and handloom sector. As a result,

employment relations in the IT/ITeS and rice mill sector were found to be more formalised in the IT/ITeS sector and in the hospitality and handloom sector there was the dominance of informal approach in employment relations. Divergence with respect to hiring of employees was also evident in the different sectors under study. While the hiring of the workers in the rice mill sector is usually done through the *sardars*, the weavers in the handloom sector are employed mostly through referrals. In the hospitality sector the employers hire people as employees who approach them and ask for jobs. Contrary to all these, recruitments in the IT/ITeS sector are highly formalised involving different stages like screening of CVs, interview etc. Thus, two extremes have been observed with respect to hiring practices in different SME sectors.

The way regulatory bodies exert their role in the sectors are also found to be significantly different. The regulatory bodies like the Labour Inspectors, Labour Commissioners etc. are found to be very active in the rice mill sector. The premises of rice mills are regularly visited by Boiling Inspector, Labour Welfare Officers etc. to inspect whether the employers are complying by the laid down norms of the Labour department. Contrary to this, the government authorities in the hospitality sector merely pass directives with respect to food safety and health related provisions. As such, they play rather an indirect role in the hospitality sector. In the handloom sector, the role of the government is

found to be largely absent. The related agencies are more or less concerned with the welfare aspect of the weavers. As the sector is highly informal in nature, the government is yet to develop any efficient mechanism to monitor employment relations in the sector. In the IT/ITeS, little interference of government regulatory bodies was observed. As the sector is highly organised and is entitled to the benefit of 'labour holidays', the regulatory bodies prefer not to interfere into the aspects of the IT/ITeS sector.

Talking in terms of 'ideology' or the viewpoints that each party in employment relations have towards each other, several anomalies can be highlighted. While ideologies of 'paternalism' prevailed in the rice mill sector, the handloom sector was governed by the ideology of 'negotiated paternalism.' The parties in the hospitality sector adopted the ideologies of 'mutuality' and 'unity of interests'. In the IT/ITeS sector, the ideology of 'benevolent autocracy' was prevalent where the targets set by the employers are expected to be achieved by the employees. Thus, all the four SME sector under study were governed by different sets of ideologies which moulded their attitude and approach towards each other.

The converging and diverging aspects of employment relations existent in the four sectors under study can be summarised in the following form.

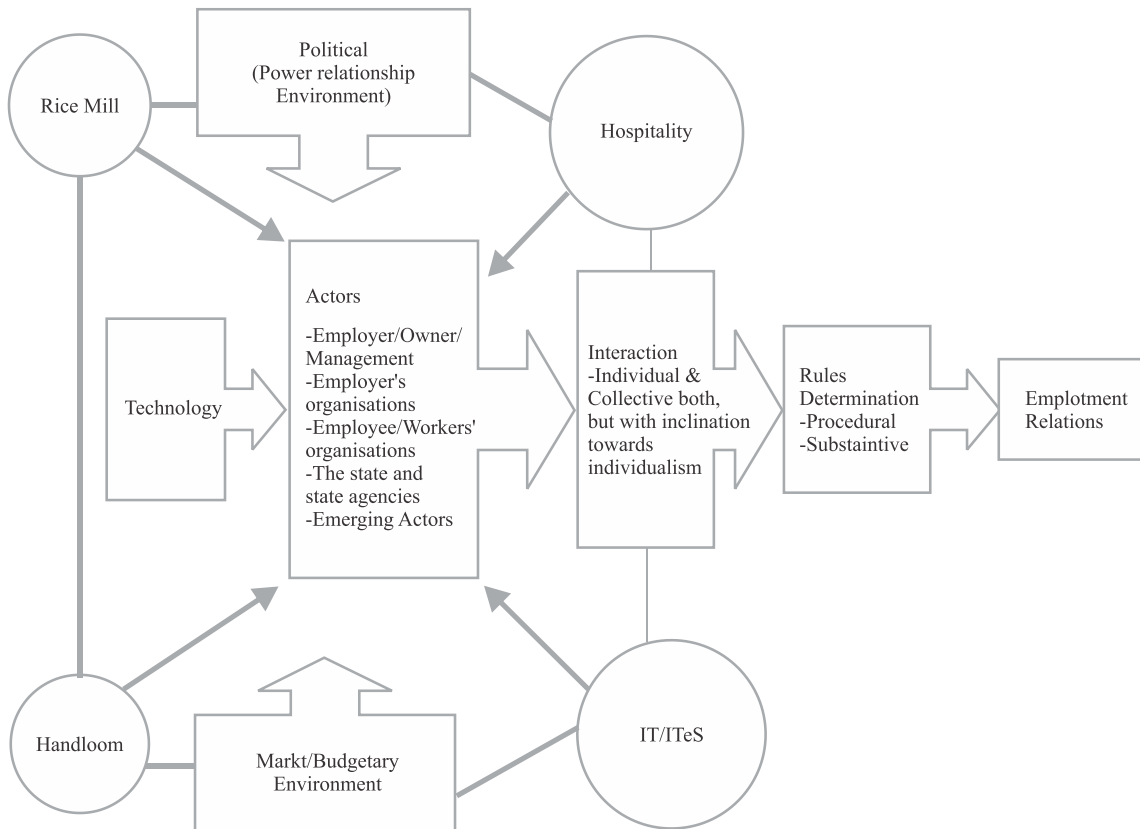
Table. 1. 2. Sectoral Convergence & Divergence in ER Practices

Converging Practices	Diverging Practices
Nature of Ownership Exploitation Absence of Voice mechanism Individualism Emerging actors Close supervision Impact of technology Common grievances	Employment patterns Role of regulatory bodies Recruitment process Ideology Workplace facility

Keeping into consideration the commonalities and anomalies an attempt has been made to develop an integrated Employment Relations System model applicable to each sector. With all the four SME

sectors in consideration, the present model is unique and equally applicable to all the sectors uniformly

Fig. 1.1



An Integrated Model of Employment Relations in SMEs

6. Discussion & Recommendations

In the light of the convergence and divergences in the context of employment relations highlighted in the previous section, it becomes important to underline certain recommendations which are vital for the evolution of healthy employment relations in the SME sector in India. The most important and critical issue found to be existing in all four sectors was the employment pattern or the way the employees are getting hired. It is a matter of serious

concern to note that the increasing trend of hiring contractual or temporary employees is weakening the very spirit of social contract which is concerned with securing mutual protection and employee welfare along with the regulations of employment relationship (Kochan&Dyre, 2017). As such employees fail to unite themselves and raise collective voice, the exploitative practices in employment relations keep on rising. It was also observed during the study that the employees are unaware about the aspects of labour legislation.

There is urgent need to devise laws or mechanism which is efficient enough to protect the employees who are employed in atypical employment. To secure and protect the sustainable sources of livelihood, it is imperative that employers are made to accept to the important role that employees play in the growth of the organisation. Similarly, government should also come forward to enforce the concept of 'decent employment' in enterprises. The regulatory bodies must be on their toes to report and prevent wrong doings in enterprises. The SMEs due to their small size can easily escape the eyes of regulatory bodies. Therefore, it important that some mechanism must be devised to keep an eye on employment relations practices in the sector. Grievance handling must be done in an easy and time bound manner. Along with this, proper wage/salary payment mechanism also shall be developed to curb the menace of wage/disparity (along with deferred/non-payment of wage/salary) to the employees. This will foster 'trust' between the parties in an enterprise and help develop better employment relations. During these periods of decline in trade unionism and collective bargaining practices, it is important to provide the employees mechanism like 'partnership' which will be helpful enough to endorse healthy employment relations in the enterprises (Bacon & Storey, 2000). Informality has been noted as a strong element in the SMEs in India and across the world. Sincere efforts are required to bring the SMEs into the mainframe of Indian economy. Bringing other sectors under the ambit of formal sector will compel the employers to adopt formalised practices leading to better employment relations climate. The government at the same time can reconsider and revise its policies to bring the SMEs under the umbrella of organised economy.

7. Conclusion

There are enough studies to establish the fact that employment relations have been used as crucial

strategies to gain competitive advantage (Schuler, 1989; Boxal, 1998). SMEs due to their small size and flexibility of operations can do wonders if they concentrate on their employment relations policies and strategies. Till date the studies substantially highlight that employment relations have not been taken seriously in the SME sector. However, the employers in the SME sector needs to understand that better employment relations motivates the employees to show behaviours which are considered to be critical for the benefit of the enterprise. It has already been well researched that healthy employment relation infuses the feeling of passion, support, and contentment which can be leveraged to enhance the productivity, customer service, status and endurance of the enterprises with the help of better coordination and cooperation. Employment relations is something with which we remain involved for a large part of our lives (Sisson, 2008). Under these considerations, the anomalies existent in the SME sector in India needs to be seriously examined by the employers and government so that the sector witnesses growth by leaps and bounds in the coming future.

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