

Employee Engagement and Organizational Performance in Indian Firms: A Multidimensional Analysis of Drivers, Outcomes, and Sectoral Dynamics

¹Sujeet Kumar Lal, ²Gourav Kamboj, ³Dr. Meenakshi Sharma, ⁴Dr. Tripti Sharma, ⁵Chetan, ⁶Mr. Asif Ahmed, ⁷Sunil Kumar

¹Research Scholar, Department of Social Work (DSSW), University of Delhi

Email- sujeetkumarlal4@gmail.com

²Assistant Professor at LM Thapar School of Management, Thapar Institute of Engineering and Technology (Deemed to be University), Patiala, Punjab, India

E-mail- gkamboj_phd25@thapar.edu

³Associate Professor, Department of Business Studies, Panipat Institute of Engineering and Technology

Email: mstkuk901806@gmail.com

⁴Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, G. M. N. College, Ambala Cantt

Email- drtriptisharmagmn@gmail.com

⁵Assistant Professor at LM Thapar School of Management, Thapar Institute of Engineering and Technology (Deemed to be University), Patiala, Punjab, India

Email- cchetan_phd25@thapar.edu

⁶Assistant Professor, Defence & Strategic Studies, Department of Political Science

Kurukshetra University, Kurukshetra

Email- asifahmed081@gmail.com

⁷Research scholar, Department of Commerce, Kurukshetra University, Kurukshetra

Email- sunilgagat1997@gmail.com

Abstract

Purpose: This comprehensive research report investigates the multifaceted relationship between employee engagement and organizational performance within the specific socio-economic context of India. As the Indian economy transitions from a labor-intensive agrarian model to a knowledge-driven global powerhouse, the psychological contract between employer and employee is undergoing a radical transformation. This paper aims to dissect the theoretical underpinnings, empirical drivers, and performance outcomes of engagement across pivotal sectors including Information Technology (IT), Banking, and Manufacturing.

Design/Methodology/Approach: The study adopts a mixed-methods meta-analysis approach, synthesizing data from academic journals, doctoral dissertations, and high-level industry reports (Gallup, Aon, Deloitte) spanning the period 2010–2025. The analysis is grounded in Social Exchange Theory (SET) and Kahn's Engagement Model, testing their applicability in the Indian cultural context characterized by high power distance and collectivism. The report aggregates statistical findings from comparative studies of public versus private sector entities and integrates longitudinal data on workforce trends.

Findings: The synthesis reveals a strong, statistically significant positive correlation between employee engagement and key organizational performance metrics in Indian firms, including a 17% increase in productivity and a 21% rise in profitability in engaged multinational corporations (MNCs). However, the 2024 landscape presents a "Thriving Paradox": while Indian employees report some of the highest engagement scores globally (32%), they simultaneously exhibit alarming levels of daily anger (35%) and low overall well-being (14% thriving). Sectoral disparities are profound; private sector bank employees demonstrate significantly higher vigor and absorption compared to their public sector counterparts

(\$p < 0.05\$), driven by distinct motivational factors.

Practical Implications: The report argues that Indian organizations must evolve beyond transactional engagement strategies toward "Human Sustainability." Detailed case studies of Tata Steel and Mahindra & Mahindra demonstrate that successful engagement in India requires a hybrid leadership model—blending modern performance management with traditional, paternalistic care (benevolence).

Originality/Value: This paper offers an exhaustive examination of the "Engagement-Wellbeing Gap" in India, providing a critical counterbalance to the purely economic narratives of engagement. It introduces a nuanced understanding of how demographic variables like gender and age interact with organizational justice to shape engagement in the Indian sub-continent.

Keywords: Employee Engagement, Organizational Performance, Indian Economy, Social Exchange Theory, Banking Sector, IT Industry, Tata Steel, Mahindra & Mahindra, Human Sustainability, Gallup 2024, Workforce Resilience.

1. Introduction

The contemporary business landscape in India is characterized by a unique juxtaposition of rapid modernization and deeply entrenched cultural values. As the world's fifth-largest economy, India is home to a workforce that is increasingly global in its aspirations yet local in its social expectations. Within this dynamic environment, the concept of **Employee Engagement** has emerged not merely as a Human Resources (HR) buzzword, but as a critical strategic lever for organizational survival and growth.

The effectiveness of an organization is fundamentally contingent upon its ability to engage its workforce. Engaged employees—those who are physically energized, emotionally connected, and cognitively focused—provide distinct competitive advantages, including superior teamwork, higher output, enhanced retention rates, and reduced burnout.¹ In the Indian context, where the competition for skilled talent is fierce, particularly in the technology and services sectors, engagement has become the primary differentiator between high-performing firms and those stagnating due to attrition and inefficiency.

1.1 The Evolution of Engagement in India

Historically, Indian organizational behavior was studied through the lens of industrial relations and personnel management, focusing on compliance, efficiency, and union negotiations. However, the liberalization of the Indian economy in the 1990s and the subsequent influx of Multinational Corporations (MNCs) shifted the paradigm toward "Human Capital Management." The narrative moved from "managing labor" to "engaging talent."

Recent literature highlights that while Indian companies have begun to recognize the impact of employee engagement, a substantial proportion still fails to grasp the depth of the challenge.² The engagement levels in India are volatile; recent data indicates that while engagement scores are rising relative to global averages, the underlying quality of that engagement is fraught with stress and emotional exhaustion.³ The "hustle culture" prevalent in Indian metropolises often conflates long hours with engagement, leading to a productivity paradox that this report seeks to unravel.

1.2 Problem Statement

Despite the proliferation of engagement surveys and initiatives, there remains a significant gap in understanding how engagement mechanisms specifically operate within the Indian cultural framework. Western models of engagement, which emphasize individual autonomy and self-actualization, often clash with or need adaptation for the Indian context, which values hierarchy, relationship-building, and job security. Furthermore, there is a distinct divergence in engagement outcomes between the Public Sector (government-owned) and the Private Sector, creating a dual-economy of work cultures.

This report addresses these gaps by exploring the following core questions:

1. How do theoretical frameworks like Social Exchange Theory apply to the Indian workforce?
2. What are the empirical drivers of engagement in key Indian sectors (IT, Banking, Manufacturing)?
3. What is the quantifiable impact of engagement on organizational performance metrics such as profitability and

retention in India?

4. How do recent trends (2024-2025) regarding employee well-being and "thriving" complicate the engagement narrative?

2. Theoretical Frameworks and the Indian Context

To rigorously analyze employee engagement, it is essential to ground the discussion in established organizational theories, interpreting them through the lens of Indian socio-cultural dynamics.

2.1 Social Exchange Theory (SET)

Social Exchange Theory (SET) is the most dominant theoretical framework utilized in the literature to explain employee engagement in India.⁴ Originating from the work of Blau (1964), SET posits that social behavior is the result of an exchange process where relationships evolve over time into trusting, loyal, and mutual commitments.

Application in India:

In the Indian workplace, SET manifests as a psychological contract based on reciprocity and benevolence.

- **The Principle of Reciprocity:** When an organization provides resources—be it financial rewards, training, or emotional support—employees feel a deep-seated obligation to "repay" the organization with higher levels of engagement and performance.⁶ This is amplified by the Indian cultural value of *rna* (debt/obligation) to those who provide support.
- **Benevolent Leadership:** Research specifically highlights the role of "Benevolent Leadership" in sustaining engagement via SET. Benevolent leaders who treat followers like family members and show genuine concern for their personal well-being (beyond just professional output) trigger a strong reciprocation mechanism. Followers of such leaders feel emotionally bound to work harder and stay longer.⁶
- **Organizational Justice:** The exchange is heavily moderated by perceptions of justice. Studies confirm that "Organizational Justice"—comprising distributive justice (fair pay) and procedural justice (fair processes)—acts as a moderating variable. If Indian employees perceive the exchange as unfair, the engagement collapses, leading to counter-productive work behaviors (CWB).⁵

2.2 Kahn's Model of Engagement (1990)

William Kahn's seminal definition of engagement describes it as the harnessing of organization members' selves to their work roles. He identified three psychological conditions necessary for engagement: **Meaningfulness, Safety, and Availability.**⁷

2.2.1 Meaningfulness

In the Indian context, meaningfulness is often derived from the perceived stability and prestige of the organization. Employees ask, "How meaningful is it for me to bring myself into this performance?"⁷ Research in the Indian IT sector suggests that meaningfulness is also increasingly linked to "task significance"—the feeling that one's work contributes to a larger societal or organizational goal.⁸

2.2.2 Psychological Safety

This is perhaps the most critical dimension in India's high power-distance culture. Psychological safety refers to the ability to show one's self without fear of negative consequences to self-image, status, or career.⁷

- **The Fear Factor:** In many traditional Indian firms, a strict hierarchy can inhibit safety. However, studies show that "supportive supervisor relations" are positive predictors of safety. When Indian managers create an environment where questions are welcomed rather than punished, engagement scores soar.⁷
- **Democratization:** The shift toward democratic leadership styles in modern Indian firms is essentially an effort to increase psychological safety, allowing employees to participate in decision-making.¹

2.2.3 Psychological Availability

This refers to having the physical, emotional, and psychological resources to engage.

- **The Burnout Crisis:** Recent Gallup data (2024) indicates that while engagement is high, "thriving" is low (14%), suggesting that many Indian employees are pushing beyond their limits of availability. They are engaged but operating in a state of resource depletion.³

2.3 Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model

While explicitly Kahn and SET are cited, the literature also implicitly supports the JD-R model. High job demands (workload, time pressure) in sectors like Indian IT are leading to burnout, unless buffered by sufficient job resources (autonomy, social support, feedback).

- **Resources as Predictors:** In the Indian banking sector, resources such as "Training and Development" and "Performance Appraisal" have been found to have a positive relationship with engagement.⁹

3. Drivers of Employee Engagement in Indian Firms

The drivers of engagement in India are a complex mix of global best practices and local cultural necessities. A systematic review of literature from 2010 to 2022 identifies several key determinants.¹⁰

3.1 Leadership Styles and Supervisory Support

Leadership is consistently identified as the single most significant predictor of engagement in India.

- **The Managerial Nexus:** Aon's research reveals that 75% of employees in engaged organizations in India report high satisfaction with leadership, compared to just 50% in disengaged organizations.¹¹ The manager is the face of the organization.
- **Transformational Leadership:** Leaders who inspire and motivate (transformational) rather than just monitor (transactional) drive higher engagement. In the context of Indian SMEs, transformational leadership was analyzed as a moderator between training and retention, though its direct impact is often more powerful on *engagement* itself.¹²
- **Communication:** Effective communication is central to performance, particularly in the Indian IT industry where teams are distributed. Regular feedback loops—both formal appraisals and informal check-ins—allow employees to align with organizational goals.¹³

3.2 Organizational Culture and Work Environment

The physical and psychosocial environment is a "hygiene factor" that can become a motivator.

- **Work-Life Balance (WLB):** WLB has moved from a "perk" to a "necessity." In the banking sector, "Work-Life Balance" is identified as the *most* important practice affecting engagement.¹⁴ This contradicts the traditional "long hours" culture of Indian corporate life, signaling a generational shift.
- **Social Intelligence:** A study of 200 professionals in the FMCG sector found that "Social Skills" and "Social Awareness" (components of Social Intelligence) are significant predictors of engagement. Workplaces that foster social connection and emotional intelligence see higher engagement.¹⁵
- **Diversity and Inclusion:** As Indian workplaces become more diverse, an inclusive culture is essential. Engagement is fostered in environments with "two-way trust" and where rituals are used to celebrate contributions.⁸

3.3 Career Development and Training

Indian employees are aspirational. The promise of growth is a massive engagement driver.

- **Training as Exchange:** In line with SET, training is viewed as an investment by the organization. Findings from SMEs in Northern China (applicable to similar developing manufacturing contexts) and Indian firms show a significant positive impact of "Training and Development" on retention and engagement.¹²

- **Career Paths:** 50% of employees in India who were provided with clear career progression opportunities were more likely to stay, compared to 35% without such opportunities.¹¹
- **Case Evidence:** Tech Mahindra's investment in reskilling has been a primary driver of their engagement scores, directly linking learning to retention.¹⁶

3.4 Compensation and Rewards (The Hygiene Factors)

While engagement is intrinsic, the extrinsic drivers cannot be ignored in a developing economy where inflation is a reality.

- **Fair Pay:** "Distributive Justice" (fairness of outcomes) is a key driver. Employees must feel that their engagement is being rewarded equitably.⁸
- **Salary Trends 2025:** Aon's 2025 Salary Increase Survey projects a 9.5% salary increase in India, the highest among major economies. This high increment rate reflects the competitive pressure to retain engaged talent.¹⁷
- **Recognition:** Beyond money, "Recognition" is cited as a key factor in private hospitals and manufacturing. Simple acts of acknowledging good work resonate deeply in the Indian psyche.¹⁹

3.5 Demographic Variables

Research indicates that engagement is not uniform across demographics⁸:

- **Gender:** In the IT industry, gender has a statistically significant association with engagement ($p=0.021$). Females often report different levels of impact from organizational factors compared to males, necessitating gender-sensitive engagement strategies.¹³
- **Age/Tenure:** In public sector banks, older employees (50-60 years) are often "least bothered about their career path" and perform duties mechanically, whereas younger employees are more responsive to engagement initiatives.⁹

4. Sectoral Analysis: IT, Banking, and Manufacturing

The dynamics of engagement vary significantly across India's three primary economic engines.

4.1 The Information Technology (IT) Sector

The IT sector is the crown jewel of the Indian economy but suffers from high attrition and burnout.

- **Drivers:** A study of 600 employees across major firms (Cognizant, Infosys, TCS, Wipro, etc.) identified "Organizational Support," "Intrinsic Motivators," and "Employee-centric Organizational Culture" as the most important determinants.⁸
- **The Gender Nuance:** A Chi-square test ($p=0.021$) revealed that gender influences how engagement is perceived. Male employees reported a higher proportion of "high-level impact" from engagement factors (32.6%) compared to females (25%), suggesting that current engagement models might be male-centric.¹³
- **Workload vs. Engagement:** Kendall's W test affirmed a high degree of agreement that "Workload Distribution" is a vital element. The industry is plagued by "crunch culture," and engagement strategies that do not address workload are viewed as superficial.¹³

4.2 The Banking Sector: Public vs. Private Dichotomy

The banking sector offers a perfect natural experiment to test the impact of ownership structure on engagement. A comparative study of 160 employees (89 Public, 71 Private) provides robust statistical evidence.²⁰

Table 1: Comparative Analysis of Engagement in Indian Banks

Engagement Indicator	Private Sector Mean (SD)	Public Sector Mean (SD)	t-value	p-value	Significance
Energy (Vigor)	4.81 (1.46)	4.01 (1.695)	3.241	0.001	Highly

					Significant
Absorption	4.88 (1.279)	4.37 (1.643)	-	0.025	Significant
Resilience	4.42 (1.134)	3.95 (1.778)	1.994	0.043	Significant
Inspiration	4.88 (1.093)	4.49 (1.577)	-	0.06	Marginally Significant
Overall Engagement	4.53 (1.136)	4.15 (1.467)	1.999	0.047	Significant

Source: Derived from ²⁰ and ²⁰

Analysis:

- **The Engagement Gap:** Private sector employees are statistically significantly more engaged ($p=0.047$). They exhibit higher energy, are more absorbed in their work ("forget everything else"), and are more mentally resilient.
- **The Security Trap:** Public sector employees, particularly older cohorts, prioritize job security over performance. The study notes that many in regional offices are "least bothered about their career path".⁹
- **Implication:** Private banks drive engagement through "Growth and Development" opportunities, whereas Public banks rely on "Job Security," which retains employees but does not necessarily *engage* them.

4.3 Manufacturing: The Role of Industrial Democracy

In the manufacturing sector, engagement often takes the form of "Total Employee Involvement" (TEI).

- **Mahindra & Mahindra:** M&M uses a TEI program to involve shop-floor workers in decision-making. This has led to massive productivity gains (detailed in Case Studies).²¹
- **Honda Siel:** A study of Honda Siel Car India Ltd. found that "Job Enrichment" and "Opportunities to Grow" were the key drivers. Even in assembly line work, the *perception* of growth drives engagement.¹⁹
- **Public Sector Units (PSUs):** In contrast to private manufacturers, PSUs in the power sector found "Meaningful Task" to be the most important factor. Workers in national infrastructure projects often derive engagement from the "nation-building" aspect of their work.¹⁹

5. Case Studies: Excellence in Engagement

To illustrate the practical application of these theories, we examine two of India's most respected conglomerates.

5.1 Tata Steel: Engagement through Empowerment and SWATI

Tata Steel has been a pioneer in employee welfare, establishing the Tata Workers Union in 1920, decades before legal mandates.

- **The SWATI Initiative:**
 - **Context:** Mining and steel manufacturing are traditionally male-dominated. To engage the female workforce, Tata Steel launched **SWATI (Steel Women's Aspirational Team Initiative)**.
 - **Mechanism:** A "Women's Empowerment Cell" was formed, comprising management and unionized women. Initiatives included "Legal Awareness," "Outdoor Development Programs" (to build team spirit), and specific health and safety interventions.²²
 - **Impact:** A study of the Sukinda Chromite Mine unit showed that SWATI significantly improved the "Quality of Work Life" (QWL) for women. It transformed the workplace from a hostile environment to one of psychological safety.²³
- **Talent Marketplace (stepUP):**

- **Innovation:** Tata Steel implemented an internal talent marketplace called *stepUP*.
- **Results:** Within months, adoption reached 81%. The platform unlocked 165,000 hours of productivity and, crucially, led to a **+10 point boost in employee engagement survey scores**.²⁴ This demonstrates that even legacy manufacturing firms can use digital tools to drive engagement.

5.2 Mahindra & Mahindra (M&M): The "Rise" Philosophy

M&M's engagement strategy is built on its core purpose: "Rise."

- **Total Employee Involvement (TEI):**
 - **Strategy:** M&M integrates employees into the management process through Kaizen (continuous improvement) teams.
 - **Performance Outcome:** Kaizen projects driven by engaged workers increased productivity from **4,903 units in 2005 to 21,294 units in 2011**.²¹ This is a direct correlation between engagement (participation) and output.
- **Digital Transformation of L&D:**
 - **Context:** To retain talent in a competitive market, M&M deployed an AI-powered Learning Experience Platform (LXP).
 - **Results:** The platform saw 80% adoption. Employee engagement scores rose from 3.76 to 4.04 (on a 5-point scale), and attrition dropped significantly from 23% to 16%.²⁵
 - **The Human Experience:** M&M shifted from "Employee Experience" to "Human Experience," focusing on the holistic well-being of the individual. This resulted in their "Happiness Quotient" becoming a business differentiator.²⁶

6. Impact on Organizational Performance

The literature provides compelling evidence that engagement is not just a "soft" metric but a hard economic driver in the Indian context.

6.1 Productivity and Profitability

- **The Productivity Premium:** Companies that actively engage their employees see a **17% increase in productivity**.¹¹ This is attributed to the "discretionary effort" that engaged employees are willing to expend.
- **Profitability:** Highly engaged organizations in India report a **21% increase in profitability**.¹¹ This is the aggregate result of higher efficiency, lower waste, and better customer outcomes.

6.2 Retention and Turnover

- **Attrition Reduction:** Engaged organizations have **59% lower turnover rates**.¹¹ In the Indian IT sector, where attrition can range from 15-25%, this reduction represents a massive cost saving.
- **Cost of Turnover:** Replacing a skilled employee in India costs 1.5x to 2x their annual salary. Therefore, engagement strategies have a direct and measurable Return on Investment (ROI).¹²
- **2025 Retention Drivers:** Aon's 2024-25 survey identifies "Growth Opportunities" and "Compensation Equity" as the top drivers for retention. It notes that attrition is stabilizing to pre-pandemic levels, but "key talent" remains at high risk of flight if not engaged.¹⁷

6.3 Customer Satisfaction

- **The Service Profit Chain:** There is a strong relationship between employee engagement and customer service levels. Towers Perrin survey data cited in the literature indicates that 84% of highly engaged employees are confident they can positively contribute to improving products and services.²⁷

- **Banking Sector:** The higher "Vigor" and "Absorption" scores in private banks²⁰ correlate with the generally superior customer service ratings these banks enjoy compared to public sector counterparts.

7. The Indian Engagement Paradox: 2024-2025 Landscape

While the historical data is positive, recent reports from 2024 and 2025 reveal a complex and potentially troubling picture of the Indian workplace.

7.1 High Engagement, Low Thriving

The Gallup *State of the Global Workplace 2024* report unveils a paradox:

- **High Engagement:** India reports an employee engagement rate of **32%**, significantly higher than the global average of 23%.³
- **Low Thriving:** Despite high engagement, only **14%** of Indian employees consider themselves "thriving" in life (well-being). This is lower than neighboring Nepal (22%).³
- **Daily Anger:** **35%** of Indian respondents reported experiencing daily anger, the highest in South Asia.³

Insight: This suggests that Indian engagement is currently driven by "Obsessive Passion"—a compulsive drive to work due to internal pressures or social status—rather than "Harmonious Passion." Employees are engaged (working hard, focused) but are burning out. They are "Availability" constrained (to use Kahn's term) but are pushing through due to economic necessity.

7.2 The "Quiet Quitting" Reserve

Gallup classifies employees into three categories: Engaged, Not Engaged (Quiet Quitting), and Actively Disengaged.

- **Global Cost:** Disengagement costs the global economy **\$8.9 trillion** (9% of GDP).²⁹
- **India's Opportunity:** The vast majority of the Indian workforce falls into the "Not Engaged" category. These are employees who are physically present but psychologically absent. Converting this cohort to "Engaged" represents the single largest opportunity for GDP growth in India.

7.3 The "Boundaryless" Future

Deloitte's 2024 Human Capital Trends report highlights that work is becoming "boundaryless".³⁰

- **Human Sustainability:** The report argues that organizations must pivot from extraction to sustainability. "Human Sustainability"—the degree to which the organization creates value for people as human beings—is the new metric. Only 6% of organizations are making progress here.³¹
- **The Trust Deficit:** In the hybrid world, maintaining the "social exchange" is harder. Trust is the currency of the boundaryless workplace.

8. Discussion and Strategic Recommendations

The synthesis of data from 2010 to 2025 leads to several critical insights for Indian firms.

8.1 From "Engagement" to "Holistic Well-being"

The discrepancy between the 32% engagement rate and the 14% thriving rate is a warning signal. High engagement with high anger is a recipe for sudden attrition and health crises.

- **Recommendation:** Indian firms must integrate "Well-being" metrics into their engagement scorecards. It is not enough to ask "Are you engaged?"; firms must ask "Are you well?". Aon's data supports this, showing that companies with effective well-being programs see a 50% reduction in turnover.³²

8.2 Bridging the Public-Private Divide

- **Recommendation for PSUs:** Public sector banks and units must address the "disengagement of security." This can

be done by introducing "Gamification" of tasks and creating "Intrapreneurial" opportunities where employees can lead small projects, mimicking the autonomy found in the private sector. The "SWATI" model from Tata Steel (a private firm with PSU-like scale) shows that empowerment works even in rigid structures.

8.3 The Role of Technology in Personalization

- **Recommendation:** Adoption of AI-driven platforms (like Mahindra's LXP) allows for the personalization of the employee experience. In a diverse country like India, a "one-size-fits-all" engagement strategy is destined to fail. Technology can help scale "benevolence" by reminding managers to check in, suggesting personalized learning paths, and recognizing milestones.

8.4 Strengthening the Managerial Core

- **Recommendation:** Since the manager is the linchpin of engagement¹¹, investment in managerial training is non-negotiable. Managers need to be trained not just in task allocation, but in "Emotional Intelligence" and "Psychological Safety." They must be the guardians of the "Social Exchange."

9. Conclusion

The relationship between employee engagement and organizational performance in Indian firms is robust, statistically significant, and economically vital. The evidence confirms that when Indian organizations successfully engage their workforce—by providing meaningful work, psychological safety, and benevolent leadership—they reap substantial rewards in terms of productivity (17% increase), profitability (21% increase), and retention.

However, the "Indian Engagement Paradox" of 2024 serves as a critical caveat. The current model of engagement in many Indian firms appears to be extractive, achieving high focus at the cost of high emotional toll (anger/stress). This is sustainable only in the short term. The future of organizational performance in India lies in transitioning to a model of "Sustainable Engagement"—where employees are not just engaged in their work, but are thriving in their lives. The success stories of Tata Steel and Mahindra & Mahindra demonstrate that when Indian values of community and care are integrated with modern management practices, the result is a resilient, high-performing, and truly engaged organization.

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