

HRM Practices And Migrant Workers In India's Hotel Industry: A Qualitative Investigation Of Turnover Drivers

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ABSTRACT:

In developing countries such as India, the hotel industry has a significantly large workforce, more so because it largely depends on interstate migrant workers to continue operating. However, because of untold contributions, these workers are often confronted with systemic and cultural challenges that limit their motivation, empowerment and retention. However, much research has not been conducted regarding the significance of Human Resource Management (HRM) in the formation of their workplace experiences. This study fills this gap through analysis of impact of HR interventions on retention and job satisfaction of migrant hotel employees in urban India. The study uses a qualitative methodology based on data obtained from semi structured interviews of 15 migrant workers working in hotels in Bangalore and Chennai. The participants were purposively selected and the data thematically analysed in order capture key patterns on workplace integration, emotional well-being and HRM practices. From this analysis, six core themes emerged: first, challenges in workplace adjustment; second, the developmental role of HR-led training; third, perceptions of fairness, especially empowerment; fourth, the influence of compensation and recognition; fifth, psychological safety and work–life balance; sixth, factors that help in staying or leaving the company. The study indicates that unfriendly HRM practices such as limited language training, unfair task distribution, obscure promotion paths and failure to recognize symbolic roles can negatively impact long term commitment and sense of belonging. However, stress and disengagement paired with inconsistent HR yield turnover intentions. The result of the analysis emphasizes that HRM plays a central role in both operational continuity and increasing psychosocial resilience of a highly mobile and vulnerable workforce.

KEYWORDS: *Migrant workers, Human Resource Management, Hotel industry, turnover intention, HR Practices.*

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the major contributors in the global economy, the hotel industry contributes a significant rise in the economy of developed countries and developing countries being involved in the generation of employment and GDP (Harman, 2025). The hospitality and tourism sector of Indian economy contributes to more than 9.1% of the said national GDP of over USD 11.1 trillion in 2024 and is projected to create around 32 million jobs by 2029, up from the current 53 million in 2020 (Keelery, 2024). While this growth is supported by a substantial part of internal labour migration (IndusFood Hospitality, 2014), workers mainly from economically weaker or rural states migrate to urban centers like Bangalore and Chennai (Ramya, 2023). India's total inter-state migration rate is over 9 million a year (Government of India, Ministry of Finance, 2017; Sharma, 2017) underlining this workforce's importance.

Key functions of a hotel like housekeeping, catering as well as customer service all require migrant workers (International Organization for Migration, 2023); however, they often face challenges such as cultural dissonance, language barriers, job insecurity and informal employment, resulting in workers being easily exploited. High turnover results of these structural barriers which breaks service continuity, increases operational cost (Onunwor, 2025; Hom et al., 2017). Although retaining and engaging with migrants is necessary for them to achieve those goals, migrant specific experiences of strategic HRM practices are still understudied (Jiang et al., 2012; ILO & IOM, 2020; Boxall & Purcell, 2022). Problems like lack of recognition, poor working conditions and cultural isolation persist and prevent migrant well being (Ngocha Chaderopa, 2021; Kansara Mishra, 2019). The

challenges women face are added to the career stagnation, vulnerability in a changing work environment (Lent, 2013) and the demanding workload and long hours induce excessive stress (Karatepe, 2013). Even with formal HR systems, however, many hotel chains are at the losing end when it comes to aligning with demographic realities of migrant workers (Gallagher et al., 2021). The goal of this study is to examine how HR practices influence migrant's integration and retention in the light of training, compensation, recognition and grievance systems, so as to explain the variations of autonomy, belonging and exit decisions..

2.THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study draws on three complementary theories, namely: Self Determination Theory (SDT), Job Demands–Resources (JD–R) Model, and Labor Market Segmentation Theory. Similarly, migrant hotel workers are found to operate in job hierarchies that can negatively stigmatize autonomy, competence and relatedness, thus undermining them. According to the JD-R model, stress and turnover result from high job demands (e.g., long hours, emotional pressure) combined with few resources (e.g., appropriate pay, support), whereas adequate resources (e.g., adequate pay, support) increase motivation and retention (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Demerouti & Bakker, 2011). The theory Labor Market Segmentation further helps to frame these dynamics by showing that migrants are typically located in vulnerable, subordinated, low-status positions and positions of little upward mobility because of structural labor inequalities (Reich et al, 1973; Piore, 1983; Dølvik and Eldring, 2008). Together, these frameworks provided a multi-dimensional lens to examine how HRM practices can address the psychological, organizational and systemic barriers in satisfying and retaining migrant workers in India's hotel industry.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on Human Resource Management (HRM) practices that have implications on migrant workers' job satisfaction and turnover intentions across industries and countries corroborates with this study's findings. HRM can either ameliorate or exacerbate socio-cultural barriers according to psychological and organizational theories. The study of Zaman et al. (2025) reveals that Green HRM (GHRM) based on Ability, Motivation and Opportunity (AMO) framework brings pro,,environmental behaviour in the hospitality sector of Pakistan. Tran, Nguyen and Phan (2025) likewise, found that human resource management and quality management practices in Vietnam build productivity by way of capability based interventions. In Malaysia and Bali, similar research also reports challenges and synergies between GHRM, organizational resilience, and sustainable HR practices (Sathasivam et al., 2024; Adhika, 2024), but further there are barriers in implementation of the practices, including cost and education..

However other studies show that HRM should be used to support vulnerable or marginalised worker groups. Kersten et al. (2024) from the Netherlands found that inclusive recruitment policies promote employment of vulnerable groups, while broader HRM strategies had a small effect on performance. In Thai MSMEs during COVID-19, Panya (2024) noticed that paternalistic leadership increased workers' loyalty to the company through moral authority. Using the lens of Self Determination Theory, Li and Kung (2024) discovered that refugee employees in the U.S. assimilate to practices of the HRM functions, which foster their psychological needs. In addition, Chang et al. (2023) state that while cultural barriers have an effect of lowering satisfaction, fairness and supervisory support largely increase the experience of low skilled migrants in their workplaces.

Global studies of migrants point towards institutional gaps within organizations conducting migrant labor. Instead of integrating the local HR norms, Chinese MNCs in Europe reproduce the employer dependency, according to Zheng and Smith (2024). Almost across 10 countries, managerial difficulties involved in integrating migrant employees were reported by Vasic et al. (2023) due to their challenges in recruitment, training, and innovation upon their intake. On the contrary, Cioce, Korczynski and Però (2023) show how migrants in Italy create solidarity using creative language strategies. In the meantime, Ng, Rajendran, and Waheduzzaman (2023) present that self-efficacy of the migrants is increased by inclusion, team cohesion and supervisor support in Australia. Based on the case of Bangladeshi workers in Mauritius, Sambajee and Scholarios (2023) claim that it is informal networks which allow dignity to be constructed where formal protections are shaky.

Despite of extensive global research on migrant workers, there are still major gaps in the Indian context, and especially within domestic migrant workforce in hospitality. From the point of view of interstate migrants,

intercultural communication, psychological empowerment, and meaningful work are under researched. There is especially scant empirical work on how HRM practices such as onboarding, recognition and training satisfy psychological needs such as autonomy and relatedness. Second, longitudinal and mixed method studies are also scarce. In view of these gaps, this study uses a qualitative lens to add to the contextual and holistic understanding of HRM's role in retaining migrant workers in Indian hotels..

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology to analyse how HRM practices influence migrant hotel workers' job satisfaction and turnover intentions in urban India. The study utilised convenience sampling and semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather rich, contextual narratives. Thematic analysis using Nvivo and NotebookLM ensured rigor, The data collection procedure was supported by ethical protocols.

5. QUALITATIVE DISCUSSION GUIDE:

15 in-depth interviews were conducted with migrant hotel employees working in various star hotels in Bangalore and Chennai. Each semi-structured interview lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes, depending on the participant's willingness to elaborate on their experiences. The interview guide consisted of 16 open-ended questions as listed below.

Table 1: Qualitative Interview Design and Questions

Question Number	Interview Question
Question 1	What were your initial experiences adjusting to the hotel work environment in a new city, and what made this transition easier or more difficult?
Question 2	How do language and cultural differences influence your day-to-day work and communication with guests or colleagues?
Question 3	Why do you think some migrant workers feel more empowered to make decisions at work, while others struggle with expressing their opinions?
Question 4	In what ways do you feel trusted or encouraged to take initiative and contribute ideas in your role?
Question 5	What types of training or support have you received from HR, and how have these affected your job performance and confidence?
Question 6	Do you feel you have opportunities for career growth or promotion in your current workplace? Why or why not?
Question 7	How supported and included do you feel by your supervisors and coworkers, especially as a migrant worker?
Question 8	What role does team bonding, feedback, or recognition play in helping you feel a sense of belonging at work?
Question 9	Why do you think salary fairness matters in motivating migrant workers to stay in or leave their jobs?
Question 10	What kinds of recognition or rewards—either formal or informal—have you received, and how did they make you feel?
Question 11	Do you feel safe when raising concerns or complaints at work? What factors influence whether you speak up or stay silent?
Question 12	Why might some migrant workers avoid sharing concerns with HR or management, even when facing serious issues?
Question 13	How do long work hours and stress affect your overall well-being and personal life?
Question 14	What improvements would you suggest to better balance work demands and personal time?
Question 15	Why do you continue working in this industry, and what factors make you consider leaving?
Question 16	Which HR practices, if improved, would make the most difference in your satisfaction and likelihood of staying longer in your role?

6. DATA ANALYSIS:

6.1 Thematic Analysis:

Theme 1: Challenges in Workplace Adjustment

Cultural dissonance, language barriers, as well as adjusting to a new lifestyle, is difficult for migrant workers to adapt to in the urban hotel environment. During the early period of employment, many felt isolated and inadequately professional. One of the greatest concerns was the language barriers, which made communication difficult as well as access to higher roles. One worker shared, "I struggled to understand instructions in Kannada and English... I often felt like an outsider" (Interviewee 1). Lack of support systems such as language training or cultural orientation worsened their exclusion. HR interventions must address these barriers to enhance integration, confidence, and retention among migrant workers in hotel industry.

Theme 2: Influence of HR Practices on Worker Development and Confidence

A key theme was the training and skill development with HRM practices strongly enhancing migrant workers' confidence, performance and sense of career growth. Workers welcomed structured forms of support, such as language instruction and upskilling programs. One shared, "The hotel's HR team sent me for a culinary upskilling course... another great thing is the internal promotion system" (Interviewee 10). Another noted, "Without HR's support, I would still be stuck in the same role" (Interviewee 12). Language training, in particular, improved communication and inclusion. Lack of consistent training, however, led some to feel stagnant and disconnected, reinforcing the need for inclusive and sustained HR investment.

Theme 3: Empowerment and Equitable Treatment

In this theme, the perception of fairness, empowerment and respect of migrant workers at work place is reported. Even more disheartened were many who felt that, more often than not, they were disadvantaged when it came to allocation in tasks and recognition, an effect that was exacerbated by the inability to speak the local language and to relate to the region they were posted in. One worker shared, "Some workers who speak better Kannada or English get more responsibility, while others like me are just expected to follow orders" (Interviewee 1). However, positive experiences focused around creating a sense of belonging and agency were indicative of experiences Interviewee 10 had (contribution to menu innovation). The attitude associated with any HR practice is due to the absence of consistent, equitable HR practices, which results in the dissatisfaction and disengagement. However, fair policies which include and recognize workers cause higher levels of job satisfaction and retention..

Theme 4: Impact of Compensation and Recognition

The main point of this theme is that it is important to ensure that migrant workers are well compensated and recognized as a way to foster their motivation and retention. Low or delayed wages, lack of appreciation for their effort evoked the dissatisfaction of many. As one shared, "If I were paid fairly and on time, I wouldn't have to keep looking for better jobs" (Interviewee 1). Others highlighted the emotional boost from simple acts of recognition, like public praise or reward programs (Interviewees 10 & 11). Symbolic acknowledgment is about dignity and belonging in addition to financial security. Therefore, HR practices have to be fair economically and psychologically to be attractive to their migrant workforce and to build a loyal and motivated one.

Theme 5: Safety in Expressing Concerns and Work-Life Balance

Migrant hotel workers' efforts to raise concerns safely, and for work-life balance in the context of intense job demands is examined as the theme of this paper. There was a culture of silence as many feared consequences from raising issues, such as reduced shifts or contract threats. "We work 12-14 hours a day with hardly any breaks... saying 'no' is not an option because they might not renew my contract" (Interviewee 7). However, others spoke of supportive environments in which we can manage stress because of fair scheduling and wellness initiatives (Interviewee 12). The importance of HR in providing psychological safety, equitable workloads, and responsive grievance systems to prevent burnout and keep employees is made clear by the contrast..

Theme 6: Reasons for Staying or Leaving

This theme reveals that migrant workers' decision to stay or leave is shaped by cumulative experiences of fairness, growth, and recognition. Compensation, promotion opportunities, and working conditions were frequently cited

as major influencers. “Many leave because of low salaries, long hours, and lack of growth” (Interviewee 8), while others stay where HR fosters development and support (Interviewee 12). Workers also highlighted how language biases in promotions created frustration and stagnation. Where HR policies ensured upskilling and equitable rewards, retention improved. Ultimately, staying was seen not as default, but as an active choice rooted in dignity and future potential.

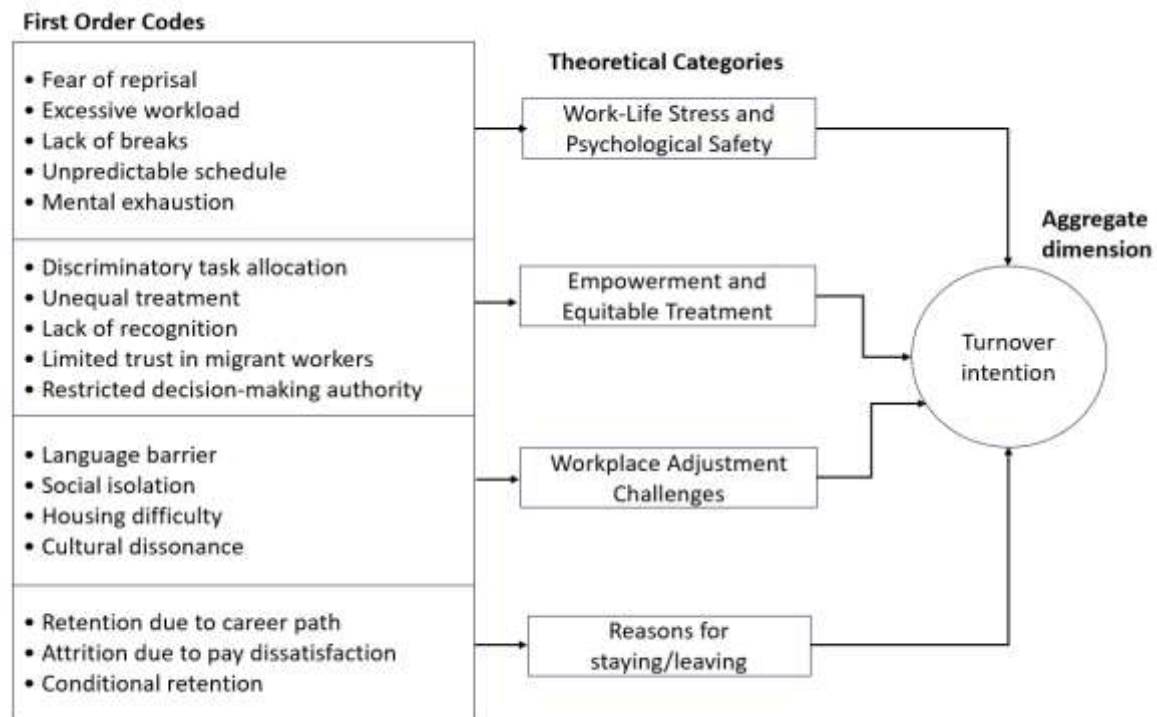


Figure 1: Data Analysis Adapted from Pratt et al. (2009)

7. FINDINGS

Then this study concludes that structural challenges and HR practices, all interlinked together, do shape migrant hotel workers' experiences in India and their perceptions on fairness, growth and belonging ultimately influence their job satisfaction and retention. The inclusiveness of HR interventions will either alleviate or worsen the initial vulnerabilities (language barriers and cultural dissonance). Relationship practices of training, fair treatment and recognition raise confidence and commitment; inconsistent compensation, lack of grievance safety of time and ability to progress themselves reduce confidence and commitment and create turnover intent. But, crucially, staying does not take place on the basis of any single factor, but on layers of perception of dignity, support and opportunity. Finally, HRM is found to be a relational force in determining the perception that migrant workers have towards their role and future in the organization and that this necessitates the need for HR strategies that are responsive and inclusive to minimise absenteeism and enhance retention and well-being in the hospitality sector.

8. DISCUSSION

One of the studies which are not covered under the ambit of literature on the migrant labor of India in hotel sector explores how HRM practices influence contentment and retention. These confirm that urban migrant workers experience structures challenges such as a language barrier, cultural unfamiliarity, and unsuitable housing, all of which fall under the study of 'cultural distance' (Lonner, Berry & Hofstede, 1980) and urban exclusion (IOM, 2022). Worse, these are systems struggle, not personal ones, due to poor onboarding and lack of contextual support. Both Communication and Technical roles stood out as pivotal roles to invest in, underlining the need for training to boost workers' confidence and job security in accordance with the findings by Gehrels and Suleri (2016). Moreover, the data extend what is known in this area by showing that HR-led development also enhances psychosocial empowerment. Next, equitable treatment was one of the main functions

that impacted worker morale, associating with Norcross' (2024) idea that task-level discrimination spoils organizational connection and cause increase turnover intent.

Beyond training and fairness, compensation and symbolic recognition emerged as strong motivators. The problem with low wages was one thing, but the fact that people did not get any kind of regular recognition, be it verbal praise or rewards systems, was more emotional. It corresponds to Herzberg's (1968) two-factor theory because salary is a hygiene reagent to the two factor theory, while recognition is a motivator in the two factor theory. Psychological safety and work-life balance were found to be critical to job satisfaction. Many participants feared retaliation for speaking up and most high workloads went unaddressed. These experiences are consistent with Maslach and Leiter's (1997) burnout model, reflecting how unmanaged stress and poor well-being contravene resilience. However, had hotels provided fair shift rotations, wellness support and an open grievance mechanism, turnover in migrant workers would have significantly decreased, highlighting HR's strategic function in not only retaining but also preserving migrant workers' care systems.

On the one hand, this study supports the existing research on role of HRM in migrant worker retention, and, on the other hand, provides a focused contribution to understand migrant worker retention within the Indian hospitality sector. Mobley's (1977) model explained that turnover is due to immediate dissatisfaction; but this study shows that it eventually accrues through perceived unfairness and limited growth, which Ndiuini and Baum (2021) similarly found. Moreover, our model differs from those that focus on wages in that it not only finds stagnation and languagebased discrimination to be important turnover drivers, but also shows that neither stagnation nor languagebased discrimination factors incur a cost to the firm. The aforementioned issues were intensified by COVID-19, in line with Triandafyllidou and Yeoh's (2023) and Jones et al.'s (2024) arguments about migrant exclusion during crises. After the pandemic, fairness and growth are expected (Wang et al., 2023), and HRM plays a central 'mediating' role in ensuring fair and stable workforce.

9. IMPLICATIONS

The results of this study suggest that structured onboarding, equitable compensation, and recognition are essential to support the wellbeing of migrant workers in hospitality. In addition, it requires that HR crisis protocols cover financial and mental health shields, most especially post COVID19. It extends theoretically Job Embeddedness Theory (Mitchell et al., 2001) and confirms psychologically Contract Theory (Rousseau, 1995). Proposed are strategic HR guidelines to improve inclusion, development, and retention in the sector.

Table 2: HR Practices Recommendations to Enhance Retention of Migrant Hotel Workers

HR Practice Area	Strategic Recommendation
Onboarding Support	Provide cultural orientation, housing help, and city familiarization
Language Training	Offer multilingual training for guest and team communication
Skill Development & Promotion	Enable clear promotion paths and role-specific upskilling
Fair Task Allocation	Conduct HR audits to ensure task equity and migrant participation
Recognition and Rewards	Implement simple reward systems (e.g., public praise, employee of the month)
Compensation and Financial Transparency	Ensure timely, fair pay with clear payroll and grievance systems
Grievance Redressal and Psychological Safety	Offer anonymous reporting, trained managers, and regular HR check-ins
Work-Life Balance	Introduce fair shifts, rest breaks, and wellness programs

10. LIMITATION

The results from this study are based on self-reported responses from a limited sample from Bangalore and Chennai and may not be generalizable to other regions. Intersectional analysis was lacking in that it did not include HR interviews or Employer perspectives or demographic analysis.

11.CONCLUSION

The study provides a solid empirical basis for understanding HRM's influence on migrant hotel workers. This highlights the requirement for inclusive proactive HR strategies that are needed in light of the workforce diversity. Further research could then be conducted to see what kind of longitudinal effects policies surrounding HR in the post pandemic will have. From these insights can be derived recommendations that will be useful in shaping equitable and sustainable HRM practices in service industries.

12. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT:

The author would like to sincerely thank all hotel staff and respondents who participated in this research. This study did not receive any financial assistance from funding body or any organization.

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Appendix

Table 3: Migrant Workers Characteristics

Participant ID	Origin State	City of Work	Role	Years in Industry	Hotel Type	Turnover Intention
P01	Bihar	Bangalore	Housekeeping Staff	3	4-star Private Hotel	High Turnover Intention
P02	Uttar Pradesh	Chennai	Kitchen Assistant	2	3-star Private Hotel	Moderate Retention
P03	Sikkim	Bangalore	Front Desk Supervisor	7	5-star Chain Hotel	Committed to Stay
P04	Odisha	Chennai	Waiter	4	3-star Private Hotel	Moderate Retention
P05	Jharkhand	Bangalore	Steward	5	Pub & Restaurant	High Turnover Intention
P06	West Bengal	Chennai	Cook	6	Pub & Restaurant	High Turnover Intention
P07	Madhya Pradesh	Bangalore	Bartender	3	Pub & Restaurant	Likely to Leave
P08	Chhattisgarh	Chennai	Receptionist	2	3-star Private Hotel	Undecided
P09	Rajasthan	Bangalore	Commis Chef	5	5-star Chain Hotel	Committed to Stay
P10	Assam	Chennai	Room Service	3	Budget Hotel	High Turnover Intention
P11	Bihar	Bangalore	Kitchen Steward	2	Budget Hotel	Likely to Leave
P12	Tamil Nadu	Bangalore	Chef	6	4-star Private Hotel	Committed to Stay
P13	Andhra Pradesh	Chennai	Banquet Staff	4	Event Venue	Moderate Retention
P14	Nagaland	Chennai	Housekeeping	3	3-star Private Hotel	Likely to Leave
P15	Madhya Pradesh	Bangalore	Line Cook	5	5-star Chain Hotel	Committed to Stay