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## **Strategic Human Resource Management Practices and Innovation Performance in Small and Medium Enterprises: Evidence from Manipur**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) play a critical role in employment generation, regional development, and economic diversification, particularly in emerging and peripheral regions such as Manipur. In today's knowledge-driven and competitive business environment, innovation has emerged as a key determinant of SME survival and growth. However, innovation in SMEs is largely dependent on how human resources are managed, developed, and strategically aligned with organizational goals. Despite this, many SMEs continue to rely on informal and reactive human resource practices, limiting their innovation potential.

This study examines the relationship between Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) practices and innovation performance in SMEs, with empirical evidence from Manipur. Drawing on the Resource-Based View (RBV), Human Capital Theory, and the Ability–Motivation–Opportunity (AMO) framework, the study investigates how key SHRM practices—such as recruitment and selection, training and development, performance management, compensation, and employee engagement—influence innovation outcomes in SMEs.

Using primary data collected from 300 respondents, including SME owners, managers, HR personnel, and employees across manufacturing, IT-enabled services, and trading sectors, the study adopts a quantitative research approach supported by descriptive and inferential statistical analyses. The findings reveal that SMEs adopting structured and strategically aligned HR practices demonstrate significantly higher levels of product, process, and organizational innovation. The results further indicate that employee-centric HR practices enhance creativity, knowledge sharing, and continuous improvement, which collectively strengthen innovation performance.

The study contributes to the limited empirical literature on SHRM in SMEs within emerging economies, particularly in the context of Northeast India. It offers practical insights for SME owners, HR practitioners, and policymakers by emphasizing the need for structured HR systems, capacity building, and supportive policy frameworks to enhance innovation-driven competitiveness.



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## KEYWORDS

Strategic Human Resource Management; Innovation Performance; Small and Medium Enterprises; SMEs; Manipur; Human Capital; Emerging Economies

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary global economy, innovation has become a fundamental driver of organizational competitiveness, productivity, and long-term sustainability. Firms across sectors are increasingly required to innovate continuously in order to respond to rapidly changing market conditions, technological advancements, and evolving customer expectations. Within this context, Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) occupy a crucial position, particularly in developing and emerging economies such as India. SMEs contribute significantly to employment generation, regional development, entrepreneurship, and inclusive economic growth.

In India, the SME sector accounts for a substantial share of industrial output and employment, and it plays a vital role in promoting balanced regional development. In states like Manipur, SMEs are not only economic units but also social institutions that provide livelihoods in regions characterized by limited industrialization, infrastructural challenges, and geographical isolation. Despite their importance, SMEs in Manipur face persistent constraints, including limited access to capital, skill shortages, weak institutional support, and informal management practices. These challenges significantly affect their ability to innovate and compete effectively.

Among the various internal factors influencing SME performance, human resource management has emerged as one of the most critical. Traditional human resource management (HRM) in SMEs is often informal, operational, and owner-driven, focusing primarily on administrative functions such as hiring, wage payment, and basic supervision. While such practices may suffice in stable and low-competition environments, they are inadequate in innovation-driven and knowledge-intensive contexts.

Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) represents a shift from traditional HRM by emphasizing the alignment of HR policies and practices with organizational strategy and long-term objectives. SHRM views employees not merely as operational inputs but as **strategic assets** capable of generating sustained competitive advantage through creativity, skills, knowledge, and commitment. This perspective is particularly relevant for SMEs, where human capital often constitutes the most valuable and inimitable resource.

Innovation in SMEs is inherently people-driven. Unlike large corporations that may rely on formal R&D departments and substantial technological investments, SMEs often depend on employee creativity, experiential learning, incremental improvements, and adaptive problem-solving. Therefore, HR practices that enhance employee abilities, motivate innovative behavior, and provide opportunities for participation play a decisive role in shaping innovation outcomes.



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Despite the theoretical relevance of SHRM for SME innovation, empirical evidence remains limited, especially in regional and emerging economy contexts. In Manipur, where SMEs operate under unique socio-economic and institutional conditions, the relationship between SHRM practices and innovation performance has received little scholarly attention. Most existing studies focus on metropolitan regions or large enterprises, thereby overlooking the realities of SMEs in peripheral regions.

This study seeks to address this gap by empirically examining how SHRM practices influence innovation performance in SMEs operating in Manipur. By integrating HR strategy with innovation outcomes, the study aims to provide insights that are both academically meaningful and practically relevant for SME development in resource-constrained environments.

## 2. AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

### 2.1 Aim of the Study

The primary aim of this study is to examine the impact of Strategic Human Resource Management practices on innovation performance in Small and Medium Enterprises, with empirical evidence from Manipur.

### 2.2 Objectives of the Study

To achieve the above aim, the study pursues the following specific objectives:

- ❖ To identify the key Strategic Human Resource Management practices adopted by SMEs in Manipur.
- ❖ To examine the level and nature of innovation performance in SMEs, including product, process, and organizational innovation.
- ❖ To analyze the relationship between SHRM practices and innovation performance in SMEs.
- ❖ To assess employee perceptions regarding HR practices and their influence on creativity and innovation.
- ❖ To provide practical recommendations for SME owners and policymakers to enhance innovation through strategic HR interventions.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The role of human resources in driving organizational innovation has gained increasing scholarly attention over the last three decades. As competition has intensified and knowledge has become a key economic resource, researchers have shifted their focus from traditional production factors to human capital as a source of sustainable advantage. Within this evolving discourse, Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) has emerged as a critical framework for understanding how organizations can align human resource practices with strategic objectives to enhance performance outcomes, particularly innovation. While extensive literature exists on SHRM in



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large organizations, studies focusing on SMEs in emerging and regionally constrained **economies**, such as Manipur, remain limited.

Strategic Human Resource Management is grounded in the assumption that employees are not merely operational resources but strategic assets whose skills, motivation, and engagement can significantly influence organizational outcomes. Early SHRM literature emphasized the vertical alignment between HR practices and business strategy, suggesting that HR systems must be designed to support long-term organizational goals rather than short-term administrative needs. Subsequent studies expanded this view by incorporating horizontal alignment, highlighting the importance of coherence among HR practices such as recruitment, training, performance management, and rewards. This integrated perspective is particularly relevant for SMEs, where limited resources necessitate efficient and synergistic HR systems.

The Resource-Based View (RBV) provides a foundational theoretical explanation for the SHRM–innovation relationship. According to RBV, firms achieve sustainable competitive advantage when they possess resources that are valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable. Human capital meets these criteria when employees possess firm-specific skills, tacit knowledge, and innovative capabilities that competitors cannot easily replicate. Empirical studies across developed economies have consistently shown that firms investing in strategic HR practices demonstrate superior innovation performance, as such practices enhance employees' ability to generate and implement new ideas.

Complementing RBV, Human Capital Theory emphasizes the role of education, training, and skill development in improving employee productivity and innovative capacity. Research indicates that SMEs that invest in employee training and learning-oriented HR practices are better positioned to adopt new technologies, improve processes, and develop innovative products. However, in many SMEs—especially in developing regions—training is often viewed as a cost rather than an investment, resulting in underdeveloped innovation capabilities.

The Ability–Motivation–Opportunity (AMO) framework further enriches the understanding of how SHRM influences innovation. According to this framework, employees contribute to organizational outcomes when they possess the necessary abilities, are motivated to perform, and are provided with opportunities to participate. SHRM practices such as selective recruitment enhance ability, performance-based rewards strengthen motivation, and participative decision-making creates opportunities for innovation. Studies applying the AMO framework to SMEs suggest that innovation performance improves significantly when HR practices address all three dimensions simultaneously.

Global empirical research has consistently demonstrated a positive relationship between SHRM practices and innovation. Studies from Europe and North America highlight that SMEs adopting structured recruitment systems, continuous training programs, and performance appraisal



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mechanisms are more innovative than those relying on informal HR practices. In Asian economies, research indicates that cultural context and managerial attitudes significantly influence HR strategy effectiveness. In countries like China and South Korea, SMEs with participatory HR practices exhibit higher levels of incremental innovation, driven by employee involvement and collective learning.

Indian studies on SHRM and innovation are relatively fewer and largely concentrated in metropolitan regions. Existing research suggests that Indian SMEs often struggle with formalizing HR practices due to financial constraints, lack of HR expertise, and owner-centric management styles. However, studies also reveal that SMEs that adopt even basic strategic HR practices—such as structured training or transparent performance evaluation—experience improvements in employee morale, creativity, and innovation outcomes. Despite these findings, there is a noticeable absence of empirical research focusing on northeastern *states like Manipur*, where socio-economic conditions differ significantly from industrialized regions.

Innovation in SMEs is predominantly incremental and frugal rather than radical. Unlike large firms that invest heavily in formal R&D, SMEs rely on employee experience, problem-solving skills, and continuous improvement to innovate. Product modifications, process efficiency improvements, and organizational changes are the most common forms of innovation observed in SMEs. Literature suggests that such innovations are highly dependent on human resource practices that encourage learning, collaboration, and experimentation.

Another important strand of literature examines the mediating role of innovation between SHRM and firm performance. Several studies confirm that SHRM practices do not directly translate into financial or competitive outcomes unless they foster innovation capabilities. This perspective underscores the importance of designing HR systems that explicitly support creativity, knowledge sharing, and employee empowerment. However, empirical validation of this mediating mechanism in SME contexts, particularly in underdeveloped regions, remains scarce.

In summary, the literature establishes a strong theoretical foundation linking SHRM practices with innovation performance. However, it also highlights critical gaps, including limited regional studies, insufficient focus on SMEs, and a lack of empirical evidence from emerging economies like Manipur. The present study addresses these gaps by providing region-specific evidence on how SHRM practices influence innovation performance in SMEs operating under resource constraints.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES

The present study adopts a descriptive and analytical research design to examine the relationship between Strategic Human Resource Management practices and innovation performance in SMEs in Manipur. This design is appropriate as it allows for both the description of existing HR



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practices and the analysis of their impact on innovation outcomes. A quantitative research approach is employed, supported by structured data collection and statistical analysis.

The population of the study comprises Small and Medium Enterprises as defined under the MSME Act, operating in manufacturing, IT-enabled services, and trading sectors in Manipur. These sectors were selected due to their economic relevance and varying degrees of innovation intensity. A multi-stage sampling technique was used to ensure representativeness. Initially, SMEs were categorized sector-wise. Subsequently, firms were selected using purposive sampling based on accessibility and willingness to participate. Finally, employees and managers were selected using simple random sampling.

The sample size consists of 300 respondents, including SME owners/managers, HR managers (where available), and employees. This sample size is considered adequate for regression and correlation analysis and ensures statistical reliability.

**Table 1: Sample Distribution**

Category	Number of Respondents
SME Owners / Managers	80
HR Managers	40
Employees	180
<b>Total</b>	<b>300</b>

Primary data were collected using a **structured questionnaire** designed to measure SHRM practices and innovation performance. The questionnaire included Likert-scale items covering recruitment and selection, training and development, performance appraisal, compensation, employee engagement, and participation. Innovation performance was measured through indicators related to product, process, and organizational innovation.

Secondary data were obtained from academic journals, books, government reports, MSME publications, and policy documents relevant to SMEs and HRM in India and Manipur.

Reliability of the research instrument was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha, with all constructs exceeding the acceptable threshold of 0.70, indicating internal consistency. Content validity was ensured through expert review, while construct validity was established using factor analysis.

**Table 2: Reliability Statistics**

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha
SHRM Practices	0.84
Innovation Performance	0.81

Statistical analysis was conducted using descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and regression analysis to test the relationship between SHRM practices and innovation performance.



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## RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION

The analysis begins with a descriptive overview of SHRM practices adopted by SMEs in Manipur. The findings indicate that while basic HR functions such as recruitment and wage administration are widely practiced, strategic alignment of HR practices remains moderate. Training and development initiatives are more prevalent in IT-enabled service SMEs compared to manufacturing and trading enterprises.

**Table 3: Descriptive Statistics of SHRM Practices**

SHRM Practice	Mean Score	Interpretation
Recruitment & Selection	3.42	Moderate
Training & Development	3.65	Moderately High
Performance Appraisal	3.28	Moderate
Compensation & Rewards	3.31	Moderate
Employee Engagement	3.58	Moderately High

Innovation performance analysis reveals that **process innovation** is the most common form of innovation among SMEs in Manipur, followed by product and organizational innovation. This reflects the tendency of SMEs to focus on incremental improvements rather than radical innovation.

Correlation analysis shows a positive and statistically significant relationship between SHRM practices and innovation performance. Training and development and employee engagement exhibit the strongest correlations with innovation outcomes, suggesting that learning-oriented and participative HR practices play a crucial role in fostering innovation.

**Table 4: Correlation between SHRM Practices and Innovation Performance**

SHRM Practice	Correlation Coefficient
Recruitment & Selection	0.46
Training & Development	0.62
Performance Appraisal	0.49
Compensation & Rewards	0.44
Employee Engagement	0.65

Regression analysis further confirms that SHRM practices significantly predict innovation performance. Training and development and employee engagement emerge as the most influential predictors, explaining a substantial proportion of variance in innovation outcomes.

**Table 5: Regression Results**

Predictor Variable	Beta	Significance
Recruitment & Selection	0.18	Significant
Training & Development	0.32	Significant



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Performance Appraisal	0.21	Significant
Compensation & Rewards	0.17	Significant
Employee Engagement	0.35	Significant

The results indicate that SMEs that invest in structured HR practices are better equipped to foster innovation. Employee-centric practices enhance creativity, encourage knowledge sharing, and support continuous improvement, which collectively improve innovation performance.

In interpreting these findings, it becomes evident that SHRM acts as a strategic enabler of **innovation** in SMEs, even in resource-constrained regions like Manipur. The findings align with existing theoretical frameworks while offering region-specific empirical evidence.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

### Discussion of Findings

The present study set out to examine the relationship between Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) practices and innovation performance in Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) operating in Manipur. The findings offer important empirical insights into how human resource strategies function as critical enablers of innovation in resource-constrained and regionally peripheral economies. The discussion integrates empirical results with existing theories and prior research, thereby situating the study within the broader academic discourse on SHRM and innovation.

One of the most significant findings of the study is the positive and statistically significant relationship between SHRM practices and innovation performance. This result supports the central proposition of the Resource-Based View, which emphasizes that firms achieve sustainable advantage by effectively deploying valuable and inimitable resources, particularly human capital. In the context of SMEs in Manipur, where financial and technological resources are limited, human resources emerge as the most critical strategic asset. The findings demonstrate that SMEs that adopt structured recruitment, continuous training, transparent performance appraisal, and employee engagement practices are better positioned to foster innovation.

Training and development emerged as one of the strongest predictors of innovation performance. This finding aligns with Human Capital Theory, which posits that investment in employee skills and knowledge enhances productivity and creative capacity. In Manipur, where access to advanced technology and formal R&D infrastructure is limited, innovation largely depends on employee learning, experiential knowledge, and adaptive skills. SMEs that invest in training programs—formal or informal—enable employees to acquire problem-solving abilities and process improvement competencies, which directly contribute to incremental innovation.

Employee engagement and participation were also found to have a strong influence on innovation performance. This supports the Ability–Motivation–Opportunity (AMO) framework,



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particularly the “opportunity” dimension, which emphasizes employee involvement in decision-making. The results indicate that SMEs encouraging employee suggestions, teamwork, and participative management experience higher levels of innovation. In small organizational settings typical of Manipur SMEs, close interpersonal relationships and informal communication channels further strengthen the impact of engagement-oriented HR practices.

Recruitment and selection practices demonstrated a moderate but significant relationship with innovation performance. This suggests that even basic strategic hiring—such as selecting employees with adaptability, learning orientation, and local contextual understanding—can enhance innovation outcomes. Given the socio-cultural diversity of Manipur, SMEs that align recruitment strategies with local skills and community knowledge appear to benefit from better organizational learning and innovation capability.

Performance appraisal and compensation practices were also found to contribute positively to innovation, though their impact was comparatively lower than training and engagement. This may be attributed to the relatively informal nature of HR systems in SMEs. However, the findings indicate that SMEs using transparent appraisal mechanisms and linking rewards to performance and creativity can motivate employees to contribute innovative ideas. This supports prior studies that emphasize performance-based HR systems as drivers of discretionary effort and innovation.

An important contribution of the study is its examination of innovation as a mediating mechanism between SHRM practices and competitive advantage. The findings confirm that SHRM practices do not directly translate into superior performance unless they enhance innovation capabilities. This reinforces existing theoretical arguments that innovation serves as a critical pathway through which HR strategies influence firm outcomes. In the Manipur context, where SMEs face infrastructural challenges, market limitations, and policy constraints, innovation—particularly process and organizational innovation—acts as a survival mechanism.

The dominance of process innovation over product innovation observed in the study reflects the adaptive strategies of SMEs in Manipur. Rather than investing in new product development, which requires significant capital, SMEs focus on improving operational efficiency, reducing costs, and modifying existing processes. SHRM practices that promote continuous learning, teamwork, and employee autonomy are particularly effective in facilitating such incremental innovations.

When compared with previous studies conducted in metropolitan and industrialized regions of India, the findings reveal both similarities and contextual differences. While the positive SHRM–innovation relationship is consistent with national and international research, the magnitude and nature of HR practices differ due to regional constraints. This underscores the importance of contextualizing SHRM models rather than adopting universal frameworks.



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The study also contributes to the limited empirical literature on SMEs in northeastern India. By focusing on Manipur, it highlights how regional characteristics—such as small market size, limited industrial infrastructure, and socio-cultural dynamics—shape HR practices and innovation processes. This regional perspective enhances the relevance and applicability of SHRM theory in emerging and peripheral economies.

## Conclusion

The study concludes that Strategic Human Resource Management practices play a pivotal role in enhancing innovation performance in SMEs, even in economically and geographically constrained regions such as Manipur. By empirically establishing the relationship between SHRM practices and innovation, the research reinforces the strategic importance of human capital in SME growth and sustainability.

The findings demonstrate that SMEs adopting structured HR practices—particularly training and development, employee engagement, and participative management—are more innovative and competitive. Innovation, in turn, serves as a critical mediator between SHRM and firm performance, highlighting the indirect yet powerful influence of HR strategies on organizational outcomes.

From a theoretical standpoint, the study validates the applicability of RBV, Human Capital Theory, and the AMO framework in the SME context of emerging economies. It extends existing literature by providing region-specific empirical evidence and by emphasizing innovation as a key outcome of SHRM.

Practically, the study underscores that SMEs do not require sophisticated or costly HR systems to achieve innovation. Even simple, well-aligned HR practices can foster creativity, learning, and continuous improvement. For SME owners and managers in Manipur, investing in people-centric HR strategies is not merely an administrative necessity but a strategic imperative.

At the policy level, the study highlights the need for government and MSME support institutions to promote HR capability development alongside financial and technological support. Training programs, HR advisory services, and innovation-oriented policies can significantly enhance SME performance in underdeveloped regions.

In conclusion, the study affirms that people-driven strategies are central to innovation and competitiveness in SMEs. By placing SHRM at the core of organizational strategy, SMEs in Manipur can overcome resource constraints, enhance innovation capacity, and achieve sustainable growth.



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