An Empirical Study of the Relationship between Inclusive Leadership and Employees Innovative Behaviour

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ABSTRACT:*This study examines the impact inclusive leadership on employees' innovative behaviour in IT companies operating in India. A total of 368 respondents from IT companies in India participated in the survey study. Smart-PLS was used to examine the impact and test the hypothesis. The statistical analysis yielded compelling evidence of significant relationships between inclusive leadership and employees' innovative behaviour. This finding underscores the pivotal role that inclusive leadership plays in shaping the innovation dynamics within organizations. This study offers a theoretical contribution by adding an insight into the relationship between inclusive leadership and employees' innovative behaviour. The study also provides a practical guideline for leaders of IT companies in India who aim to increase innovative behaviour among employees by considering inclusive leadership style*
KEY WORD: *Inclusive leadership, organizational performance, employees' innovative behaviour, IT sector*

I.   INTRODUCTION

In the current era, the business environment is marked by intense competition, rapid technological advancements, changing economic environment and dynamic shifts in market conditions (Iqbal et al., 2022; Mahmood et al., 2019; Saeed et al., 2024). Technological revolution, with its rapid pace of innovation, has transformed the way businesses operate, Communicate, and deliver products and services (Bani-Melhem et al., 2018).

In order to thrive in a dynamic organizational landscape, it is imperative for firms and business leaders to embrace innovation (AlMulhim & Mohammed, 2023). Research has shown that continuous innovation is the primary driver of organizational growth, profitability, and competitive advantage in today's complicated and changing business landscape (Bagheri et al., 2022; Iqbal et al., 2022; Jason & S. N., 2021).

In the business context, creativity recognized as a critical precursor to innovation and a fundamental means of attaining competitive advantages (Choi et al., 2015). Consequently, all type of organizations including high-tech service organizations like information technology (IT) service companies have acknowledged that innovation is a crucial strategic objective for ensuring long-term survival and attaining a competitive edge (Amankwaa et al., 2019; Cenkci et al., 2021; Iqbal et al., 2022; Jason & S. N., 2021; Mittal & Dhar, 2015; Uddin et al., 2019).

There is an emerging consensus that employees innovative behaviour serves as the source and basis of enterprise innovation, driving creativity and competitive advantages (Amankwaa et al., 2019; Ramamoorthy et al., 2005; P. Ye et al., 2023; Zhang & Zhao, 2024).

Employees' innovative behaviour refers to employees actively participating in innovative activities (Qi et al., 2019). Over the past three decades, research aiming to identify factors contributing to employee innovation has experienced significant growth. Within this body of research, several studies assert that leaders have a crucial role in fostering employees' innovation and creativity (Amankwaa et al., 2019; Mittal & Dhar, 2015; Qi et al., 2019; Zhang & Zhao, 2024). A leader not only provide the essential resources and support for innovation but also inspire and empower their subordinates to explore innovative ideas and approaches (Azinga et al., 2023; Sürücü et al., 2023).

Prior studies shows that leadership style such as ethical leadership (P. Ye et al., 2023), transactional leadership (UDIN et al., 2022), inclusive leadership (Sürücü et al., 2023), transformational leadership (Amankwaa et al., 2019; Azinga et al., 2023) , authentic leadership (Renko et al., 2015), and charismatic leadership (Le Blanc et al., 2021) encourage employees innovative behaviour by creating changes in employees

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motivation, attitudes, and behaviours.Randel et al., 2018) conducted a comparative analysis between inclusive leadership and the aforementioned leadership style, contending that inclusive leadership offers unique advantages not fully addressed by other leadership style.

Inclusive leadership foster an environment where employees feel empowered to share their perspectives and insights, contributing to a culture where diverse viewpoints are valued and respected (Fang et al., 2021). It embodies specific attributes openness, accessibility, and availability in leaders interactions with their followers (Fang et al., 2021). By being open, available and accessible, inclusive leaders promotes improvement in employee innovation behaviour, and performance, as individual feel more engaged and motivated to contribute their unique skills and ideas toward common goals (Sürücü et al., 2023; Zhang & Zhao, 2024).

Despite the recognized importance of inclusive leadership in fostering innovation, there has been insufficient attention among researchers on its specific effects on employees' innovative behaviour. Falih Bannay et al., (2020) shed light on the limited understanding of the impact of inclusive leadership on employees innovative behaviour. Bani-Melhem et al.,(2018) also suggested that future studies should incorporate leadership style, and organizational culture as an additional variables that could similarly influence employees' innovative behaviour.Cenkci et al., (2021) highlighted a gap in the existing research literature concerning inclusive leadership with in the IT sectors of various countries. Therefore, the previous research emphasized the scarcity of research on inclusive leadership and employees' innovative behaviour with in country and sector specific.

Based on the identified gaps in the existing literature, this research aims to investigate the impact of inclusive leadership on employees' innovative behaviour within the IT sector in India. Despite the growing recognition of the importance of inclusive leadership in fostering innovation, there remains a notable dearth of studies focusing on this relationship within the specific context of IT industry in India (Falih Bannay et al., 2020; Fang et al., 2021). By addressing this gap, the study seeks to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how inclusive leadership influence employees' propensity to innovate in a country renowned for its burgeoning IT sector. By conducting research within specific country and sector contexts, scholars can uncover insights that are more tailored to the nuances of those environments, thereby advancing our understanding of how inclusive leadership contributes to fostering innovation within diverse organizational settings.

Figure 1 Conceptual framework of the study
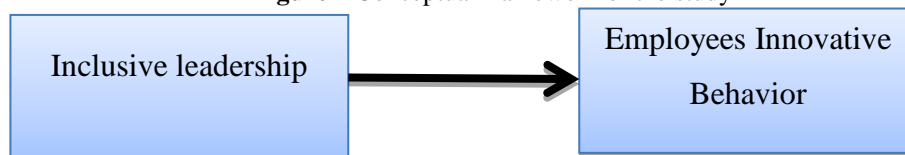
II. Literature Review and hypothesis development

II (a) Inclusive leadership and employees' innovative behaviour

Nembhard & Edmondson, (2006) introduced leader inclusiveness to describe leader behaviours that actively sought and valued input from team members. According to them when a leader adopts an authoritarian and unsupportive attitude, team members experience a sense of risk and insecurity that discourages them from sharing their thoughts with the leader. On the other hand, leaders who have democratic attitudes and provide support create an environment in which team members feel safe enough to express their ideas and concerns. Subsequently, Hollander (2009) systematically explained the idea of inclusive leadership, based on leader-member exchange theory, that inclusive leadership is follower-cantered, respect employees and understands their need. According to (Carmeli et al.,2010), inclusive leadership embodies qualities of openness, accessibility, and availability in leaders' interactions with their followers.

Inclusive leaders encourage employees participation in decision-making (Carmeli et al., 2010; Nishii & Mayer, 2009; P. Ye et al., 2023; Younas et al., 2023), enhance the ability of employees to create novel ideas (Choi et al., 2015), readily available to provide relational support (Fang et al., 2021), support employees in taking initiative and exploring innovative solutions (Zhang & Zhao, 2024). Inclusive leaders actively seek input from all team members, regardless of their position or background, and foster an atmosphere of psychological safety where individuals feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and opinions (Sürücü et al., 2023). Conclusively, inclusive leaders demonstrate empathy, appreciation, and genuine concern for their employees' well-being; it cultivates a sense of trust and loyalty among the workforce. In turn, employees are more likely to feel motivated, engaged, and committed to their work.

Many researchers have investigate the impact of inclusive leadership on employee work engagement (Cenkci et al., 2021; Choi et al., 2015), job satisfaction (Dahleez et al., 2023), business model innovation and ambidextrous innovation (Fang et al., 2021; Gong et al., 2021), innovative work behavior(AlMulhim& Mohammed, 2023; Falih Bannay et al., 2020; Shakil et al., 2023; Sürücü et al., 2023), organizational learning behaviour(Nejati & Shafaei, 2023), team climate and inclusive climate (Ashikali et al., 2021; Orekoya, 2024), team innovative behaviour(Ma & Tang, 2023; Q. Ye et al., 2019), turnover intension (Nishii & Mayer, 2009; Yasin et al., 2023), employee performance and employee well-being (Umrani et al., 2024), employees voice behaviour(Guo et al., 2022), employee innovative behaviour(Qi et al., 2019). The study on inclusive leadership advocated that this leadership approach not only promotes a sense of belonging and psychological safety but also cultivates a culture of innovation within the organization (Fang et al., 2021; Gong et al., 2021; Lakhal et al., 2024; Q. Ye et al., 2019). Social exchange theory also sheds valuable light on the connection between inclusive leadership and employee creativity within organizations (Choi et al., 2015).

Despite the recognized importance of inclusive leadership in fostering innovation, there has been relatively limited research specifically examining the relationship between inclusive leadership and employees innovative Behavior. While numerous studies have explored the impact of inclusive leadership on innovation, including team innovation (Choi et al., 2015; Q. Ye et al., 2019) and business model innovation (Fang et al., 2021), fewer studies have focused specifically on inclusive leadership and employees innovative behaviour(Choi et al., 2015; Qi et al., 2019).

II (b) Employees Innovative Behaviour

Employees' innovative behaviour in the organization is regarded as an indispensable prerequisite for organizational success and survival (Bani-Melhem et al., 2018; Hakimian et al., 2016; Hon & Lui, 2016; Jaiswal & Dhar, 2017). The literature in innovation have defined employees innovative behaviour as the effort of individual employees to generate, promote and implement novel ideas within the organization (Bagheri et al., 2022; Chen et al., 2016; Shakil et al., 2023). According to exiting literature an inclusive leader actively promotes and supports employees in the development, promotion, and implementation of new ideas within the organization (AlMulhim & Mohammed, 2023). In the context of social exchange theory, when employees perceive that inclusive leaders offer them valuable resources, whether in the form of support, (Jason & S. N., 2021)opportunities for development, or recognition, they develop a sense of reciprocity towards the leader (Choi et al., 2015). When employees feel valued, respected, and included, they are more likely to reciprocate by investing greater effort and energy into their work. In turn, this enhances their willingness to contribute creative ideas and solutions to organizational challenges.

The supportive behaviours exhibited by inclusive leaders play a crucial role in developing employee expertise, fostering cognitive thinking, and motivating engagement in creative work within the organization (Guo et al., 2022), (Shakil et al., 2023), as a result, employees are more likely to come up with novel and creative ideas, driving continuous improvement and innovation throughout the organization. Based on these theoretical underpinnings, we formulate the following hypothesis

Hypothesis 1: Inclusive leadership will be positively associated with employees' innovative behaviour

III. Methodology

III (a) Sampling and data collection

The present study examined the impact of inclusive leadership on employees' innovative behaviour in Information Technology (IT) companies in India. The respondents were chosen from among employees working in IT companies in India. This research chose IT companies in India as the focus of research because the IT sector is widely recognized for its high levels of innovation and its preference for hiring highly innovative employees (Jason & S. N., 2021). In contrast to other industries, knowledge-intensive services such as IT possess intangible, diverse, and perishable products, necessitating on going minor enhancements to meet client demands (AlMulhim & Mohammed, 2023; Iqbal et al., 2022). Consequently, the innovative behaviour of IT employees becomes a focal point for research (Mittal & Dhar, 2015), given its significance in adapting to evolving client needs and ensuring continual product improvement. Additionally, exploring the relationship between inclusive leadership and employee creativity within this context will provide valuable insights for enhancing innovation and performance in other industries as well.

Data for this study were gathered via a questionnaire survey utilizing the convenience sampling method. The survey targeted employees with a minimum of two years of work experience, as they were deemed relevant for the research due to their active involvement in organizational decision-making processes.

A total of 500 questionnaires were distributed among the targeted participants, and 388 responses were collected. Data screening and elimination of incomplete response left us with 368 responses for further analysis, resulting in a response rate of 73.6%. This response rate indicates a substantial level of engagement from the survey participants, reflecting their willingness to contribute to the study.

III (b) Measures
- Inclusive leadership

To assess the constructs under scrutiny, a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5 was employed, where 1 represented "strongly disagree" and 5 indicated "strongly agree". In the examination of inclusive leadership, a hybrid approach was adopted, integrating elements from the nine-item scale formulated by (Carmeli et al., 2010)and the 13-item scale devised by totalling seven items after modifications. An illustrative question from this scale is "my leader encourages me to actively participate in the decision-making process?"

- Employees Innovative Behaviour

For the evaluation of employees' innovative behaviour, the 22-item scale originated from (Scott & Bruce, 1994)was utilized, with seven items selected after appropriate adjustments. This comprehensive methodology ensured a thorough assessment of the constructs while incorporating established frameworks and tailored adjustments to align with the specific focus of the study.

Figure 2 Research methodology
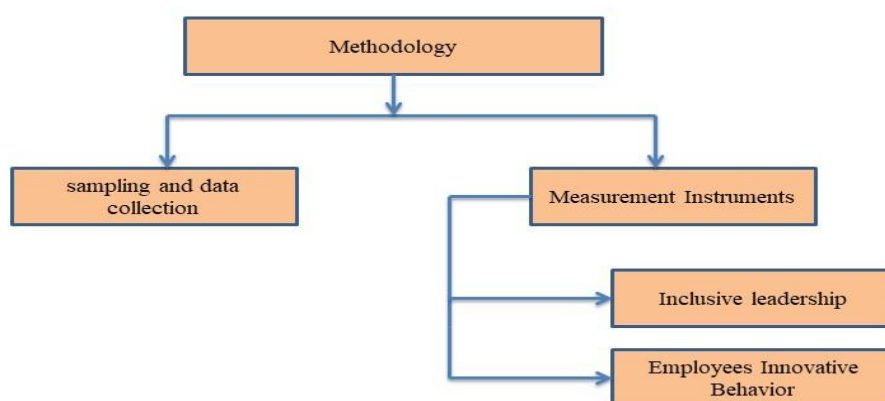
IV.   Analysis and Results

IV (a) Descriptive statistics
The respondents were requested to complete the questionnaire which included questions about the variables and a few questions on their demographics. The descriptive statistics presented a comprehensive snapshot of the sample demographics. Table1 describe demographic characteristics of the respondents. Among the 368 respondents, a notable majority of 62.6% identify as male, while 37.4% identify as female. Delving deeper into age distribution, employees within the 30-40 age bracket emerge as the most prominently represented group, comprising 40.2% of the total respondents. Moreover, when examining years of experience, it becomes evident that those with 4 to 6 years of professional experience constitute the largest segment, with a significant 57.4% share of the respondents

Table 1 Demographic characteristics of the respondents

Characteristics description	Groups	Frequency %
Gender	Male	62.6%
	Female	37.4%
	Total	100%
Age	less than 30	35.8%
	30-40	40.2%
	40-50	17.5%
	above 50	6.6%
	Total	100%
Year of experience	2 to 4 years	35.8%

4 to 6 years	57.4%	
above 6 years	6.8%	
total	100%	

IV (b) Correlation among study constructs

The correlation matrix presented in the Table2 illustrates the relationship between various variables in the dataset. Each cell in the matrix displays the Pearson correlation coefficient, which indicates both the strength and direction of the relationship between pair of variables for example, gender with mean 1.62 and standard deviation .484 suggests that gender does not have a significant relationship with age, working experience, ILP, or EIB based on the provided data. Interestingly, age shows a strong positive correlation (.915) with working experience, suggesting a close association between age and duration of professional experience.

On the other side, age displays a negative correlation (-.145) with inclusive leadership policies (ILP), implying the as individual age, their perception of ILP may decrease slightly. However, ILP demonstrate a robust positive correlation (.470) with employee Innovative behaviour (EIB), indicating that organizations with inclusive organizations with inclusive leadership policies tend to foster a culture of innovation among their employees.

Table 2. Correlation matrix

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1 Gender	1.6257	.48461					
2 Age	1.9481	.89138	.139**				
3 WE	2.7104	.58591	.109*	.915**			
4 IL	3.8476	.80267	.066	-.145**	-.115*		
5 EIB	3.8165	.73798	.065	.002	.015	.470**	-

Note(s): *p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; SD = Standard Deviation; WE = Working experience; Inclusive leadership = IL; Employees innovative behavior = EIB

V.   Results

The current study employed the Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) technique, utilizing the Moment of Structures framework (Amos version 21), to assess the proposed hypotheses. Through this analytical approach, the study sought to examine the relationships between variables and to test the hypothesized structural model.

Table 2. Regression Weights

Variables		Estimate	C.R.	P
IL ⟶ EIB		.448	10.475	***

The estimate represents the regression weight or coefficient. In this case, estimate is 0.4448, indicating the effects of IL (inclusive leadership) on EIB (employees' innovative behaviour). This means that for every one-unit increase in IL, EIB is expected to increase by 0.448 unit's i.e. 44.8%. Similarly, a critical ratio (CR) is 10.475, indicating that the relationship between IL and EIB is statistically significant. Here p-value is less than 0.001, indicating a highly significant relationship between IL and EIB therefore these results supports hypothesis i.e. IL have a positively associated with employees' innovative behaviour.

Table. 3 Standardized Regressions

Variables	Estimate
IL ⟶ EIB	.508

The standard regression weight represents the strength of the relationship between IL and EIB after standardizing the variables. Here a value of 0.508 indicates a strong positive relationship between IL and EIB.

Overall, the output suggests that ILP has a significant and positive impact on EIB, with higher levels of ILP associated with higher levels of EIB. The standardized regression weight further confirms the strength of this relationship

VI. Discussions

This study aimed to investigate the impact of inclusive leadership (IL) on employees' innovative behaviour (EIB) within the IT sector in India. However, the finding signified that IL had a positive impact on EIB. Inclusive leadership entails a deliberate effort by leaders to share their organizational vision and infrastructure with employees, actively involving them in the implementation of ideas and initiatives (Falih Bannay et al., 2020). Through transparent communication and open dialogue, inclusive leaders ensure that employees are not only aware of the overarching goals and objectives but also understand how their individual contributions align with the broader organizational vision. This inclusive approach not only enhances employee engagement and morale but also fosters a sense of ownership and commitment to organizational goals (Carmeli et al., 2010; Ma & Tang, 2023).

Ultimately, by embracing inclusivity and leveraging the collective intelligence of their teams, inclusive leaders drive innovation via employees' innovative behaviour, foster a culture of continuous improvement, and propel organizational success.

Further, the results depicted that IL has positive impact on EIB. Conclusively, embracing inclusive leadership style will leads to innovation within the organization as inclusive leader encourage employees to actively participate in the decision making process(Hakimian et al., 2016) , develop and implement new and fresh ideas (Den Hartog & De Hoogh, 2009; Gong et al., 2021; Hon & Lui, 2016; Van Knippenberg et al., 2007).

VI (a) Theoretical Implications

The exploration of the impact of inclusive leadership on employees' innovative behaviour in IT companies in India contributes to theoretical advancements in several ways. Firstly, it enriches the understanding of leadership dynamics within the context of a rapidly evolving industry like IT in India. By identifying the mechanisms through which inclusive leadership fosters innovation, researchers can refine existing leadership theories and frameworks, such as transformational and servant leadership, to better accommodate the unique cultural and organizational dynamics of IT firms in India. Additionally, the study can shed light on the mediating and moderating variables that influence the relationship between inclusive leadership and innovative behaviour, providing insights into the underlying processes driving innovation within these companies. Moreover, the research may highlight the role of contextual factors, such as organizational culture and employee demographics, in shaping the effectiveness of inclusive leadership practices in stimulating innovation.

VI (b) Practical implication

From a practical perspective, understanding the impact of inclusive leadership on employees' innovative behaviour holds significant implications for IT companies operating in India. Firstly, it provides actionable insights for organizational leaders and managers to cultivate a culture of inclusivity that encourages diversity of thought and experimentation. By adopting inclusive leadership practices, such as soliciting input from employees at all levels, providing opportunities for collaboration and fostering a supportive work environment, companies can unleash the creative potential of their workforce and drive innovation. Additionally, the findings may inform the design and implementation of leadership development programs aimed at cultivating inclusive leadership competencies among managers and executives.

Furthermore, the study outcomes can guide human resource practices related to recruitment, training, and performance evaluation, emphasizing the importance of selecting and nurturing leaders who demonstrate inclusive behaviours conducive to innovation. Overall, by leveraging the insights gleaned from this research, IT companies in India can enhance their competitive advantage, adapt to changing market dynamics, and sustain long-term growth in an increasingly competitive landscape.

VII. Conclusion

In conclusion, the study of the impact of inclusive leadership on employees' innovative behaviour in IT companies operates in India unveils a compelling narrative of organizational dynamics and leadership effectiveness. Through a comprehensive analysis, it becomes evident that inclusive leadership plays a pivotal role in fostering a conducive environment for innovation within these companies. By embracing inclusivity and

leveraging the diverse perspectives and talents of their workforce, leaders in IT firms can stimulate creativity, encourage risk-taking, and drive meaningful innovation initiatives. Moreover, the findings underscore the importance of cultivating a culture of trust, collaboration, and psychological safety, where employees feel valued, respected, and empowered to contribute their ideas and insights

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