Bridging the Gap Between Diversity and Inclusion: A Framework for Indian Organisations

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Abstract

In recent years, Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) have gained significant prominence in organisational discourse, both globally and within India. However, despite numerous diversity driven initiatives, Indian Organisations often struggle with translating representational diversity into authentic everyday inclusion. This study explores the nuanced gap between diversity and inclusion by examining how Indian organisations conceptualise and implement these constructs, the barriers that impede inclusive practices and how employees from diverse backgrounds experience inclusion in the workplace. Drawing on a structured quantitative survey administered across mid to large Indian organisations in most consumer centric sectors such as IT, Finance, FMCG, Banking and Hospitality, the study analyses employee responses to identify perceptual gaps, structural limitations and patterns of exclusion.

Findings indicate that while diversity efforts, such as gender hiring and accessibility compliance are increasingly visible, inclusion remains inconsistently understood and ineffectively operationalised. Many organisations conflate the two constructs, resulting in superficial implementation and missed opportunities for genuine employee engagement. The analysis reveals significant disparities in how inclusion is experienced across demographics, particularly in relation to caste, language and organisational hierarchy.

In response, the study proposes the Inclusion Integration Ladder – a contextualised framework that outlines progressive stages through which organisations can evolve from symbolic diversity efforts to embedded inclusion cultures. The model addresses both structural interventions and perceptual shifts needed to bridge the diversity inclusion gap.

This research contributes empirical insight into India's under theorised Inclusion landscape and offers practical recommendations for HR Practitioners, Business leaders and policy influencers aiming to embed sustainable inclusion into organisational strategy.

Keywords: Diversity, Inclusion, Indian Organisations, Employee perception, Organisational Equity.

1.0 Introduction

1.1 Background and Context

In recent decades, diversity and inclusion (D&I) have become central pillars of modern organisational development, not just as ethical imperatives but as critical business drivers. Global Studies – including Mckinsey's "Diversity Wins" (2020) have consistently discovered that companies in the top quartile for

ethnic and gender diversity on executive teams are more likely to outperform their peers in profitability. This correlation has prompted many organisations to expand their diversity initiatives, invest in round the year bias training and report on D&I metrics as part of their Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) commitments.

Yet despite this progress, organisations often fall into the trap of equating diversity with inclusion, assuming that demographic representation alone is sufficient to foster equity, belonging and participation. "Diversity is about being invited to the party, Inclusion is about being asked to dance". The failure to distinguish the two results in environments where surface level diversity coexists with systemic exclusion – a phenomenon now widely referred to as 'Diversity without inclusion"

For the same reason, empirical studies on organizational practices of inclusion are somewhat limited, barring a few. This challenge is especially pronounced in the Indian context. With a population marked by intricate social stratifications – spanning caste, language, region, gender, class and disability – Indian organisations face a uniquely layered challenge. While regulatory frameworks such as The Companies Act 2013 and The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016) have introduced diversity mandates, and several large corporations have launched DE&I programs, true inclusion remains uneven, elusive and inconsistently implemented. According to the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report, India ranks 135th out of 146 countries, reflecting the distance yet to be travelled.

Moreover, Inclusion is often approached as a Western Imported Construct, heavily centred on gender or race, without accounting for other cultural specificities like caste, language or religion that significantly impact workplace dynamics in India. The result is a patchwork of isolated D&I efforts that lack cohesion, employee buy in or measurable impact.

In this context, understanding how Indian Organisations perceive and practice inclusion, and how that differs from diversity, is both academically relevant and practically urgent. The post pandemic world has made visible the vulnerabilities of the marginalised groups in the workforce, and as hybrid work becomes the norm, so do new forms of exclusion. The business case for inclusivity has never been stronger, but it must be translated into culturally relevant evidence based frameworks that Indian organisations can implement meaningfully.

1.2 Research Objectives

1. To explore how Indian Organisations understand and implement Diversity and Inclusion: While diversity and inclusion are often discussed interchangeably in corporate parlance, they are conceptually and operationally distinct. This objective focuses on understanding how Indian Organisations define these terms, what meanings they assign to each, and whether their internal stakeholders – including HR leaders, managers and employees, perceive and practice them as separate constructs or as interchangeable ideals. This includes examining how D&I appears in policies, communications, training modules and workplace culture.

2. To identify the barriers that prevent diversity from translating into genuine inclusion: Many Indian organisations have made visible progress in diversity hiring and compliance driven representation (gender quotas, disability inclusion targets), However this does not necessarily mean inclusion in practice. This objective investigates the structural, psychological and cultural barriers that prevent diverse individuals from experiencing full participation and assimilation.

3. To propose a culturally relevant framework that bridges the gap between diversity and inclusion in Indian workplaces: The third and central objective is to move beyond critique and offer a

constructive, evidence based framework that Indian organisations can use to transition from representation to inclusion.

1.3 Research Questions

1. How do Indian organisations define and differentiate diversity and inclusion?
2. What challenges/ barriers exist in implementing inclusion alongside diversity initiatives?
3. How do employees from diverse backgrounds perceive inclusion in Indian workplaces?
4. What components should an effective inclusion framework in Indian organisations contain?

1.4 Rationale of the Study

While global scholarship has offered several models of inclusion (3), there is a notable dearth of India specific research frameworks that take into account the local social hierarchies and cultural attitudes. This study is designed to bridge that gap between by examining inclusion not just as a policy but as an experience – one that is influenced by how individuals perceive fairness, access, belonging and voice within their organisations. In the context of India, as an economy that enjoys the multiplicity of cultures, religions, age groups and even regions, it is all the more urgent that its diversity be harnessed for growth within business. And not just token diversity, but real inclusive progress that can capitalise on its richness.

The significance of this research also lies in offering a diagnostic and developmental tool for Indian organisations. By empirically identifying how employees perceive D&I efforts, this study aims to provide practical insights into what's working, what's not and how inclusion can be better embedded in Indian workplaces.

1.5 Scope and Limitations

This study focuses primarily on mid-to-large scale Indian organisations across sectors such as IT, finance, manufacturing, and education. While it considers insights from MNCs operating in India, the framework is designed with a focus on local cultural, legal, and social dynamics. Limitations include potential respondent bias in self-reported data and the inability to generalise findings across all industries. These limitations are acknowledged and addressed in the final chapter of this study along with directions for future research.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Introduction to Diversity and Inclusion

Consistent with global workforce predictions, the 21st-century workplace is increasingly characterised by the presence of women, ethnic minorities, individuals from varied religious and linguistic backgrounds, and intergenerational communities. Organisations worldwide have recognised the profound impact of these demographic shifts on organisational functioning and competitiveness. This recognition is evidenced by the fact that over 75% of Fortune 500 companies have initiated diversity initiatives (Daniels, 2001).

Despite widespread awareness regarding the importance of managing workforce diversity, organisational approaches vary considerably. Common strategies include gender-specific recruitment drives, region-specific initiatives, training programs, and mentorship schemes aimed at increasing and retaining workplace heterogeneity (Cox and Morrison, 1992). More progressively, some organisations have shifted towards broader programs emphasizing employee participation, inclusive communication, and barrier removal, signalling a growing focus on not just diversity, but also on inclusion.

However, despite this shift from diversity to inclusion, there remains a limited understanding of whether this represents a true transformation in organisational culture or merely a linguistic adjustment to reduce resistance to existing diversity initiatives. Compounding this confusion is the frequent interchangeable use of the terms "diversity" and "inclusion," which obscures their distinct meanings (Sherbin and Rashid, 2007).

Diversity refers to the presence of differences among individuals within a workforce, encompassing attributes such as caste, colour, race, gender, age, abilities, and religion. In contrast, inclusion focuses on the degree to which diverse individuals are integrated into the organisation's structures, processes, and culture. As diversity advocate Verna Myers aptly noted, "*Diversity is being invited to the party; inclusion is being asked to dance.*"

While ensuring diversity may be relatively straightforward—often a matter of meeting numerical targets—inclusion demands a deeper cultural transformation. According to Willis Towers Watson's Wellbeing Survey (2023), approximately 71% of Indian organisations report offering DE&I training, the same percentage promote gender-neutral workplace communication, and around 62% ensure accessible office spaces. Notably, the COVID-19 pandemic acted as a watershed moment, prompting Indian organisations to move beyond benchmarking employee perks towards fostering deeper workplace sensitisation and employee retention strategies.

2.2 The Indian Context

Although India's constitutional framework prohibits discrimination based on religion, caste, race, gender, or colour, translating these principles into corporate practice remains challenging. For example, India's Global Gender Gap Index ranking stood at 135th out of 146 countries in 2022 (World Economic Forum, 2022). Although regulatory interventions like the Companies Act and SEBI mandates have tripled women's representation on corporate boards over the past decade, true leadership parity remains elusive, with women occupying less than 5% of chairperson roles.

Similarly, despite efforts to enhance the employability of Persons with Disabilities (PwDs), only about 11.3% (3.4 million out of 30 million) work within the organised or semi-organised sector, with PwDs comprising less than 0.5% of the total workforce in most companies (NASSCOM and AON, 2022).

LGBTQIA+ inclusion, too, remains nascent. Although the decriminalisation of homosexuality in 2018 marked a major societal shift, tangible representation within the workforce is limited, and socio-economic barriers persist.

Thus, while legislative frameworks aim to safeguard minorities' rights, true inclusion in Indian organisations remains an evolving aspiration rather than an achieved norm. Diversity in the Indian context extends beyond gender and race to encompass caste, class, language, regional identity, and other cultural differentiators, complicating the translation of diversity and inclusion into organisational practice.

Diversity indicator	Statistic	Source
Women's labour force participation	22.3 % India vs 47% global	WEF global gender gap report 2022
Women directors on NIFTY 500 boards	95% companies have atleast one woman	Avtar 2022
Female chairperson/ Executive	Less than 5 %	Avtar report 2022

directors		
Persons with disabilities (PWD)	Less than 0.5 %	NASSCOM report
LGBTQIA inclusion	Minimal	Avtar reports, News articles

As shown in the table above, while diversity initiatives have expanded, representation among marginalised groups remains uneven.

2.3 Changing Industry Trends Influencing D&I

Digitalisation : The acceleration of digital transformation, particularly post pandemic, has significantly reshaped workforce dynamics. Remote work technologies have expanded access to employment opportunities for individuals across geographies and demographics. Research indicates that digital platforms can democratise hiring by overcoming traditional social and economic barriers. However scholars caution that digitalisation can simultaneously exacerbate inequalities as not all individuals have equitable access to technology, internet infrastructure or digital skills. (Bain and company, 2021). Thus while remote employment models create avenues for inclusion, they also spotlight the digital divide that persists across rural-urban and social-economic lines in India.

Globalisation: Globalisation has led to heightened competition for talent, prompting organisations to diversify their workforce to remain competitive on a global scale. Studies note that companies engaged in global markets increasingly seek employees from diverse backgrounds to drive innovation and adaptability (5). In India, the globalisation of industries such as IT, consulting, and finance has expanded cross-cultural collaboration, reinforcing the need for inclusive practices that accommodate varying social norms, languages, and work expectations (KPMG, 2020).

External Social Movements: The global amplification of social justice movements, including #metoo, #blacklivesmatter and LGBTQIA rights advocacy, has influenced Indian workplaces by intensifying public expectations for ethical and inclusive organisational conduct. (6). Research indicates that organisations now face increasing pressure from employees, consumers and investors to demonstrate tangible commitments to diversity, equity and inclusion. In India, the decriminalisation of homosexuality and growing activism around workplace harassment have directly impacted corporate D&I strategies, prompting companies to review internal policies and public postures.

Reporting and Regulations: Governmental mandates and regulatory frameworks have institutionalised certain aspects of D&I implementation. The Companies Act, SEBI's board diversity requirements, and the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act have made D&I reporting a compliance

requirement for many Indian companies (Ministry of Corporate Affairs, 2013; SEBI Guidelines, 2015). Studies show that regulatory pressures have led to **formalisation of diversity metrics**, especially around gender representation at leadership levels (Catalyst India, 2022). However, researchers argue that compliance-driven diversity, if not accompanied by genuine inclusion strategies, risks becoming a symbolic rather than transformative practice.

Post Covid Recovery: The Covid 19 pandemic disproportionately impacted women, Persons with Disabilities (PwD) and economically disadvantaged communities, magnifying pre-existing social and economic irregularities. Academic and industry reports reveal that the crisis prompted organisations to re-evaluate their workforce policies, with renewed focus on employee wellbeing, mental health and flexibility. Post- pandemic there has been greater recognition of the need to embed inclusion into core business resilience strategies rather than treating D&I as a peripheral initiative. Nonetheless, researchers

highlight that recovery efforts often benefit privileged groups first unless inclusion is intentionally prioritised at both cultural and policy levels.

2.4 Understanding Cultural Sensitivities in the Indian Workplace

India's social and organisational landscape is shaped by deep rooted cultural dimensions that extend far beyond visible diversity markers. These cultural factors often influence how inclusion is perceived, practiced and experienced in the workplace. Understanding these sensitivities is crucial for designing and implementing truly inclusive policies that resonate with the lived realities of diverse employees. This section examines five key diversities that significantly affect inclusivity at the Indian Workplace:

1. Language Diversity

Research highlights that linguistic diversity significantly affects communication and inclusion in Indian workplaces. Given India's 22 official languages and hundreds of dialects, studies argue that organisations must account for linguistic differences to create truly inclusive environments (Singh, 2018). Multilingual communication strategies and culturally sensitive messaging have been associated with higher employee engagement and belongingness.

2. Gender Sensitivities

Several studies point out that despite increasing female participation in the urban workforce, deeply rooted gender norms persist, influencing career progression, leadership opportunities, and workplace experiences (Chaudhuri, 2016). Research further indicates that gender-sensitive policies and active leadership support are critical for improving women's representation in decision-making roles (Avtar, 2022)

3. Religious Tolerance

Empirical research shows that India's religious diversity impacts workplace dynamics substantially. Scholars argue that organisational flexibility during major religious events and cultural sensitivity towards religious practices enhance perceived inclusion among employees (Kumar & Sharma, 2017). Lack of such flexibility has been correlated with disengagement and feelings of exclusion.

4. Caste Sensitivities

Despite constitutional safeguards, caste biases continue to subtly shape hiring, team formation, and promotion decisions in Indian workplaces (Thorat & Newman, 2010). Studies report that employees from marginalised castes often face invisible barriers that limit their career mobility and social integration within organisations

5. Regional Sensitivities

India's diverse regional identities influence social norms, communication styles, and workplace behaviours. Research has shown that recognising and celebrating regional diversity positively affects organisational commitment and employee engagement (Rao, 2019). Ignoring regional diversity can result in alienation of employees from less dominant socio-cultural backgrounds.

2.5. The Road from Diversity to Inclusion

Much of the early scholarship on diversity and inclusion has emerged from Western contexts, particularly focusing on race and gender dynamics in Anglo-Saxon societies (Shore et al., 2011; Mor Barak, 2015). Consequently, the conceptual frameworks around D&I have often remained narrowly confined to specific identity markers, limiting their applicability to complex socio-cultural settings such as India.

In scholarly terms, **diversity** primarily refers to the **numerical representation** of different social identity groups within an organisation. It encompasses demographic factors such as gender, caste, region, religion, disability status, and sexual orientation. Diversity metrics often measure how many individuals from underrepresented groups are present at different levels of an organisation.

Inclusion, by contrast, is a **qualitative construct**. It refers to the extent to which diverse individuals are integrated into the organisation's formal structures, informal networks, and decision-making processes. Inclusion focuses on fostering a workplace where all employees feel **respected, valued, empowered, and heard**.

Scholars such as Mor Barak (2015) argue that inclusion operates at two critical levels:

- **First Level (Equality and Fairness)**: Employees evaluate their experiences relative to their reference groups — such as colleagues in the same department, same management tier, or same job role — to assess whether they are treated fairly in opportunities for development, compensation, recognition, and participation.

- **Second Level (Uniqueness and Belongingness)**: Beyond fairness, true inclusion requires affirmation of individual uniqueness. Research suggests that employees feel genuinely included when their distinct backgrounds, perspectives, and identities are recognised as assets, not liabilities, and when they have a meaningful voice in organisational matters (Shore et al., 2011).

The literature thus emphasises that **diversity without inclusion** leads to superficial representation, often resulting in tokenism and disengagement. In contrast, organisations that achieve inclusion leverage diverse talents for innovation, creativity, and better decision-making outcomes (Nishii, 2013).

While many organisations worldwide — and increasingly in India — have adopted diversity metrics to showcase demographic progress, the **translation of diversity into inclusion remains uneven**. Particularly in Indian workplaces, intersectional factors such as caste, region, language, religion, and class add further layers of complexity, necessitating localised inclusion strategies.

Therefore, moving from diversity to inclusion is not simply a linear progression but involves **systemic transformation** at multiple levels — policy, leadership, culture, and everyday behaviours. Building truly inclusive workplaces demands deliberate efforts to remove structural barriers, address unconscious biases, amplify marginalised voices, and foster cultures where every individual's contribution is not only permitted but actively sought and valued.

3.0 Research methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a quantitative, cross sectional research design, to investigate how Indian organisations understand and implement diversity and inclusion (D&I) initiatives. This study adopts a quantitative, cross-sectional research design to investigate how Indian organisations understand and implement diversity and inclusion (D&I) initiatives. A quantitative approach enables the collection of standardised data from a broad sample, making it possible to examine patterns, relationships and group level differences with statistical precision. (Creswell, 2014). The cross sectional design captures insights at a single point in time, making it appropriate for studying employee perceptions of current D&I practices without the complexity of longitudinal tracking. Given the study's focus on employee perspectives across sectors and demographic backgrounds, a survey based method provides a practical and scalable way to gather diverse opinions across India's vast organisational landscape.

3.2 Data collection Instrument

The data was collected through a structured online questionnaire that was developed using Google forms. The questionnaire was designed keeping in mind the need to collect quantifiable data while also at the same time allowing the respondents to express their understanding of Diversity vs inclusion, and the ways in which the two differ.

The instrument focused on the following key information imperatives:

- Awareness and definitions of diversity and inclusion
- Perceptions of current workplace practices
- The scale of understanding in the crucial differences between D&I
- Personal experiences of diversity and inclusion
- Perceived organisational barriers to communication
- Suggestions and expectations from a sound enforceable D&I initiative

Most of the questions were multiple choice, with a few employing psychometric scaling methods like Likert Scale. This was done to allow for a more deeper measure of an employee's positive or negative response to a statement. Moreover, the middle option of 'neither agree nor disagree' was removed so that they were 'forced' to form an opinion. There were also a few open ended questions in the end asking for suggestions and an employee's personal expectations from an inclusive diversity program. The instrument was first reviewed by academic experts and piloted with ten respondents for clarity and efficacy, leading to minor adjustments in wording.

3.3 Sampling Strategy

This study used a purposive sampling method, which allowed the researcher more discretion in the nature of respondents. The selection was made from working professionals in the age group of 25-60 years, working across public and private companies in IT, Consumer good, Hospitality, Banking, Retail and Healthcare. The intention was to capture a variety of workplace environments and cultural dynamics. To improve demographic reach and ensure diversity across caste, gender, regions and roles, Snowball sampling was also used. Respondents were encouraged to share the survey within their professional networks.

The target sample size was set at 150 respondents to allow statistical validity and ensuring sectoral and demographic sub group comparisons.

3.4 Data Collection Procedure

The data was distributed online through email, LinkedIn and professional WhatsApp groups. The whole process of data collection took place over a six week period from May 10 to June 18. Participants were presented with an informed consent statement at the start of the form, outlining the purpose of the research study, ensuring confidentiality and the voluntary nature of participation. No incentives were offered and all participation remained entirely anonymous.

4. 0 Research findings and interpretation

This chapter presents the results of the empirical survey conducted as part of the study, 'Bridging the gap between diversity and inclusion': A framework for Indian organisations. The findings are organised into five sections. First, the demographic profile of the respondents is described to contextualise the sample characteristics. This is followed by a descriptive analysis of the Likert scale survey responses that are grouped into three domains:

1. Understanding of diversity and inclusion

2. Organisational practices supporting diversity and inclusion
3. Personal experience of inclusion at the workplace

Within each domain, mean scores and standard deviations are reported for the relevant survey items. Subsequently, notable patterns and variations in responses are recorded, for example highlighting which items received the most agreements and which the lowest. The chapter concludes with a summary of the findings, discussing how these results address the research questions and pointing towards the need to bridge the gap between diversity and inclusion in the Indian workplace.

4.1 Demographic profile of Respondents (N= 150)

Demographic variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	60	40
	Female	90	60
Age Group	20-29 years	24	16
	30-39 years	36	24
	40-49 years	55	37
	50 years and above	35	23
Job Level	Entry level	45	30
	Mid-Level	35	23
	Senior	60	40
	Executive	10	7
Organisation type	MNC	85	57
	PSU	15	7
	Public company	12	8
	Start up	28	19
	Family owned	10	7
Region	North/central India	45	30
	South India	35	23
	West India	40	27
	East/Northeast India	30	20

Table 4.1 Demographic profile of Respondents

As shown in Table 4.1, the gender distribution of the sample is relatively balanced, with 60 percent respondents identifying as female and the remaining as male. The respondents span a range of age groups, a plurality of 37% were in the age group of 40-49 years, while about a quarter (24%) were in the 30-39 years category and the 50 years and above category. (23%). The remaining respondents (16%) were in the youngest, the 20-29 year category. The spread is evenly distributed and indicates that the results display experiences of both fresh young professionals as well as seasoned seniors who have been around for a while.

In terms of job seniority, the majority of replies (40%) came from the senior managers, while the entry level employees made up the second largest category at 30%. About 7% were from Executives at the top of the organisation chart, while about 23% were mid-level managers. This mix of job levels provides perspectives across organisational hierarchies. Organisational representation is also very varied, with the

majority of them being multinational corporations, (50%) and start ups (45%). A little more than a quarter, (27%) were family owned businesses while the remaining were PSU's and public limited companies. The high representation of MNC's and start-ups is significant because diversity initiatives are most widely observed among such organisations with a studied intention towards corporate social responsibility and a robust HR department.

The regional background of respondents is very balanced, with almost equal division between the four broad regions of the country, the highest being from Northern/central part of the country (30%).

In summary, the respondent profile is demographically varied, which helps ensure the findings reflect a broad view of diversity and inclusion from all organisational classes and regions.

4.2 Understanding of diversity and inclusion

This section examines respondents self-reported understanding of diversity and inclusion (D&I) concepts. Survey items in this domain assessed how well individuals grasp the meaning and importance of diversity and how and in what ways it differs from true inclusion. All items were rated on a five point Likert scale, (1=strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree).

Table 4.2 Understanding of Diversity and Inclusion (N=55)

Item	Mean	SD
I understand the concept of diversity in the workplace	4.5	0.7
I understand the concept of inclusion in the workplace	4.4	0.8
A diverse workforce is beneficial to the organisation	4.6	0.6
Perceived D&I awareness in the organisation	3.8	1.0

The results in table 4.2 allude to a high level of personal understanding towards the concept of Diversity and Inclusion. On average, respondents strongly agreed that they understand the concept of workplace diversity, (mean = 4.5) and inclusion (4.4). There is also a near unanimous agreement that having a diverse workforce is beneficial to the organisation (mean is the highest at 4.6 and standard deviation is the lowest at 0.6 indicating a consistent response). These findings reflect a broad recognition of the values of diversity aligning with the goals and visions of an organisation for long term growth.

The only relatively low score in the category pertains to the *perceived D&I awareness among colleagues in the organisation* (mean =3.8). While it is still positive and above the netural midpoint of 3.0, it is still markedly lower than the others. This gap implies that some respondents feel that not everyone in their organisation is aware and/or educated about D&I as they themselves are. The higher standard deviation for this response (SD= 1.0) supports this interpretation indicating more varied opinions – some respondents may have rated this very high believing most colleagues do understand the minutiae of diversity and inclusion while others rated it low implying that organisational awareness does not quite measure up.

In summary, respondents individually report strong understanding of diversity and inclusion concepts and a belief in their importance but they are slightly less confident of the uniformity of such sentiment in their organisations.

4.3 Organisational practices supporting D&I

This section focuses on organisational practices and initiatives related to diversity, as reported by the respondents. The Likert scale items in this domain capture the extent to which respondents agree their

workplaces have accepted and implemented policies programmes and actions that support and further diversity. Key parameters included D&I policies, training and education, recruitment practices and leadership commitment. The below table provides the statistical observations for each item assessing organisational D&I practices.

Table 4.3 Organisational D&I practices (N=150)

Item	Mean	SD
Our organisation has formal policies or programs promoting D&I	4.0	0.9
Regular diversity and inclusion training is provided to employees	3.2	1.1
The organisation actively recruits individuals from diverse backgrounds	3.8	0.8
Leadership demonstrates a strong commitment to D&I	3.6	1.0

The responses summarised in table 4.3 suggests that most respondents find their organisations to have some foundational diversity and inclusion practices in place. But that certain areas are lacking. The highest mean in this set is for the presence of **formal D&I policies and programmes** (mean =4.0) reinstating what was said above. This is an encouraging sign, however it should be interpreted with caution, broader surveys indicate that only about 21% of Indian organisations have formally instated D&I initiatives into its CSR. (hr.economictimes.indiatimes.com).

The relatively strong agreement in the sample may reflect that the surveyed organisations are somewhat ahead of the curve, possibly because companies interested in D&I would be more inclined to participate in such research or it may reflect the respondents optimistic approach to the problem.

In contrast, the lowest mean in this category is for regular D&I training (mean =3.2). This is also the lowest rated item across all organisational practices questions, indicating that many respondents could not confirm that their organisation offers frequent training or education on diversity and inclusion. The lower scores on training also indicate a potential gap between having a policy on paper and actual real time implementation of said policies. The higher standard deviation for this item (SD=1.1) points to variability : some respondents, likely from more proactive organisations reported that training is provided, while others disagreed. These findings reinstate the findings of an earlier study that a significant portion of employers lack a structured approach to D&I despite considering themselves inclusive, highlighting a pervasive disconnect between theory and practice.

Other aspects of organisational practice indicate moderate positive agreement. Diverse recruitment efforts received a mean of 3.8, implying that many respondents see their employees making an effort to hire from a variety of backgrounds, (though not universally strongly agreed, as SD = 0.8 shows some difference in perception). The item on leadership commitment to D&1 has a mean of 3.6 suggesting that, on average, respondents somewhat agree that top management is championing diversity and inclusion. Still, there appears to be division. Some respondents may feel there is truly committed leadership at the top and others perceive the leadership response to be somewhat tepid. These findings imply room for improvement in leadership driven inclusion initiatives.

4.4 Perceived distinction between Diversity and Inclusion

One of the core objectives of this study was to explore whether organisations are able to meaningfully distinguish between the concepts of diversity and inclusion, or do they use them interchangeably.

Moreover, whether they recognise the absence of true inclusion in their diversity programmes and are making efforts to bridge that gap.

The responses reveal that the distinction is **not consistently clear** across participants. While a sizeable number of participants indicated a high level of personal understanding of both terms, the qualitative data and specific items suggest blurred boundaries of comprehension.
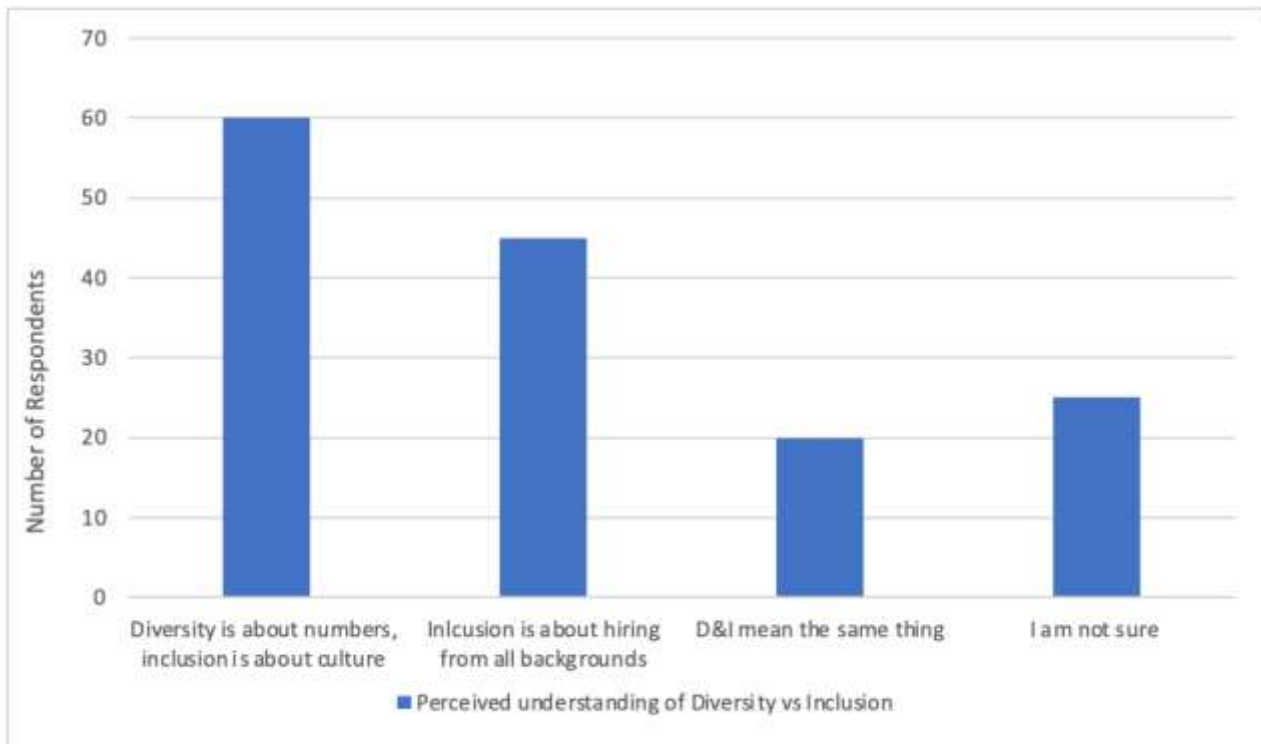
As demonstrated by the graph above, while the majority of respondents (replied in the affirmative to the phrase, *'Diversity is about numbers while inclusion is about culture',* a sizable portion of them conflated inclusion with hiring initiatives, highlighting the deeper problem Sherbin and Rashid (2007) highlighted in their HBR study 'Diversity does not stick without inclusion', of organisations having strong diversity efforts of hiring and representation but weak inclusion experiences of equal growth and a decision making voice.

Furthermore, 13% respondents, (20 out of 150) find themselves unsure of distinguishing between the finer nuances of diversity vs inclusion. This finding ties up neatly with the earlier Likert item of lack of training about D&I within the organisation, with the concepts being new and somewhat unexplored, there is an imperative need to educate employees about the finer points of the subject, sensitising them to the needs for inclusivity and tying it up with the diversity programmes that most Indian organisations seem to be running on auto pilot. This supports the research premise that the Indian corporate sector may be achieving diversity in form but there is a long way to go till they succeed in true inclusivity in function.

4.5 Inclusion experience of employees

in addition to organisational efforts, the survey also measured the employees personal experiences with differentiation and othering at their workplaces. This domain reflects how included, respected and equal respondents within their places of work. Key items probe whether individuals feel valued in their team,

feel comfortable being themselves at work, perceive fairness in opportunities and see equitable treatment for all.

Item	Mean	SD
I feel valued and included by my team and colleagues	4.0	0.8
I feel comfortable being myself at work	3.9	0.9
All employees in my organisation have equal opportunities for advancement	3.3	1.2
The organization treats employees from all backgrounds fairly	3.7	1.0

The data in table above indicates that respondents generally have a **positive sense of inclusion at the interpersonal level**, but they also identify certain shortcomings in broader inclusion outcomes. Respondents largely agree that they feel personally valued and included by their immediate team members (mean =4.0). This suggests that on a day to basis participants experience a sense of belonging in their work groups. Similarly, there is a high level of agreement that people feel comfortable being themselves at work (mean 3.9) implying that organisational culture in many cases is accepting of individual differences (whether related to identity, background or opinion). The variability on these two items is relatively low (SD ~ 0.8-0.9), indicating a consistent trend of most respondents feeling included by colleagues and able to be authentic at work

However, when they were asked about all employees being treated equally despite their backgrounds, the replies were more ambivalent, bordering on average, with mean scores of 3.3 and 3.7 on the Likert scale respectively. These low scores coupled with higher standard deviation signals that a considerable number of respondents do not believe that the growth opportunities in their organisations are equally available to everyone. In other words, some employees see a gap or bias in promotions or career progression, which naturally goes against the principle of true inclusion. To conclude, the mixed responses in this category, of a strong interpersonal inclusion but weak systemic fairness, are telling. It indicate that while everyday interactions with colleagues are positive, there are institutional or cultural aspects (like promotions, policies or leadership behaviour) that lag behind. This is consistent with the already known challenges in bridging the diversity vs inclusion divide, (hr.economictimes.indiatimes.com.). This research's findings mirror these challenges, as sections of respondents acknowledge gaps in inclusion. Despite generally feeling positive about their own situation, these individuals recognise that truly equitable opportunities and uniform respect are not fully attained. Such insights underscore the importance of cursory diversity measures without first focusing on fostering a culture of genuine inclusion.

4.6 Summary of Findings

Several notable patterns and variations emerge from the above results, offering deeper insights into how respondents view diversity and inclusion in their organisations and how the responses measure against the research questions earlier enlisted for this study.

Firstly, with regard to how diversity and inclusion are understood, (Research Question 1), the results demonstrate that respondents have a strong affinity to D&I concepts and they overwhelmingly recognise their importance. The near universal agreement on the importance of a diverse workforce signifies that the value of diversity is well and truly understood by almost all. There is also evidence that individuals feel knowledgeable and positive about D&I on a personal level. However, when it comes to the finer

points of distinction between the two, there is still a felt gap in awareness and knowledge which makes it difficult for them to clearly enunciate between the two.

Secondly, concerning the state of organisational practices for D&I (Research Question 2) the findings indicate that while many organisations represented in the sample have made strong visible strides in the direction of more representative diversity, there remains a clear gap in execution. Formal policies exist on paper but the low incidence of regular training and only moderate leadership engagement point to patchy implementation. In practice this means that while employees see some commitment to diversity, it is difficult to believe if that isn't merely performative in the absence of consistent actions to that effect. This partial implementation aligns with the notion that many Indian companies are still in early stages of their D&I

journey – acknowledging this issue but not fully investing in it. The variability across responses also suggests that some organisations are much further along with their robust D&I programs while others have little to show beyond rhetoric.

Thirdly, regrading employers experiences of inclusion, (Research Question 3), the survey reveals a mixed picture. On one hand, many respondents do feel included and respected with their immediate work environment – a positive sign that inclusion at the personal level is happening atleast informally. On the other hand, the lower agreement on equal opportunities and fair treatment signals that inclusive outcomes are still far and few, especially if you belong to the section of people who are commonly differentiated against. E.g. women, lower castes, LGBTQ, physically challenged or others. In other words, despite the diverse representation, there still exist perceived inequities for example in promotions or growth opportunities. These perceptions are critical, as they highlight the gap between diversity and inclusion. It is possible to have diversity in an organisation and a generally friendly culture, and yet still fall short of true inclusivity if the concerned sections of the group feel underappreciated or overlooked.

In conclusion, the findings of the survey confirm that while Indian organisations and their employees largely endorse diversity and inclusion in theory, the practice of inclusion has large rooms for improvement. These findings are highly relevant to the research problem as they empirically illustrate the discrepancy between having representational diversity and making all employees of the organisation feel like they belong. This evidence

strengthens the impetus for developing a comprehensive framework for Indian organisations to bridge the gap between diversity and inclusion. Having identified what the roadblocks are, the research can now proceed to formulate targeted strategies to enhance inclusion, ensuring that the benefits of diversity are fully realised in the Indian workplace.

5.0 Discussion and Framework Development
5.1 Linking findings to Literature

The findings of this study reaffirm and extend existing literature on the distinction and interplay between diversity and inclusion in organisational contexts, particularly within the Indian setting. Consistent with Sherbin and Rashid's (2007) assertion that diversity and inclusion are often conflated, this research reveals a widespread conceptual ambiguity among employees and organisations alike. Respondents frequently equated diversity with inclusion or viewed inclusion as merely an extension of diversity, reflecting the cognitive merging described in global scholarships.

The predominance of representational diversity initiatives such as gender hiring mandates and accessible infrastructures, aligns with the trends highlighted by Cox and Morrison (1992), where diversity

management is focused more on recruitment and representation than on embedded cultural transformation. However as Shore (2011) and others emphasised, Inclusion is a deeper issue that involves feeling like being accepted into the inner sanctum of the organisation, and is often characterised by a sense of belonging towards their place of work. This gap between numerical diversity and experiential inclusion reinforces the literature's warning against tokenism.

In sum, this study substantiates foundational literature, while also exposing gaps in its applicability to the Indian context. By mapping organisational practices onto The Inclusion Integration Ladder explained in the next section, it becomes evident that most Indian Organisations remain in lower rungs – focused on representational diversity without the cultural, procedural or leadership changes required for full inclusion. This underscores the urgent need for India specific frameworks that move beyond numerical targets towards more meaningful engagement, empowerment and equity.

5.2 The Seven stage Inclusion Integration ladder

To further address the issue, this study proposes a **seven stage inclusion integration ladder** – a structured progression that Indian organisations can use to diagnose where they currently stand and to develop targeted strategies for embedded inclusion.

	Stage	Inclusion focus	Intended Organisational Outcome
1	Diversity	Demographic representation	Heterogenous workforce
2	Equity and fairness	Fair equitable policies and protections	Non Discrimination
3	Access and participation	Equal opportunities to contribute	Functional inclusion
4	Belonging and safety	Trust, acceptance, authenticity	Emotional inclusion
5	Voice and influence	Sponsorship, Mentorship, Decision making power	Structural inclusion
6	Appreciation of Uniqueness	Valuing identity based strengths	Cultural inclusion
7	Embedded Inclusion	Inclusion in strategy, systems and culture	Sustained innovation, consolidated strength and growth

Let's look at each of these stages:

Stage 1 : Diversity (Representation of differences)

"You can't include what isn't represented'

What this stage looks like : Organisations ensure hiring from diverse identity groups including but not limited to gender, caste, disability, region, religion and sexual orientation. It could be a bonus to ensure demographic targets are met.

Key result areas under this stage would include:

- Establish Diversity Dashboards (by role, religion, identity)
- Use inclusive job descriptions and accessible recruitment channels
- Extend campus hiring to Tier 2 and Tier 3 cities
- Proactively recruit people with disabilities (PWD's) and LGBTQ individuals

Stage 2: Equity and fairness (Non Discrimination policies)

"Representation must be matched with equal treatment'

What this stage looks like: HR policies are updated to prohibit discrimination and ensure fair pay, appraisal, leave and promotion systems.

Key result areas under this stage would include:

- Audit all HR policies for bias (language, flexibility and access)
- Enforce anti- harassment and grievance redressal mechanisms
- Provide equitable parental leave (irrespective of gender)
- Mandate bias training for hiring and appraisal panels

Stage 3 : Access and participation (Inclusive opportunity structures)

"It's not just about being invited to the party, it's about being asked to dance"

What this stage looks like: All employees regardless of background are encouraged to participate in key projects, leadership pipelines and decision making spaces.

Key result areas under this stage would include:

- Rotate high impact projects intentionally
- Offer mentorship/sponsorship programmes for underrepresented employees
- Set KPI'S for managers to foster diverse participation in teams
- Track representation in leadership development programs

Stage 4: Belonging and Psychological Safety

"Inclusion starts where fear ends"

What this stage looks like : Employees feel safe to express their authenticity and personal views without fear of backlash or exclusion. They can afford to be themselves at work

Key result Areas under this stage would include:

- Conduct anonymous inclusion pulse surveys
- Offer multilingual communication options
- Accommodate religious, cultural and dietary needs
- Encourage inclusive rituals (e.g. diverse holiday celebrations)

Stage 5: Voice and Influence (decision making power)

"Inclusion without influence is performative"

What this stage looks like: Diverse employees have real power

Key Result Areas under this stage:

- Ensure demographic diversity in strategic committees
- Introduce anonymous ideation platforms
- Facilitate skip level meetings and listening circles
- Create safe channels for upward feedback (especially for women, PwD'S and LGBTQ)

Stage 6 : Appreciation of Uniqueness

"The goal isn't assimilation, it is celebration"

What this stage looks like: Differences are no longer tolerated, they are leveraged. Employees are recognised for the unique perspectives and experience they bring to the table due to their unique identities.

Key Result Areas under this stage:

- Highlight diverse employee stories in internal communication
- Recognise contributions from non-traditional talent sources
- Leverage multi linguism and regional knowledge in customer roles

- Train managers to see identity as an asset, not a risk

Stage 7: Embedded inclusion

"Inclusion is no longer a program- It is the culture"

What this stage looks like: Inclusion is integrated across **strategy, systems, leadership, metrics and performance**. It's no longer a CSR initiative, its business as usual.

Key Result Areas under this stage:

- Link Inclusion KPI'S to leadership appraisals
- Include D&I metrics in quarterly business reviews
- Establish permanent inclusion councils
- Reward inclusion behaviours in team and individual performance reviews

The Inclusion Integration Ladder above offers more than just a theoretical model – it serves as a practical diagnostic and development tool for Indian organisations striving to translate diversity into actionable inclusion. By mapping where they currently stand across the seven progressive stages, organisations can not only identify specific structural and strategic gaps but also prioritise tailored interventions aligned with their organisations internal maturity and workforce demographics. Importantly, the ladder recognises that inclusion is not a singular one time achievement but a continuum of evolving practices that require an ethos of ongoing introspection, leadership commitment and systemic reinforcement. In the uniquely layered context of Indian workplaces – marked by regional, linguistic, caste, gender and generational complexities – this framework provides a culturally grounded pathway for embedding inclusion not as a siloed initiative but **as a core driver of organisational resilience, innovation and equity**. The recommendations that follow this section, build on this framework to suggest concrete steps organisations can take at each stage to foster a more inclusive workplace.

6. Conclusion: From Representation to Belonging

This research set out to examine the disconnect between diversity and true inclusion in Indian Organisations – a gap that is often acknowledged in principle but rarely addressed in practice. The empirical findings revealed that while many organisations have made visible strides in hiring from diverse backgrounds and embedding anti-discrimination policies into their HR initiatives, the true intent of inclusion, in the form of equitable voice, access and belonging, has been inconsistent and grossly under theorised. Notably, a significant portion of employees either misunderstood or conflated the meanings of diversity and inclusion, which also partially explains why diversity initiatives fail to achieve inclusive outcomes. The proposed Inclusion Integration framework offers a culturally relevant and context sensitive framework for Indian organisations to evolve beyond representational diversity. It provides a staged model that begins with demographic representation, and culminates in a fully embedded, systemic culture of inclusion. However, for this progression to be meaningful, organisations must go beyond vision statements and implement deliberate, measurable actions.

These actions must begin at the top: senior leadership must be held accountable for inclusion outcomes, and not just diversity headcounts. Inclusion should be embedded into performance reviews, budget priorities and leadership development. Organisations must also invest in inclusive structures, from transparent hiring and promotion systems to multilingual communications and accessible workspaces. At the cultural level, employee resource groups, inclusive celebrations and feedback forums must be cultivated as ongoing practices rather than annual events. Crucially, data collection and disaggregated

measurement should become standard, so that inclusion can be tracked and improved with the same rigour as financial or operational metrics.

By blending empirical insight with practical guidance, this research contributes as both a diagnostic tool and a progress roadmap. It challenges Indian organisations to introspect on the mere performance of diversity and progress towards real authentic inclusion. From having a seat at the table to having a real impactful voice that will not only be heard but applauded too. Inclusion is not merely a moral imperative but a business necessity and a cultural opportunity. Organisations that embrace it will not only build stronger teams but also contribute to a more equitable and just workforce.

7. Limitations of this study

While this study contributes valuable insights into the evolving conversation around diversity and inclusion (D&I) among Indian organisations, it is important to acknowledge its limitations in scope, design and generalisability. Recognising these boundaries not only strengthens the credibility of the research and its results but also paves the way for future researches into the subject which can start from the vantage point of knowing what could be done differently.

1. **Non randomised and Sector skewed sampling**: This study utilised a non-probabilistic sampling method, primarily targeting professionals in the corporate sector. The sample was drawn from mostly Urban dwellers in Tier 1 and 2 cities, working in private or government establishments. As a result the findings may not fully reflect the inclusion realities of smaller cities, of other industries such as education and healthcare, all of who form significant parts of the Indian economy.

2. **Self-reported data and Social Desirability Bias**: Data was collected via an online, self-administered survey and accordingly, the need to come across as positively included, may have crept into their responses. They may have overreported positive experiences and underplayed negative ones in order to be perceived as accepted and/or socially desirable or even to escape organisational scrutiny, even though it was unanimously made clear that the answers would be kept strictly confidential. This may have affected the authenticity of the findings, especially in cultures where hierarchy and conformity are dominant.

3. **Quantitative Dominance over Qualitative insight** : While the survey provided breadth across demographic and perceptual variables, it lacked the qualitative depth to capture nuanced, lived experiences – particularly around inter sectional identities (e.g. of caste, gender, social class, language and sexual orientation). A mixed method or interview based approach could have highlighted more detailed and authentic personal experiences, making the data richer with context and lived insight.

4. **Absence of Longitudinal Data** : The study offers a snapshot of D&I perceptions in Indian organisations at a particular point in time. This makes the study look at the current experience of diversity and inclusion and not its development graph. With longitudinal data, collected over a period of time, it would have been possible to assess whether inclusion has improved, deteriorated or stagnated over the course of the organisation and how external circumstances such as Covid or Industry Policy changes may have impacted the same.

8. Future Research Prospects

Building on these limitations, several promising areas of future research enquiry emerge. These directions can help deepen the richness of this area of study and provide more specific context that could

bring to light more nuances about diversity and inclusion and its complex nexus within the Indian corporate sector and furthermore it could widen the scope of study for research making the results more conclusive and reliable.

1. **Qualitative Research Perspective:** Future studies should bring into their fold a more personal narrative on the topic of inclusivity. This could be done by making the research methodology more qualitative. More in depth personal interviews, focus groups and/or ethnographic methods may be used to specifically target people most vulnerable to exclusion. This would highlight the everyday subtleties of othering, the informal power structures within every organisation and the process of identity negotiation that all intersectional communities have to contend with.

2. **Intersectional Research Frameworks:** As Indian workplaces are shaped by overlapping social identities, (such as a LGBTQ person from a lower caste, or a differently abled woman) future researches could adopt a cross sectional lens in order to view the problem of diversity vs inclusivity from the perspective of how these compounded identities navigate the space of belonging in their workplaces.

3. **Sector Specific Regional Studies:** Future researches could also narrow their focus into specific sectors such as manufacturing or retail or compare sectors such as public and private. They could also make their approach more region specific in order to uncover the influences of culture and language sensibilities on the interpretation of diversity and inclusivity. This would also help refine the proposed framework for different organisational ecosystems.

4. **Longitudinal and Impact based Research:** Longitudinal studies could track the progress of D&I initiatives over time, examine whether inclusion training, leadership buy in and policy interventions have yielded measurable differences in organisational culture and employee experience.

5. **Empirical testing of the Inclusion Integration Ladder:** The Inclusion Integration Ladder, as proposed in this study could also be used as a stepping stone to new, further research. Future researches could empirically test this framework across organisations of varying sizes and maturity levels to validate its utility, refine its stages and develop a possible benchmarking index.

Closing Note

This research opens the door to a deeper, India Specific dialogue on Inclusion, but in many ways it is only a starting point. The domain is much vaster, deeper and more unexplored than what we first imagined at the start of our research. Future scholars must continue to unpack what being included truly means, and the many dimensions and manifestations of the concept in a nation like ours, with its complex, stratified and dynamic nature. It is only through continued dialogue and prolonged intentional effort that it would be possible to make workplaces in our country truly inclusive and to move finally from merely symbolic diversity towards sustained, systemic equity.

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