Use of Information Technology in agricultural supply chain for performance improvement of marginalised suppliers and the overall supply chain- Emerging economies perspective



## A THESIS

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### Abstract

*Introduction and Motivation:* Agriculture is the backbone for the livelihood in the developing countries (World Bank, 2007). It plays a very crucial role in the development of Indian economy (Mohan, 2006). The agricultural sector covers around 24% of India's GDP, it covers around 15% from the total earnings from the export and about 56.7% of the country's population is employed in the agriculture (Rao, 2007). Recently, the increasing attention on agricultural sector has motivated the researchers to work on the improvement of agricultural supply chain. The correct information about the agricultural industry which includes farming techniques and market information (price, demand etc.) is very important for the farmers to work in the right direction that might help the farmers to cope with better agricultural output and income. The studies have shown that Indian community heavily relies upon the traditional means of accessing the information, which does not completely satisfy the adequate information needs (Rao, 2004).

With the rapid rate of globalization and privatization in agricultural economy, the traditional modes of getting information have failed to meet the growing information demand for the farmers (Parwez, 2014). Further, a report of Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) of the United Nations in 2016 had reported in its statistics that around 23% of the total damage caused due to medium and large scale natural disasters between 2006-2016 had been accounted by agriculture in developing countries. In case of drought, agriculture suffered 80% of the damage in this time range. The report highlighted that the agriculture could not just be the victim of the disasters but can also act as solution of disaster risk reduction like using agricultural technologies, to combat in these tough situations. These agricultural technologies help in reducing farm level risks much more effectively than the usual practices and have also been responsible for 2.5 times higher net economic benefits.

Our dissertation involves two studies understanding the role of information and communication technology (ICT) in agricultural supply chain while documenting evidence, through survey based research. The study 1 captures the farmers view and investigates two conceptual models, while the study 2 captures the agri-tech companies senior executives views and investigate one conceptual model.

*Study 1 (Essay 1):*The first essay investigates the extent to which Instrumental relationship commitment is responsible towards the poor farmer's IT adoption in the emerging economies. Collecting the data (despite being rare) from the 120 marginalised farmers (suppliers) from Indian villages, who were given the support of IT tools, knowledge transfer and technical exchange from the private firms (buyers) in order to involve them to the use of IT. Further, realising the need of dynamic capability in the context, we tried to bring more insightful results towards the theoretical as well as managerial contribution from this study. We performed structural equation modelling and found that instrumental relationship commitment as a barrier towards the adoption of IT in the agriculture unless a good incentive is given to the poor farmers. We also found the instrumental relationship commitment and leading to the use of IT. This essay also stresses on importance of digitalization in the agriculture with the proper inflow of incentives to have the sustainable supply chain.

*Study 1 (Essay 2):* The second essay examines the performance of marginalized farmers in supply relationships with agri-tech firms in emerging rural agricultural economies. The complex relationship among the suppliers, dual relationship and knowledge transfer were studied. The essay empirically investigates the relationship between knowledge transfer to supplier's performance improvement via buyer-supplier relationship. Grounding on agency theory, a conceptual framework has been proposed to identify the mediation effect of BSR. The context deals with suppliers who are farmers in developing nations. The hypotheses were

tested using confirmatory factor analysis and structural equation with a sample of 121 marginalized farmers from Indian states. The data was collected using a survey instrument designed by adapting the well-cited and validated measures. These marginalized farmers worked in collaboration with the agri-tech firms facilitating them with the knowledge transfer.

*Study 1 (Qualitative Investigation):* The results very well explain variables and their relationship with one another. These established relationships also establish the fact that knowledge transfer is a powerful tool to make connect with farmers leading to their performance improvement. The knowledge transfer was found as a driver to improve performance of the marginalised farmers (poor suppliers) and the buyer supplier relationship acted as a positive mediator in this essay. The above two essays were further concretised in their results by running another statistically robust technique called Qualitative Content Analysis, which studied the qualitative and quantitative data both collected from the fields. The results again proved the use of IT and knowledge transfer to be the rigorous drivers for the improvement of farmer's performance which further strengthens our work and proves our claim.

*Study 2 (Essay 3):* Theorising from resource-based view ideology, our third essay studies the intersection of supply chain management and the use of IT. This essay aims to investigate supply chain performance as an essential outcome from the use of IT and explores the effect of supply chain collaboration on supply chain performance, which will eventually improve firm performance. In addition, the volume uncertainty has been explored and tested whether the risks due to the uncertainty can be mitigated via the use of IT. A sample of 121 senior executives from agri-tech firms was collected in person by travelling and meeting the executives in person in various states of India. Structural equation modelling (SEM) was used to test the hypothesized relationship of volume uncertainty to supply chain performance via

the use of IT and supply chain collaboration. The results show that volume uncertainty significantly impacts supply chain collaboration via the use of IT and on supply chain performance via supply chain collaboration. The use of IT positively and significantly impacts supply chain performance via supply chain collaboration.

*Findings:* The findings from our overall study in all the three essays are stated below.

*Essay 1:* IRC positively and significantly affected the TE but IRC does not lead to UOI when TE is the mediator. TE also positively and significantly affected the KT and UOI. TE also leads to UOI when KT is the mediator. In addition, the relationship between the KT to UOI was also seen to be positive and significant. Thus we see that IRC positively and significantly leads to UOI when TE and KT both are acting as the mediators.

*Essay 2:* The KT was found as a driver to improve performance (SPI), and the BSR acted as a positive mediator in this study. The complex relationships among the KT, BSR and SPI hold. The relationship between the KT and BSR was coming to be strong and significant and was supported empirically. Thus, all in all, our study explored the various relationships between KT to BSR and SPI. The KT to SPI directly and via the BSR is positive and significant.

*Essay3:* Results show that volume uncertainty significantly impacts supply chain collaboration via the use of IT and on supply chain performance via supply chain collaboration. The use of IT positively and significantly impacts supply chain performance via supply chain collaboration.

*Thesis Contribution:* The thesis contributes in the various dimensions of managerial theoretical and practical implications, stemming from its findings. This work can be subscribed to various nuanced understandings of the agricultural supply chain context in emerging economies, in the specialized cases where farmers belong to the marginalized communities. The thesis has the scope to replicate using a qualitative and quantitative mixed-method approach in emerging economies beyond India. The key academic contribution of the thesis are:

- ✓ Advances the agency theory, dynamic capability and resource based view literature in the supply chain discipline of emerging rural economies.
- ✓ The marginalized farmers with knowledge transfer and improved buyer-supplier relationship can become a part of the mainstream value chain, their debts can be reduced, suicides can be prevented, and the quality of their family life can be significantly improved.
- ✓ How the agri-tech firms (non-traditional buyer) and supplier relationship and KT helps improve the economic sustainability of smallholder farmers in India. The study offers strategic implications for agri-tech practitioners, policymakers, and academic debate.

The authors immersed themselves in fieldwork by interacting and meeting in person with 121 farmers residing in the remotest of the remote rural areas across multiple states of India. This resulted in the collection of real and authentic data and capturing the ground realities from one of the fastest-growing and largest emerging economies.Witnessing the potential benefits of the emerging use of IT in risk mitigation and uncertainty reduction as reported in the third essay, agri-tech firms operating in emerging rural and agricultural economies need to ensure supply chain collaboration to improve the supply chain performance. The volume uncertainty

at agri-tech firm's end as well as a farmer's end is a ground reality, which has been leading to an inability to plan and prepare systematically. These results in massive wastages in the agricultural supply chain, supply chain disruption at one end, and the farmer's suicide on the other end. The key academic contributions from study 2 are:

 $\checkmark$  How the risks in the agricultural supply chain sourced due to the volume uncertainty can be mitigated by the use of IT and supply chain collaboration to influence the supply chain performance in rural agricultural and developing economies.

### Limitations: The key limitations in each essay are:

*In essay 1*, work is focussed to shed light on how such small sized firms are able to create value in the supply chain. The current model attempts to capture the antecedents of UOI. However, we are unable to capture the supply chain performance due to lack of data from the upstream players. It would be interesting to observe how the overall supply chain profit behaves when ICT is used specifically to cater to farmers performance improvement. Also, one of main limitations in capturing the UOI in agricultural sector is the lack of explanations in the construct items. The construct items provide a macro-level perspective on the business thereby restricting the robustness in the findings. We believe that a single in-depth case study in a similar firm would significantly enhance the validity of our work as a future study.

*In essay 2*, The supplier performance improvement (SPI) has been addressed by the various links like knowledge transfer (KT), buyer supplier relationship (BSR) and knowledge transfer (KT) via buyer supplier relationship as a mediator. We tried to check the relationship of KT with SPI, where we did not specify the exact kind of KT (ICT, advisory services, apps, mobile phones) because we just wanted to understand the role of KT. Future studies can look into the

specific kind of KT to understand the impact in-depth concerning the SPI. The authors tried their best to collect the data from maximum parts of rural India, but several issues like transportation, logistics, the data remain less and so future studies can get into depth with newer insights with larger sample size. This work deals completely with the farmer's point of view regarding their performance improvement when they avail KT, so there is a good scope for future studies to look at it from buying firms' point of view when they facilitate the farmers with KT, their challenges, problems, benefits etc. Due to sample restrictions, the results from this work may not be generalisable to other contexts and needs further research.

*In essay 3*, we stepped on to certain limitations. First, we considered a situation in the agricultural sector where the UOI is rare in developing countries like India. This is because the rural sector does not have the bandwidth to transform the agricultural supply chain towards Industry 4.0 (Ivanov et al., 2019). This creates a lacuna in understanding the nature of the business at the field level and thereby shortens the total population concerning Agriculture 4.0 (Yost *et al.*, 2019) in developing nations like India. This provides an opportunity for future researchers to delve deeper into such individual companies and understand the operational constraints and needs which prompted them to use digitization as a tool. Second, our work here focused on understanding how SCP is enhanced through digitization from the perspective of agricultural companies.

The agricultural companies may concede that due to ICT's, better SCC leads to SCP. However, whether the farming community, especially the BoP segment, appreciates and benefits from such collaboration is unknown. As a result, our work only addresses the concern of supply chain performance from digitization from the perspective of an upstream player (Hirose and Matsumura, 2017), as our target respondents were the firm's employees. Future studies need to conduct a similar perspective from the downstream player and then validate whether digitization contributes to SCP and the degree to which the risk or volume uncertainty is taken care of through the UOI from the farmer's perspectives.

**Keywords**: Supply Chain, Digitization, Information and communication technology, supply chain collaboration, use of IT, supply chain performance, volume uncertainty, Agency theory, Knowledge transfer, Buyer-supplier relationship, Supplier performance, Emerging agricultural economies, Technical Exchange, Agricultural Supply Chain, Poor Farmers, Instrumental Relationship Commitment, Structural Equation Modelling

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