Hustle Culture and Employee Wellbeing in India's Start-up Ecosystem: A Multiple-Case Analysis of Founder Narratives and Sustainable Entrepreneurship

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ABSTRACT

Hustle culture, the belief that extreme commitment, long working hours and personal sacrifice are necessary for entrepreneurial success, has become highly visible in India's start-up ecosystem. Its glorification can normalise excessive work demands and obscure their consequences for employee wellbeing and organisational sustainability. The literature reviewed here treats hustle as a concept, workaholism as an individual tendency and work strain as a measurable outcome, but says little about how founder narratives become workplace expectations in Indian start-ups. This paper addresses that gap through a qualitative multiple-case study of publicly available secondary sources, including founder statements, news reports, an investigative report based on employee accounts and an executive's opinion article. Five cases were purposively selected: Infosys (N. R. Narayana Murthy), Ola (Bhavish Aggarwal), Byju's, Swiggy and Zerodha. The data were analysed thematically through the Job Demands–Resources model, institutional theory and a sustainable-entrepreneurship perspective. The cases show hustle culture in several forms: a normative argument for long hours, founder-centred accounts of extreme work, reported target-driven pressure and job insecurity at Byju's (allegations the company disputes), and a senior executive's rejection of hustle. Zerodha offers a counter-case in which founder-reported practices limit after-hours communication and staff targets, although it is a single high-margin business and cannot be generalised. The paper argues that start-up governance and entrepreneurship education should treat employee wellbeing as part of long-term organisational value rather than as the price of growth. As the data are secondary and partly self-reported, the findings are exploratory.

Keywords: Hustle culture, Indian start-ups, employee wellbeing, burnout, work-life balance, sustainable entrepreneurship, overwork, responsible leadership

INTRODUCTION

India's start-up ecosystem has developed rapidly over the past decade. The expansion of digital infrastructure, access to venture capital, a growing technology workforce and government initiatives such as Startup India have contributed to the emergence of new ventures across information technology, fintech, education, mobility, e-commerce, food delivery and hospitality.

This expansion has also produced a powerful cultural narrative concerning how entrepreneurs should work. Founders who work late into the night, remain constantly available and sacrifice personal wellbeing are frequently presented as examples of ambition, resilience and commitment. In this context, hustle culture refers not merely to hard work but to the belief that continuous effort, extreme working hours and personal sacrifice are essential for professional success.

The contemporary hustle narrative has been influenced by the entrepreneurial mythology of Silicon Valley. Technology companies that achieved rapid growth were often associated with intense competition, high

performance expectations and long working hours. As Silicon Valley became a global symbol of innovation, its work ethic was adopted and adapted by entrepreneurial ecosystems in other countries, including India.

However, the Indian expression of hustle culture is shaped by specific economic and social conditions. These include intense competition for employment, job insecurity, pressure to demonstrate rapid growth, aspirational middle-class values and cultural ideas connecting hard work with social mobility. In some public discussions, long working hours have also been framed as a contribution to national economic development.

A strong work ethic can be valuable during the early stages of venture creation. Nevertheless, temporary periods of intensive work are different from a permanent organisational expectation of exhaustion. When overwork becomes a badge of honour, employees may feel compelled to remain available beyond formal working hours, accept unreasonable targets and suppress concerns about stress or wellbeing.

The consequences may include burnout, sleep disruption, anxiety, work-family conflict, reduced psychological safety and employee turnover. At the organisational level, excessive work pressure may undermine productivity, ethical decision-making, innovation and long-term sustainability. The issue is particularly significant in start-ups because they often operate with limited resources, uncertain revenue, aggressive growth expectations and relatively weak HR systems.

Despite the visibility of hustle culture in public debate, its relationship with employee wellbeing and organisational sustainability in India requires further academic examination. This paper therefore analyses how hustle culture is communicated by founders and the entrepreneurial ecosystem, how it is converted into workplace expectations, and what alternative models of entrepreneurship may be possible.

Statement of the Problem

India's start-up ecosystem has created employment, innovation and economic opportunities. At the same time, public narratives often associate entrepreneurial success with extreme working hours, constant availability and the sacrifice of personal life. Such narratives may encourage commitment, but they can also normalise excessive work expectations and make rest appear to be a sign of insufficient ambition.

The problem is not hard work itself. The problem arises when work intensity becomes an unquestioned measure of commitment and when employees are expected to reproduce the founder's personal sacrifices without possessing equivalent ownership, autonomy or financial rewards. In start-ups, this pressure may take the form of extended working hours, unrealistic targets, weekend work, job insecurity, digital monitoring and performance pressure.

The wider entrepreneurial ecosystem may reinforce this situation. Founder interviews, social-media posts, business-school activities, pitch competitions, incubator programmes and business media frequently highlight rapid growth and personal sacrifice while paying less attention to employee wellbeing, labour rights, ethical leadership and organisational sustainability.

There is therefore a need to examine how hustle culture is constructed and normalised in India's start-up ecosystem and how it affects the relationship between entrepreneurial growth and employee wellbeing.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Hustle Culture and Workaholism

Hustle culture promotes continuous effort, long working hours and personal sacrifice as indicators of professional success. Jepsen and Eaton (2025) explore the historical and conceptual development of hustle, while Taris and de Jonge (2024) examine workaholism and excessive working. Hustle culture represents the social celebration of overwork, whereas workaholism concerns excessive and compulsive working at the individual level. This distinction helps examine how entrepreneurial narratives may influence workplace expectations without assuming that all employees who work long hours experience workaholism.

Work Demands, Burnout and Employee Wellbeing

Bakker and Demerouti (2007), through the Job Demands–Resources model, explain how excessive job demands and inadequate resources may contribute to employee strain. Schaufeli, Leiter and Maslach (2009) highlight burnout as an important organisational concern. Molino et al. (2016) and Langseth-Eide (2019) further examine workaholism and work engagement through the JD-R perspective. These studies provide a theoretical foundation for understanding how excessive workloads, constant availability and insufficient recovery may affect employee wellbeing.

Employee Wellbeing in Start-ups

Ammirato et al. (2024), through a systematic review of 42 studies, identify job satisfaction, psychological wellbeing and work–life balance as important dimensions of human resource wellbeing in innovative start-ups. Dirik and Özdoğan (2025), in an exploratory interview study, examine meaningful work, autonomy, support and work–life balance among start-up co-founders. These studies highlight both the opportunities and challenges of entrepreneurial work. However, founders' experiences may differ from those of employees who have less control over working hours and organisational decisions.

Work–Life Balance and Wellbeing in India

Sharma and Sharma (2018) examine workaholism, work–family interference and wellbeing among bank employees. Mohanty and Jena (2016) discuss work–life balance challenges among Indian employees, while Prasad et al. (2025) examine the relationship between work–life balance and psychological wellbeing among IT employees, with occupational stress as a mediating factor. Sharma and Tiwari (2023) explore technostress, burnout and work–life balance among Indian IT employees. Jogi (2023) focuses on work–life balance among Indian start-up employees. Palo and Kumar (2024) examine the experiences of platform-based gig workers. Collectively, these studies highlight the importance of workplace demands and organisational support, while also demonstrating the need to distinguish between different employment groups.

Sustainable Entrepreneurship and Responsible Growth

Sustainable entrepreneurship considers long-term value creation alongside broader social and environmental responsibilities. Johnson and Schaltegger (2020) and Rosário et al. (2022) contribute to the conceptual development of sustainable entrepreneurship. In the present study, this perspective helps examine whether organisational growth can be pursued alongside employee wellbeing and responsible workplace practices. Zerodha provides a contrasting case through its publicly discussed approach to controlled growth and work–life boundaries, although these practices alone cannot establish the causes of organisational success or guarantee positive employee experiences.

Research Gap

The studies reviewed in Section 3 explain hustle culture, overwork, burnout and employee wellbeing separately, but they do not connect them. They describe hustle as an idea (Jepsen & Eaton, 2025), workaholism as a personal habit (Taris & de Jonge, 2024), and burnout as an effect of heavy work demands (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Molino et al., 2016; Langseth-Eide, 2019). They do not show how a founder's praise of long hours turns into targets and work expectations for employees. The start-up studies either give general findings on wellbeing (Ammirato et al., 2024) or look at founders, who own the company and control their own time (Dirik & Özdoğan, 2025), and not at how founder narratives affect employees. The Indian studies mostly cover older sectors like banking and IT (Sharma & Sharma, 2018; Prasad et al., 2025). The few on start-ups or gig workers look at one small company or describe the daily experience of delivery workers (Jogi, 2023; Palo & Kumar, 2024). None of them links workplace pressure to what founders and business media say in public. Many of these studies are also surveys or literature reviews, so none compares companies that promote, apply or reject hustle in different ways. Finally, sustainable entrepreneurship is mostly discussed as an idea about the environment and society (Johnson & Schaltegger, 2020; Rosário et al., 2022), with little

focus on working hours and employee wellbeing, and few Indian examples of a company that limits overwork on purpose. This study addresses this gap by comparing five cases: Infosys, Ola, Byju's, Swiggy and Zerodha. The gap applies to the studies reviewed in this paper; it does not claim that no other study exists.

Objectives of the Study

In response to this gap, the study has the following objectives:

- To examine the meaning and development of hustle culture in India's start-up ecosystem.
- To analyse how selected founders and business media construct narratives of overwork, sacrifice and entrepreneurial success.
- To identify the organisational practices through which hustle culture is converted into workplace expectations.
- To examine the reported implications of hustle culture for employee wellbeing, work-life balance and organisational sustainability.
- To analyse sustainable entrepreneurship as an alternative to the constant-hustle model.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study uses three complementary perspectives.

Job Demands–Resources Model

The Job Demands–Resources model distinguishes between job demands and job resources.

Job demands may include:

- Long working hours.
- Excessive workload.
- Aggressive performance targets.
- Constant digital availability.
- Job insecurity.
- Emotional pressure from managers.
- Algorithmic monitoring.

Job resources may include:

- Autonomy.
- Supervisor support.
- Adequate staffing.
- Role clarity.
- Recognition.
- Recovery time.
- Access to mental-health support.
- Participation in decision-making.

When demands remain high and resources are insufficient, the probability of exhaustion and disengagement increases.

Institutional Theory

Institutional theory helps explain how ideas become accepted as normal and legitimate. Hustle culture may be reinforced by:

- Founder speeches.
- Investor expectations.
- Business-school activities.
- Incubator and accelerator programmes.
- Social-media influencers.
- Entrepreneurship reality shows.
- Business journalism.

When several institutions repeat the same message, extreme commitment can appear to be a natural requirement of entrepreneurship rather than one possible cultural choice.

Sustainable Entrepreneurship Perspective

The sustainable entrepreneurship perspective provides the basis for evaluating alternatives. It asks whether growth is:

- Economically viable.
- Socially responsible.
- Ethically governed.
- Supportive of employee wellbeing.
- Capable of continuing over the long term.

The conceptual framework of the study is therefore:

Ecosystem Pressures → Hustle Narratives → Workplace Practices → Wellbeing and Organisational Outcomes

Human-resource systems, leadership quality, employee autonomy and regulatory conditions may moderate this relationship.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study adopts a qualitative multiple-case-study design. This design is appropriate because the research focuses on narratives, meanings, public representations and organisational experiences rather than numerical measurement alone.

Case Selection

Five cases were purposively selected:

- Infosys, represented through public discourse associated with Narayana Murthy.
- Ola, represented through public statements by Bhavish Aggarwal.
- Byju's, representing reported target-driven and operationally embedded work pressure, drawn mainly from an investigative report.
- Swiggy, represented through a senior executive's published critique of hustle culture.
- Zerodha, representing a counter-case based on controlled growth and work-life boundaries.

Infosys is included as a legacy technology-enterprise case rather than as a contemporary start-up. It is relevant because public statements by its co-founder have influenced national discussion about work intensity and productivity.

The cases were selected according to the following criteria:

- Indian origin or substantial operations in India.
- High public visibility.
- Direct relevance to work culture or employee wellbeing.
- Availability of multiple independent sources.
- Sectoral diversity.
- Availability of contrasting evidence.

Sources of Data

The study relies on publicly available secondary data, including:

- Founder interviews.
- Public speeches and social-media statements.
- Publicly available organisational information.
- Business-news reports.
- Investigative journalism.
- Employee accounts.
- Academic research.

Data Analysis

The material was analysed through thematic analysis. Documents were reviewed and coded under the following themes:

- Founder rhetoric.
- Work-hour expectations.
- Sacrifice narratives.
- Performance targets.
- Constant availability.
- Employee experiences.
- Management behaviour.
- Job insecurity.
- Institutional reinforcement.
- Wellbeing outcomes.
- Organisational outcomes.
- Sustainable alternatives.

Within-case analysis was conducted first. Cross-case comparison was then used to identify similarities and differences.

Evidence Classification

The study distinguishes between three forms of evidence:

Direct evidence: Official statements, documented policies, formal reports or research findings.

Reported evidence: Media accounts or employee testimonies reported by credible sources.

Interpretive evidence: The researcher's analytical interpretation of patterns across the material.

This distinction is necessary because publicly available sources cannot provide complete evidence about the entire culture of an organisation.

Scope and Limitations

The study has several limitations. First, it relies on publicly available secondary data and does not include direct interviews with founders or employees. Second, media reports may overrepresent controversial events. Third, anonymous employee accounts cannot always be independently verified. Fourth, the study does not statistically measure working hours, burnout or productivity. The findings therefore concern publicly visible narratives and reported organisational experiences rather than the complete experience of every employee in the selected organisations.

Case Study Analysis

This section presents the five cases. Evidence in each case is treated as direct, reported or interpretive, as set out in Section 7.5.

Infosys: Narayana Murthy and the 70-Hour Workweek Debate

In October 2023, Infosys founder N. R. Narayana Murthy said on a podcast, The Record, hosted by former Infosys CFO Mohandas Pai, that India's work productivity is among the lowest in the world. He argued that young Indians should therefore be willing to work 70 hours a week. He compared this to Germany and Japan after the Second World War, saying that people there worked extra hours for a number of years (Rao, 2023).

The remark received mixed reactions. Karnataka's IT minister Priyank Kharge praised Murthy's contribution to the IT industry but said that companies cannot force employees to work extra hours. He added that firms should judge how productive their people are, not how many hours they work. Some industry leaders, such as Sajjan Jindal of JSW Group, Bhavish Aggarwal of Ola, and Pai, supported Murthy. Online, many people reacted critically, and IT employees asked when they would find time for family and mental health (Rao, 2023).

The company's own practice looked different from the founder's statement. Infosys asked some junior and mid-level employees to come to the office ten days a month from 20 November. This was less than the five-day week that some competitors required, and Infosys said that it wanted to keep flexibility between remote and office work. TCS, in contrast, asked staff to return on all five days (Rao, 2023). This suggests a gap between a founder's public view of work and the working arrangements of the company.

Ola: Bhavish Aggarwal and the Founder's Work-Hour Claims

Bhavish Aggarwal, the founder of Ola, publicly supported Murthy's view within days. In late October 2023, he said on X that he was working not just 70 hours but about 140, and he gave the post a light, joking tone (Dixit, 2023). This presented long hours as something enjoyable, not as a burden.

A few days later, he linked work hours to company results. He wrote that the Ola Electric factory team was working more than 70 hours to meet demand, and the company reported sales growth of almost 30% in October compared with September (D'Cruze, 2023). Here the long hours are offered as the explanation for business success.

In 2024, Aggarwal went further and described his own working life. He said he had worked 100-hour weeks for four years, and the report connected this effort to Ola Electric's fast growth (NDTV Profit, 2024).

Across these three statements, he uses personal sacrifice and team effort as proof of achievement. However, all the figures, including the hours worked and the sales growth, are his own or his company's claims. The sources do not show that long hours caused the sales increase.

Byju's: Reported Employee Experience of Hustle Culture

In December 2022, Context, a news platform of the Thomson Reuters Foundation, published an investigation into working conditions at Byju's, then one of India's most valuable startups. It was based on interviews with 26 salespeople, 18 current and eight former. They described excessive hours, verbal and physical abuse, and pressure to meet sales targets (Banerji, 2022). The article said that WhatsApp messages, internal emails, contracts and call recordings showed some managers pressuring and threatening staff to work more than 72 hours a week. Staff who missed targets were allegedly refused lunch breaks and time off, and a manager's WhatsApp messages reportedly threatened to cut their day's pay and place them on performance improvement plans (Banerji, 2022).

Most of the interviewees said they were expected to work at least 12-hour shifts six days a week, and sometimes seven, without extra pay. Their contracts did not set daily or weekly hours. The weekly sales target was at least ₹1 lakh, which meant selling between one and four courses (Banerji, 2022). Fourteen of the workers were based in Bengaluru, where, according to the article, the rules limit work to nine hours a day and 48 hours a week, with overtime pay beyond that. The hours described therefore exceeded the legal limits the article cites (Banerji, 2022).

The article suggests that job insecurity kept employees in these conditions. Nearly half of those interviewed came from low-income families and were the first in their families to attend university. They said they tolerated the pressure for fear of losing their jobs in a difficult labour market. They also said the pressure grew as colleagues were laid off (Banerji, 2022). Attempts to organise met resistance. About 1,000 salespeople joined two WhatsApp groups demanding fixed work hours and fair attendance marking, but membership fell by more than half after managers threatened staff. One group co-founder said he was fired (Banerji, 2022). A lawyer quoted in the article said workers often avoid legal action for fear of being blacklisted by employers (Banerji, 2022).

The article also reports effects on well-being. One former salesman said he worked seven days in a row, had no work-life balance, and was later diagnosed with anxiety. Workers said it was nearly impossible to take leave, even sick leave (Banerji, 2022). These are individual accounts and cannot be generalised to all Byju's employees.

Byju's disputed the findings. A spokesperson said the employees who spoke out were a tiny share of the workforce and that the company had zero tolerance for unpleasant behaviour. It said no manager was allowed to require more than a five-day week, that any extra days were voluntary and paid, and that it did not set irrational targets (Banerji, 2022). Byju's did not respond to several individual accounts. Since most interviewees were anonymous, these findings are best treated as reported allegations, not established facts.

For the hustle culture argument, the article shows a difference from the founder cases. Murthy and Aggarwal presented long hours as voluntary dedication (Rao, 2023; D'Cruze, 2023), while the Byju's workers described long hours as enforced through targets, threatened pay cuts and fear of job loss (Banerji, 2022). The article attributes the pressure to some managers, not to the founder personally, so the findings should not be read as showing that the founder ordered these practices.

Swiggy: A Senior Executive's Rejection of Hustle Culture

In November 2024, Rohit Kapoor, then chief executive of Swiggy's food marketplace business, published an opinion article in Outlook Business arguing against hustle culture. He began with the meaning of the word. Hustle, he said, means to push someone or to pressure someone into doing something, so it is not a virtue to

preach or practise. He compared a workplace built on hustle to Bentham's panopticon, where everyone is coerced to work or behave in a particular way (Kapoor, 2024).

Kapoor did not reject hard work. He defined it as driving outcomes with intensity, clarity and purpose, and he accepted that employees sometimes have to stretch and work long hours. However, he argued that success should not require sacrificing family, friends and wider social responsibilities. In his experience, teams with a clear sense of direction and happy employees delivered better results than teams that "hustled" without clarity, and he described a leader's primary job as being the "chief clarity officer" (Kapoor, 2024).

His central argument was that long hours are not the same as hard work. He said that working late every night is unfair to colleagues such as young mothers and single parents, who end up judged by the time they spend in the office, not by the quality of their work. It is also unfair to employees' families. He added that long hours can limit a person's development, because skills and interests outside work can improve focus and creativity. He pointed to India's low productivity as the real problem and argued that the country needs better productivity, not longer working hours. His advice to young professionals was not to romanticise very long hours (Kapoor, 2024).

This view contrasts directly with the founders in the earlier cases. Murthy used India's low productivity as a reason for young people to work 70 hours a week (Rao, 2023), while Kapoor used the same problem to argue the opposite. Aggarwal presented long hours as dedication and a cause of company success (D'Cruze, 2023), whereas Kapoor described the same pressure as coercive and unfair. The comparison shows that business leaders disagree about whether long hours are a virtue.

Two limits should be noted. First, the article is a personal opinion by one executive, and it says the views are personal. It does not describe Swiggy's actual working practices or policies. Second, it does not mention Murthy by name, so the link to the 70-hour debate is the author's interpretation of the context, not a statement in the article. Reports of working conditions for Swiggy's delivery workers should therefore be assessed separately from this executive-level statement.

Zerodha: A Counter-Case to Hustle Culture

Zerodha, founded in 2010 by Nithin and Nikhil Kamath and built without external funding (Business Today, 2025), works as a counter-case to hustle culture. Nithin Kamath said that until about 2019 he sent and answered emails at strange hours and sometimes worked weekends, and that he later changed these habits (Kamath, 2026). The company then adopted practices that limit work expectations. In 2021 it stopped work-related chats after 6 pm and on holidays to reduce burnout (Kamath, 2021), and it keeps its workforce at around 1,000 with no sales or revenue targets for staff (Outlook Business Desk, 2026).

Kamath has also said Zerodha sets no revenue or growth targets and has no plans to list (Forbes India, n.d.). The founding team does not speak with one voice, however, since Nikhil Kamath argued that people should be free to compete on working hours (Das, 2023). Zerodha has stayed profitable, though its profit fell about 22.9% in FY25 amid an industry slowdown and tighter regulation (Manchanada, 2025). Its case therefore shows that a low-hustle model can work in one high-margin business, not that it works for start-ups in general.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Hustle Culture Has Multiple Forms

The cases demonstrate that hustle culture is not a single organisational practice. It appears in several forms, summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Forms of hustle culture and the case evidence

Form	Description	Case evidence
Normative hustle	Long work presented as national or moral responsibility	Infosys: Murthy's call for a 70-hour week to raise India's productivity (Rao, 2023)
Founder-centred hustle	Founder's extreme work style presented as the organisational standard	Ola: Aggarwal's statements about 140-hour and 100-hour weeks (Dixit, 2023; D'Cruze, 2023; NDTV Profit, 2024)
Coercive hustle	Targets, job insecurity and managerial pressure	Byju's: reported allegations by sales staff, disputed by the company (Banerji, 2022)
Platform hustle	Algorithmic demands, delivery speed and insecure income	Not examined directly in the five cases. Palo and Kumar (2024) report problems with sleep quality, job satisfaction and wellbeing among delivery workers on platforms such as Swiggy and Zomato in Mumbai.
Sustainable counter-narrative	Controlled growth, boundaries and long-term efficiency	Zerodha (Kamath, 2021; Outlook Business Desk, 2026). The Swiggy executive's critique of hustle (Kapoor, 2024) is a related counter-voice but does not describe company practice.

Source: Compiled by the authors from the cases in Section 8.

Founder Narratives Have Symbolic Power

Founders influence culture through more than formal policies. Their public statements can establish what is considered admirable, ambitious and legitimate. When successful founders praise extreme work, younger entrepreneurs and employees may interpret such statements as informal career guidance.

However, founder commitment and employee commitment are not equivalent. Founders may receive ownership benefits from growth, while employees may receive only wages and uncertain job security. Therefore, organisations should not automatically transfer founder work patterns to employees.

Overwork Becomes More Harmful When Resources Are Weak

High work demands are particularly harmful when employees lack autonomy, role clarity, managerial support, adequate staffing and recovery time. This finding is consistent with the Job Demands–Resources framework.

A demanding project may be manageable when employees have resources and control. The same demand may become harmful when it is combined with job insecurity, abusive supervision, unrealistic targets and constant monitoring.

Media and Institutions Amplify Hustle Narratives

Business media and social-media platforms often focus on founder biographies, valuation milestones, rapid growth and dramatic personal sacrifice. These narratives can make success appear to be the result of individual endurance rather than a combination of capital, technology, networks, timing, labour and institutional support.

Business schools and incubators may unintentionally reproduce this pattern when they focus mainly on unicorns, investment rounds and pitch performance. Entrepreneurship education should also address failure, psychological wellbeing, responsible growth and employment practices.

Sustainable Entrepreneurship as a Possible Alternative

The Zerodha case indicates that sustainable entrepreneurship need not remain a theoretical ideal. It can involve deliberate choices concerning growth speed, organisational size, communication boundaries, investment structure and employee autonomy. This evidence is largely founder-reported and comes from one high-margin business, so it shows that a low-hustle model is possible, not that it will work for start-ups in general.

The objective is not to eliminate effort but to prevent effort from becoming permanent exhaustion. Sustainable start-ups can remain ambitious while treating employees as stakeholders rather than as unlimited sources of labour.

Findings in Relation to the Objectives

Table 2 sets the findings against the five objectives of the study.

Table 2. Main findings by objective

Objective	Main finding	Main evidence
1. Meaning and development of hustle culture	Hustle culture takes several forms rather than a single practice (Table 1). In the cases studied, the 2023 70-hour debate brought the idea into national discussion.	Rao (2023); Dixit (2023); D'Cruze (2023); Banerji (2022)
2. Founder and media narratives	Murthy and Aggarwal present long hours as dedication, national duty and a cause of success. Kapoor and Zerodha's Nithin Kamath argue the opposite, so leaders disagree. Aggarwal's figures are self-reported and do not show that long hours caused results.	Rao (2023); D'Cruze (2023); NDTV Profit (2024); Kapoor (2024); Kamath (2026)
3. Organisational practices	The practices reported at Byju's are long shifts without fixed hours, weekly sales targets, threats and resistance to organising; these are allegations the company disputes. In the founder cases the evidence is mostly statements, not practices. Zerodha reports limits on after-hours chat and no staff targets.	Banerji (2022); Kamath (2021); Outlook Business Desk (2026)

Objective	Main finding	Main evidence
4. Wellbeing, work-life balance and sustainability	Reported implications come mainly from the Byju's accounts (anxiety, no leave, fear of dismissal), which are anonymous, individual and disputed. The other cases offer views about wellbeing rather than reported outcomes. Zerodha stayed profitable, although its profit fell in FY25.	Banerji (2022); Manchanada (2025)
5. Sustainable entrepreneurship as an alternative	Zerodha shows that a low-hustle model can operate in one high-margin business. The evidence is largely founder-reported, and the founding team does not speak with one voice.	Kamath (2021, 2026); Outlook Business Desk (2026); Business Today (2025); Das (2023)

Source: Compiled by the authors from Sections 8 and 9.

Recommendations

Recommendations for Founders

- Avoid presenting extreme work schedules as universal standards.
- Measure performance through outcomes rather than visible busyness.
- Establish clear expectations regarding working hours and availability.
- Respect leave, rest periods and personal responsibilities.
- Communicate the difference between temporary urgency and permanent overwork.
- Develop respectful and psychologically safe leadership practices.

Recommendations for Human-Resource Departments

- Conduct regular workload and burnout assessments.
- Monitor overtime, weekend work and after-hours communication.
- Establish confidential grievance mechanisms.
- Train managers in respectful performance management.
- Provide access to counselling and employee-assistance services.
- Track turnover, absenteeism, employee complaints and engagement.
- Strengthen HR systems before rapid expansion creates cultural problems.

Recommendations for Investors and Boards

- Include workplace culture in investment due diligence.

- Assess founder behaviour and governance risks.
- Monitor employee turnover and complaints.
- Avoid rewarding growth solely through valuation and speed.
- Require ethical employment standards.
- Link leadership evaluation with long-term organisational health.

Recommendations for Business Schools and Incubators

- Include sustainable entrepreneurship in the curriculum.
- Teach employee wellbeing, labour rights and ethical leadership.
- Present failure and recovery cases alongside unicorn success stories.
- Discuss the difference between commitment and exploitation.
- Include gig-worker welfare and responsible platform design.
- Evaluate ventures on people and governance indicators as well as financial performance.

Recommendations for Start-up Employees

- Clarify job expectations before accepting a role.
- Maintain records of working hours and significant workplace concerns.
- Use formal grievance mechanisms where available.
- Seek support from trusted colleagues or professional services.
- Distinguish genuine learning opportunities from repeated unpaid overwork.

CONCLUSION

Hustle culture in India's start-up ecosystem is more than a collection of motivational slogans. It is a cultural and organisational system through which extreme commitment, constant availability and personal sacrifice are presented as evidence of entrepreneurial legitimacy.

The selected cases show that hustle culture can operate through founder rhetoric, media narratives, performance targets, job insecurity and platform-based technologies. Its effects are not uniform. In some cases, it appears mainly as a public ideology; in others, it becomes embedded in organisational practices that may affect employee wellbeing, psychological safety and long-term sustainability.

The analysis also shows that founders and employees do not occupy the same position. A founder may voluntarily accept extreme work because of ownership and control, whereas employees may experience similar expectations as coercive, particularly when they are connected with job insecurity or managerial pressure.

The Zerodha case provides an important counter-narrative. It indicates that long-term business performance can be pursued through controlled growth, clear boundaries, employee autonomy and a focus on efficiency rather than permanent overwork. Sustainable entrepreneurship therefore does not reject ambition. It redefines

ambition as the creation of enduring economic and social value without treating human exhaustion as a necessary business resource.

A healthier Indian start-up ecosystem requires a shift from the question, "How many hours are you willing to work?" to broader questions concerning the quality, ethics and sustainability of growth. Start-ups should be evaluated not only by funding, valuation and speed but also by how responsibly they treat the people who create their value.

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