



Who is Ethno-Eco-Cultural Entrepreneur? Case Study from Ri-Bhoi, Meghalaya

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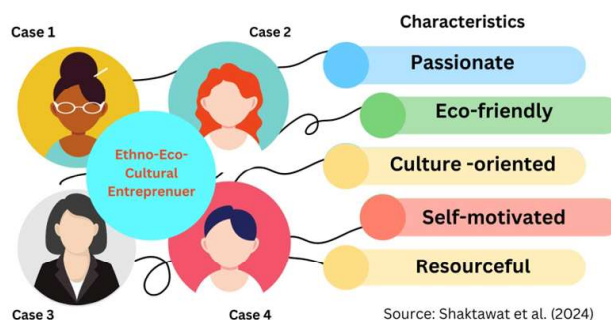
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HIGHLIGHTS

- This qualitative case study identified key characteristics of Ethno-Eco-Cultural Entrepreneurs.
- Explored how Ethno-Eco-Cultural entrepreneurship can shape community-wide entrepreneurial cultures.
- Derived prepositions about Ethno-Eco-Cultural Entrepreneurs.

GRAPHICAL ABSTRACT



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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Necessity is the mother of invention. In the name of development, our civilization is going far from nature and culture, so it necessitates that as we progress, we stay connected with our roots and nature. So, when we came across a group of entrepreneurs' enterprise were closely knitted with culture and nature, we decided to take up this study.

Context: Entrepreneurship drives the global economy, generates employment, and creates innovative trends. India has the third-largest startup ecosystem in the world. The entrepreneurial world has witnessed several exemplary millennial entrepreneurs solving emerging issues on one hand and exploiting the nature and impacting the culture.

Objective: This qualitative research study is intended to explore unique characteristics and define "Ethno-Eco-Cultural Entrepreneur".

Methodology: A narrative research design was used to explore their personal life experiences through the stories that are narrated by the four cases. In the Narrative case study, we purposively selected the Eri-silk producers organizations involved in the clothing industry of Ri-Bhoi District, Meghalaya. This study explored four cases using an In-depth interview and analysed the verbatims employing thematic analysis through NVivo software.

Results & Discussion: The results reveal themes such as: "Business", "Cultural", "Fashion", "Traditional" and "Weavers". Study also conceptualizes the unique characteristics and define a new breed of entrepreneurs called "Ethno-Eco-Cultural Entrepreneur." However, this study will be the foundation for future research on Ethno-Eco-Cultural entrepreneur.

"Entrepreneurship isn't just a label – it's a lifestyle." –Richard Branson.

The term "entrepreneur" has been used in academic circles for over 250 years (Hormiga and Rohlfer, 2016). The term entrepreneur originated from the French word "*entreprendre*", which means "to do something" was mentioned by Cantillon (as cited by Jeong, 2020). Several years of fruitful research have highlighted different entrepreneurial breeds and their significance. Entrepreneurship is acknowledged as the important key driver of economic prosperity as per the report of Global Entrepreneurship Monitor India, the established entrepreneurship rate has also increased from 9.3% to 14.8% from 2017 to 2021–22 (Shukla *et al.*, 2023). Statista (2023) report pointed India has the 3rd largest startup ecosystem in the world. Startup India blog (2023) mentioned that the vision of New India, 2030 to inspire regional entrepreneurs in transforming their ideas into business ventures and by the year 2030, its goal is to expand the startup culture throughout the entire nation. The strategizes of existing entrepreneurship programs are to support rural enterprises and potential entrepreneurs of India through capacity building and technological handholding (Gowda *et al.*, 2023). There are numerous definitions of entrepreneurship some state it as an art (Chang and Wyszomirski, 2015) or a process (Barot, 2015). Nonetheless, the ultimate goal of entrepreneurship is to generate employment opportunities and promote economic growth (Acharya *et.al.*, 2023). Entrepreneurship in Meghalaya, flourishes because of its varied cultures and gorgeous surroundings. Meghalaya's supportive ecosystem and vibrant culture fosters innovation, empowering locals to create businesses. It blends tradition with modernity, contributing to economic growth of the state.

Types of entrepreneurs : Barot (2015) pointed out two different types of entrepreneurships: 1. opportunity-based entrepreneurship and 2. Necessity-based entrepreneurship. But further studies revealed lots of entrepreneurial breeds exist other than these Renko (2013) and Chauhan and Ghai (2023) mentioned "Social entrepreneurs" are ones who chase social problems solutions more than financial returns by keeping unaided higher priorities on catalysing social change and satisfying urgent social needs. Crals & Vereeck (2016) mentioned that "Sustainable entrepreneurs" are those individuals and businesses who contributed to sustainable development by "doing business in a sustainable way".

Guttermann (2022) mentioned the characteristics

of "Growth-oriented entrepreneurs" or "High-growth entrepreneurs", can be determined and distinguished by their desire to grow their operations which will help the area's economy by attracting additional money in the form of investment, employment, and career opportunities. He also mentioned "market-driven entrepreneurship" combines marketing and entrepreneurship logics, and seeking out opportunities in the new markets," Elakkiya and Asokhan (2023). Entrepreneurs who started new enterprises based on the sustainability principle – "Ecopreneurs" are those entrepreneurs who launch for-profit ventures with strong commitment towards the environment and who offer green goods or services".

Importance of entrepreneurs to society : The primary focus of an enterprise remains the discovery of opportunities, innovations, and creativity in undertaking a variety of projects aimed at growth and development (Agarwal *et al.*, 2020).

It has established large-scale employment prospects as well as self-employment. It contributes to a nation's advancement economically by promoting investment, rising per capita income, raising living standards, and promoting balanced growth by lowering regional inequities. (Kumar and Raj, 2019).

After understanding these facts consequently, the gap of understanding the characteristics of the new breed of entrepreneur is demanded. Seeking more specifically into literatures but the existing pieces of literature does not provide adequate information about how this new breed of entrepreneur functions and what features exist in this breed of entrepreneur. From the light of research findings, the literature provides characteristics of the social and cultural entrepreneurs who are culturally or socially oriented in their respective manner. But very few speak about the way an entrepreneur is oriented towards sustainability along with conserving culture an enterprise can function.

Research objectives :

- To understand the characteristics of Ethno-Eco-Cultural Entrepreneurs.
- To define Ethno-Eco-Cultural Entrepreneur.

This research paper aims to conceptualize and define Ethno-Eco-Cultural entrepreneurs, confidences to advance emerging theories of becoming an Ethno-Eco-Cultural entrepreneur. It also further expands its focus on some crucial facets of entrepreneurship, including social investment, sustainability planning,

supporting emerging enterprises, and leadership development and gives a look on the investigation of how they differ from commercial enterprise practices in terms of nature, procedures, and objectives.

METHODOLOGY

The study was carried out at Ri-Bhoi District in Meghalaya. The research adopted case study design with a narrative research strategy to get an in-depth understanding of participants' viewpoints.

Respondents : Khasi tribe is one of the largest indigenous tribes of North-East India inhabiting Khasi hills in the Ri-Bhoi district of Meghalaya state constituting 78.3% of the region's population (Singh, 1997). The first case identified was Ms. Iba Malai which led to other three case. We discovered to interact with a case from Assam with similar qualities of research cases. A fourth case from non-Khasi tribe was included in this study.

Data-collection : The data were collected by adopting key informant interviews. The two key methods for gathering primary data were in-depth interviews and direct observation. The responses of respondents were recorded with the help of local field associates who helped in translating their tape-recorded responses and note writing as well. The study includes four participants who work in the Eri-silk fashion industry. Wherein, three participants were from the Khasi culture, while the fourth was from non-Khasi tribe to verify the viability of the enterprise in another culture. Thematic analysis was used to find patterns and themes in verbatims, which are then coded and analyzed to better understand the experiences of the participants.

Data-analysis: The collected data were transcribed into verbatims and were analysis by employing thematic analysis (Van Manen, 1997) using NVivo® software. Thematic analysis involves a systematic and iterative process to identify, analyze, and report patterns or themes within qualitative data. Outline of methodology for creating a word count diagram based on written response sheets from four participants is given in the figure 1 below.

RESULTS

Four participants in one-to-one depth interviews expressed their personal stories and life events that inspired and drove their journey as an Ethno-Eco-Cultural entrepreneur. Familiar ideals, heritage from their culture, and their experience about topics that

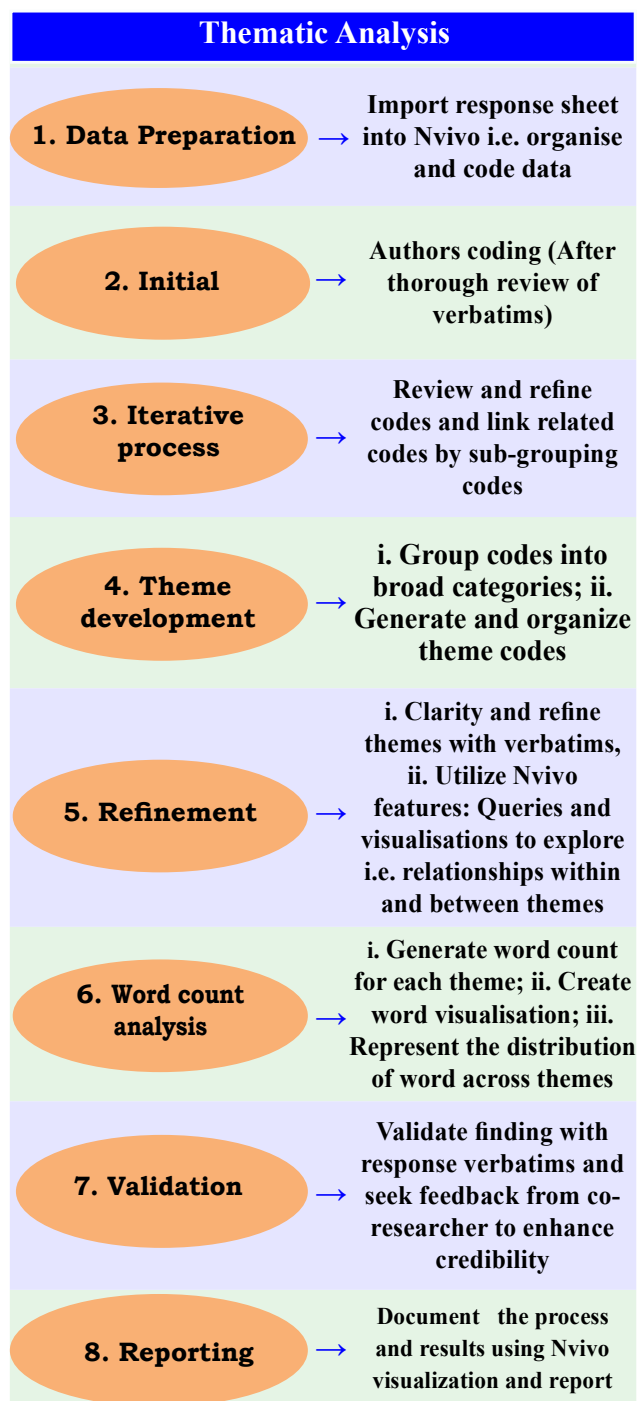


Figure 1. Thematic Analysis

had a deep and personal relevance. The details of the respondent cases is given in the Table 1.

Case 1: Ms. Iba Malai (Owmer: Kiniho- clothing brand, Shillong)

Kiniho- sown in tradition and sewed in heritage was started in the year 2016. Ms. Iba is a professional fashion designer, and the primary focus of her enterprise is to hold on to tradition and promote eco-fashion. Kiniho strives towards environmental and social responsibilities. She feels pride in its

Table 1. Details of the respondents

| Name of the respondents | Company name | Year of establishment |
|-------------------------|---|-----------------------|
| Ms. Iba Malaii | Kiniho - clothing brand, Shillong | 2016 |
| Ms. Iaineh | IAINEH handloom traditional dress, Mawlong, Ri-Bhoi | 2018 |
| Ms. Charity Lyngdoh | Little Blossom Training cum Production Centre, Ri-Bhoi, Meghalaya | 2018 |
| Mr. Uttam Kalita | Chapathuri Bowa-Kota Samabay Samity Ltd., Assam | 2016 |

commitment to sustainability and uses only eco-friendly materials. Ms. Iba Malai expressed that *"The designs we create is made using zero waste draping techniques from soft handwoven Eri silk fabric. Our primary aim is to achieve sustainable fashion"*. She strongly believes that it's her responsibility to employ sustainable and ethical practices with her every design that her brand creates. She also highlighted her upcoming future goals while discussing said: *"I want to promote my culture at international level for acknowledgment and awareness regarding ahimsa practice and healthy sustainability fashion"*. According to her *"Kiniho seeks prominence to the weavers' community of Khasi and dye our own yarns using mainly leaves, roots and flowers which promotes Kiniho to cultivate its own native flowers and plants in order to stop the destruction of its forests. We should not disregard the environment or nature, culture which is a major priority of our enterprise"*. Kiniho has benefited from local government incentives for environmental and social responsibility, and it competes in a large tourist market. The company sells its products through social media platforms and local retailers, and its ethical norms and codes of conduct place a premium on the safety and fairness of its suppliers' working conditions. Kiniho honors traditional fashion, encourages women's economic empowerment, and uses environmentally friendly materials and tools. After Covid-19 local market has reduced its glory in the fashion industry with an increase in online shopping trends. Kiniho is having difficulty digitizing its operations and gaining licenses and permissions. Ms. Iba Malai expressed that *"Connecting with lots of people to share about Khasi traditional cultural fashion would help in promoting their cultural values to a large population"*. She also mentioned that, *"I empower women by working with women weavers in Northeast India by helping them support their livelihood and provide for their families and communities. Their life and tradition both depend on their weaving abilities because it is not just their main source of income but also their cultural*

heritage. Additionally, it broadens their options for employment". Therefore, Kiniho choose to work with the traditional textile Eri silk also known as "Peace Silk" in the community, which strongly supports the sustainability of nature, and they are committed to working closely with the weaving community in Ri-bhoi District.

Case 2: Ms. Iaineh (OWNER: IAINEH handloom traditional dress, Mawlong, Ri-Bhoi).

Iaineh Handloom Traditional Dress is a family-run business launched in the year 2018. Iaineh is specialized in producing traditional hand-loomed clothing, fashion accessories, and home decor items. The company is highly passionate about preserving and promoting traditional hand-loomed clothing and conserving the environment. They also provide certified training classes to the other weavers in the locality. Ms. Iaineh expressed that she gained interest in starting a clothing weaving business by seeing in her family and now her brand customizes dresses for women and men both. She set an example of how to lead and initiated an initiative of sustainability along with comfortable fashion. *"You definitely cannot be afraid to fail,"* Iaineh said in her risk-taking efforts to pursue great achievements in the field and expressed herself by saying *"If you are failing, then is its fine because it's okay to fail. but continue to direct your efforts till the time you achieve your goal"*. She expressed on sustaining enterprise that *"I never lose hope as I am doing it with fullest of my heart then I will achieve something good in future... agreeing I am not in that higher platform to impart bigger changes but I think for now root require more nourishment."* Iaineh tailors' cloth to customer specifications and prioritizes funding for future investments. The company has the potential to build a strong brand identity and consumer loyalty by using its legacy. Iaineh is aware of current weaving machinery and uses environmentally friendly methods like as natural dyes and ahimsa practice settings. She mentions that *"Our brand is a meeting point of Khasi traditional weaving practices, cutting-edge harmful fashion fabrics, and*

colour blending techniques that come together to produce aesthetic fabrics. In order to provide our customers with flawless ensembles, we work towards a socially and environmentally responsible technique of production”.

Case 3: Ms. Charity Lyngdoh (Owner: Little Blossom Training cum Production Centre, Ri-Bhoi, Meghalaya).

Ms. Charity Lyngdoh is a traditional weaver from Ri-Bhoi district of Meghalaya. She is passionate about preserving the traditional weaving techniques and customs of the Ri-Bhoi. She ensures that these techniques are passed down to the next generation by teaching them in the local schools and communities. Ms. Charity Lyngdoh expresses that *“I intent to create a bigger enterprise which reflects her traditional clothing and fashion by saving environment from harmful dye and killing Eri-silk worm”* and talked about how they enjoy challenges while working, how they take risks to solve complex and diversified managerial problems, and they are at ease with uncertainty. Charity Lyngdoh's traditional weaving company in Ri-Bhoi is confronted with several obstacles and opportunities. She believes that *“Participation in socio-political activities can provide local government assistance to promote traditional weaving processes”*. The market is highly competitive with quick fashion, and the revenue gained must be used to fund the centre's operations and goals. Charity Lyngdoh, on the other hand, is uninformed of legal rights and needs. She further mentioned that *“They try to create clothes that are contemporary and comfortable, natural and organic. I feel blessed that I come from such a rich cultural community that has so many ethnic communities with their own cultural and crafts practices for weaving fabrics. I am deeply inspired by our own traditional art forms and it's an uttermost challenge for me to transform something as sacred as a tradition into contemporary clothing according to the recent fashion trends”*.

Case 4: Mr. Uttam Kalita (Owner: Chapathuri Bowa-Kota Samabay Samity Ltd., Assam).

Mr. Uttam Kalita is a self-made entrepreneur started his company in 2016. Primary focus of his enterprise is to generate employment, to conserve and promote his traditional culture. He seems to be an open-minded person willing to adopt new technology and aspire to upgrade his society in developing arena. He has explored the market for his company in different

states with full enthusiasm. He aspires to hand over his business to the next generation of the family. He speaks about that *“I want all society to move together with the upcoming change of conserving culture to make life healthier and simpler”*. He also mentioned that *“as an entrepreneur, my company purpose or mission was to take all society toward development together for great social change, with indirectly increases revenues benefiting society or communities rather than a group of shareholders or investors”*. The political atmosphere in Assam may give the owner with support for business growth through incentives and subsidies. The market's strong cultural diversity and traditional values foster healthy competition and provide prospects for expansion. Assam's social environment is good for the proprietor, having a supportive society and a prospective consumer base. Internet marketing and the use of technology have the potential to increase business efficiency and profitability. It is vital to be aware of laws and regulations to operate safely and ethically. Clothing customization and keeping up with current fashion trends are critical for success. The area's traditional culture gives a unique chance for promotion. It is also feasible to reduce the environmental impact.

Theme identification of all participants manually by researchers : All the participants repetitively used keywords such as “Business”, “Cultural”, “Fashion”, “Traditional”, “Weavers”, “Eco-friendly”, “Company”, and “Weaving”. The participants valued their action orientation towards a desirable goal of the organization as well, displaying examples of a general tendency towards action, taking charge, or making things happen even when others advised against it. Ethno-eco-cultural entrepreneurs play a pivotal role in fostering economic activities deeply rooted in local culture and traditions. This word count representation deciphers the significance of specific terms identified through quantitative analysis.

Word counts of all 4 respondents interviewed verbatims are coded to identify the common themes among all 4 respondents and following are explained

Table 2. Frequency of the themes' occurrence in verbatim

| Word | Count | Word | Count |
|-------------|-------|--------------|-------|
| Business | 59 | Culture | 20 |
| Cultural | 38 | Eco-friendly | 18 |
| Fashion | 37 | Company | 17 |
| Traditional | 37 | Weaving | 17 |
| Weavers | 21 | Practice | 14 |

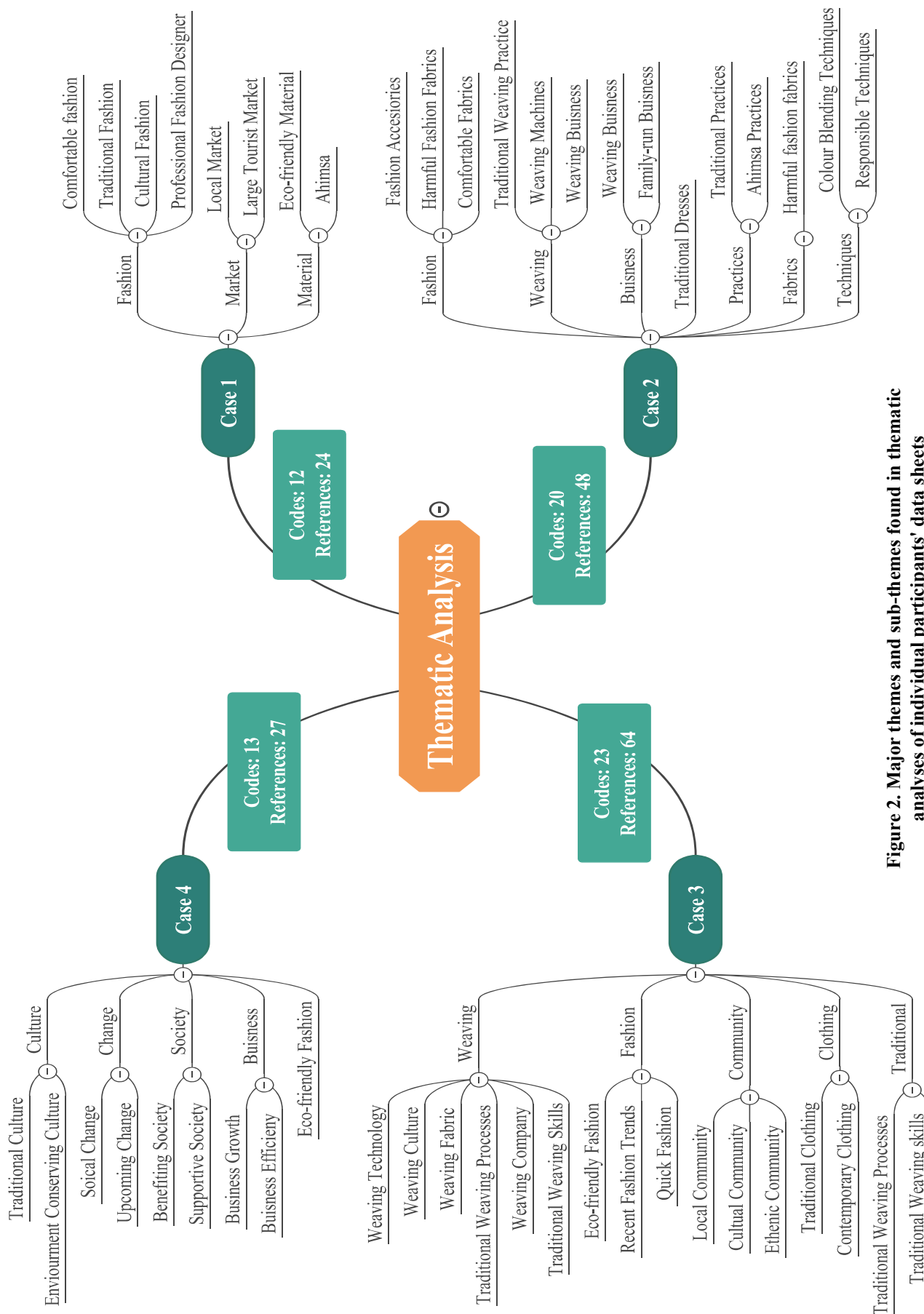


Figure 2. Major themes and sub-themes found in thematic analyses of individual participants' data sheets

below: *Business* (Word count: 59) The high occurrence of the term 'business' underscores the interview indicating a strong focus on economic activities rooted in local culture and traditions. *Cultural* (Word count: 38): The prominence of 'cultural' reflects a conscious effort to intertwine entrepreneurial endeavors with the preservation and promotion of cultural heritage in activities that celebrate and sustain local traditions. *Fashion* (Word count: 37): The term 'fashion' suggests a contemporary aspect, where traditional crafts and designs are adapted to meet modern consumer preferences. *Traditional* (Word count: 37): The recurrence of 'traditional' highlights a commitment to preserving and perpetuating age-old practices, showcasing a blend of entrepreneurship and cultural heritage. *Weavers* (Word count: 21): The mention of 'weavers' emphasizes the importance of artisanal skills in the entrepreneurial landscape, indicating a focus on traditional craftsmanship. Followed by the themes: *Culture* (Word count: 20) : This theme highlights the deep connection individuals have with their cultural roots and how it permeates various aspects of their lives, *Eco-friendly* (word count: 18): This revealed a heightened awareness of environmental issues and a conscious effort to incorporate sustainable choices into their lifestyles, *Company* (Word count: 17), *Weaving* (Word count: 17) and *Practice* (Word count: 14) respectively.

Thematic analysis : Based on the word count of the response sheets provided by all respondents, common themes were identified. The analysis involved a comprehensive examination of these themes and sub-themes for each participant, enabling a more in-depth understanding of the characteristics of the respondents.

Subsequently, the themes and sub-themes extracted from each respondent's verbatims were meticulously mapped and diagrammatically represented in the mind map below (Figure 2). The mind map includes corresponding codes along with the count and reference values. For instance, Data1(Case 1) have (Count: 12, Reference: 24), Data 2(Case 2) have (Count: 20, Reference: 48), Data 3(Case 3) have (Count: 23, Reference: 64) and Data 4 (Case 4) have (Count: 13, Reference: 27) respectively.

Characteristics of ethno-eco-cultural entrepreneur : The characteristics observed from the Deep-rooted interview from the four cases are presented in Fig. 3..

Key characteristics are as follows:

- **Passionate:** They demonstrate a deep commitment to preserving traditional cultural practices and protecting the environment through sustainable business practices.
- **Culture-oriented:** They have an intimate knowledge of the local culture, customs, and values. This knowledge allows them to create businesses that are culturally appropriate and environmentally responsible.
- **Creative:** They can create unique products and services that are in demand by the local community.
- **Self-motivated:** They have self-motivation capacity to continue to pursue and achieve success in their project.
- **Resourceful:** They are resourceful as they can find and use the locally available resources and know how to generate work purpose from it to achieve success.

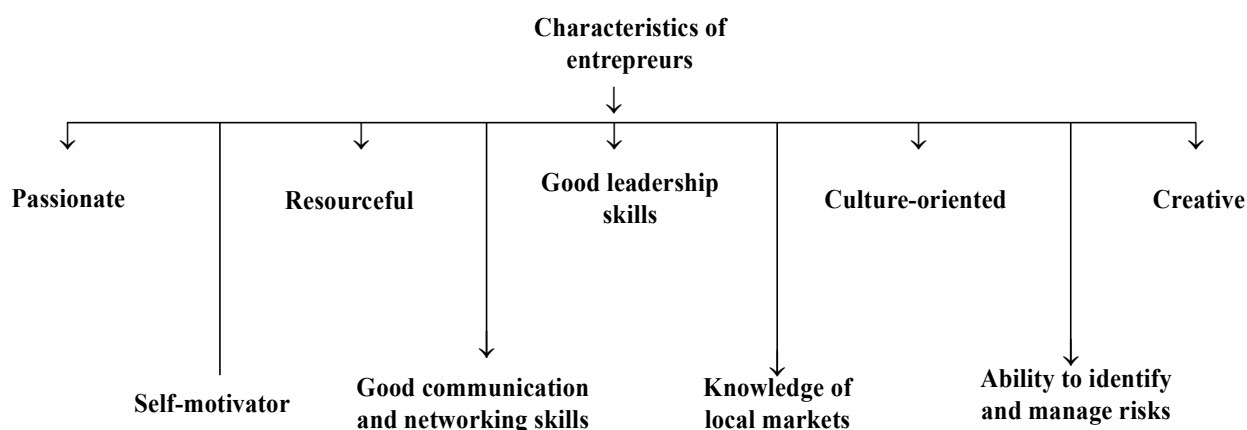


Figure 3: Characteristics of Ethno-Eco-Cultural Entrepreneur

- *Good leadership skills:* They have demonstrated strong leadership qualities as they try to promote their culture and tradition and unite people for successful enterprise.
- *Good communication and networking skills:* They are skilled communicators and networkers and can effectively promote their products and services to the local community and build relationships with customers.
- *Knowledge of local markets:* They possess an in-depth knowledge of local markets and can identify potential customers and opportunities.
- *Ability to identify and manage risks:* They could identify potential risks and develop strategies to manage them.

Definition of ethno-eco-cultural entrepreneur (EECE) : Based on the research findings this study conceptualizes an “Ethno-Eco-Cultural Entrepreneur” as “an individual who combines their cultural background, environmental values, and entrepreneurial skills to create a business that reflects and promotes their cultural and environmental goals.”

These entrepreneurs often paint themselves based on their cultural traditions, practices, and knowledge to create products or services that are aligned with their values that contribute to the preservation and promotion of their cultural heritage also prioritizing environmental sustainability.

Propositions from research : Based on the findings of the study we put forth the following prepositions about ethno-eco-cultural entrepreneur.

Based on the study findings, a few key propositions for future research are put forth.

- i. Ethno-Eco-Cultural Entrepreneur (EECE) is strongly culture-rooted.
- ii. Ethno-Eco-Cultural Entrepreneur (EECE) is an innovator and self-motivated.
- iii. Ethno-Eco-Cultural Entrepreneur (EECE) has a strong sense of social responsibility.
- iv. Ethno-Eco-Cultural Entrepreneur (EECE) is pro-environment.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this narrative research is to investigate the characteristics of ethno-eco-cultural entrepreneurs, with a particular emphasis on the Khasi culture. To gain inclusive insights and validate the findings of the research, we selected four participants-

three from the Khasi community and one from the Assam community to cross-check for the characteristics and viewpoints proposed through the findings. The three participants were chosen from the Khasi culture based on their active involvement in ethno-eco-cultural entrepreneurship and who particularly demonstrated commitment to environmental sustainability through Eri-silk work cultivation and a deep understanding of their cultural heritage.

Incorporation of one participant from Assam who was a comparative reference point to ensure total analysis of proposed findings. This person is well-versed in Assamese culture and has experience in ethno-eco-cultural enterprise related to Eri-silk worm produce. Through their participation, it was possible to compare the traits that have been identified within the Khasi group and investigate any potential environmental viewpoint parallels or divergences between the two cultural environments. Confidentiality and informed consent were prioritized throughout the research process, ensuring that participants' privacy and rights are respected (Chauhan and Saikia, 2021).

This study overall intended to showcase the distinctive traits of ethno-eco-cultural entrepreneurs. Ethno-Eco-Cultural Entrepreneurs (EECE) as a result are bringing a developing trend toward sustainable fashion in society and similarly, it has been proven that any progress toward sustainable development goals is spearheaded by social transformation, which necessitates active leadership qualities of entrepreneurs. The findings emphasize that ethno-eco-cultural entrepreneur often possess a strong connection to their cultural heritage and the environment in which they operate, allowing them to use these resources as assets for competitive advantages and responsible consumption (Singh *et al.*, 2023). In contrast to other entrepreneurs, frequently operate in a broader commercial context, with less emphasis on cultural and environmental factors. Unlike other entrepreneurs, the ethno-eco-cultural entrepreneur is driven by different factors. Traditional business owners prioritize making a profit and seizing market possibilities, while ethno-eco-cultural entrepreneur shows a deeper sense of purpose that includes promoting and maintaining their cultural heritage, safeguarding the environment, and improving their communities. Whereas, Social entrepreneurs work to address a range of social concerns, including poverty, healthcare, education, and environmental sustainability. They frequently pinpoint

societal systemic issues and create ground-breaking fixes to effect good change (Spandana *et al.*, 2023).

On the other hand, eco-entrepreneurs put a high priority on environmental sustainability and work to develop products, services, and technology that are environment benign. Similarly, agripreneurs work in the agricultural industry, implementing cutting-edge techniques and technology to develop sustainable farming practices, boost productivity, and improve the entire value chain of agriculture (Chauhan *et al.*, 2023). They might be involved in organic farming, vertical farming, farm-to-table businesses, agricultural technology startups, or agricultural consulting services. Overall, all these entrepreneurial subfields reflect the variety of perspectives and pursuits found in the larger entrepreneurship ecosystem, demonstrating how people and organizations can incorporate technological, cultural, and environmental factors into their business models.

The recurrent use of themes such as 'business', 'cultural', 'fashion' and 'traditional' emphasizes the entrepreneurial nature of the individuals under scrutiny with the preservation and promotion of cultural heritage. It has pointed to the adaptability of traditional crafts and designs to meet the preferences of modern consumers and also to preserve and perpetuate age-old practices.

CONCLUSION

This study used a case study design with narrative research approach to better understand the characteristics and possibilities for the success of Ethno-Eco-Cultural entrepreneurs. The characteristics of Ethno-Eco-Cultural entrepreneur are passion, culture orientation, inventiveness, self-motivation, resourcefulness, and outstanding communication and networking abilities. Budding of Ethno-Eco-Cultural entrepreneurship in a community can result in the establishment perhaps make communities sustainable. There are some inherent limitations of this study. The major limitation is the finding cannot be generalised for a larger population and the inherent shortcomings of narrative research design creeps into this study. However, this study will be foundation future research on Ethno-Eco-Cultural entrepreneur. The findings of this study need to be validated by quantitative research.

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Authorship contribution: First author conceptualized, operationalized, interpreted the data and visualized data for creating the original draft. Second author participated in contributing to the text and the content of the manuscript, including revisions and edits. Third author contributed to writing – review and editing. Whereas fourth and fifth author helped in interpreting the data, theme identification and development, and debriefing.

Declaration of competing interest: The authors declare that none of their known competing interests may have seemed to have an impact on the work that was published in this paper and agree to be held accountable for the work.

Data availability: The secondary data used in this work is freely accessible and will be provided upon request.

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