

Integral Leadership Review

Feature Article: 'Koodam' – Breaking Hierarchy, Building Democracy¹!

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The editor's comments: The Koodam represents one of the most successful applications of second tier thinking that I have come across. The authors of this paper have worked with tribal issues in the hinterland of India. They have had to face police repression on a few occasions. The personal courage they have shown is exemplary. They are also deeply spiritual people with long years of practice in meditation. When this is combined with thought leadership in governance, it is a potent combination. The erudition and scholarship in law as well as in political science helps them find insightful and incisive ways of designing interventions. The Koodam is the result of many years of grass roots work as well as personal transformative practices undertaken by the authors.



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Hierarchy and bureaucracy are two of the most common features of governance systems that play a determining role in shaping the organizational culture, systemic response and human relations that prevail in government institutions. The more rigid and formal the hierarchy, the greater is the consciousness of status and authority that in turn creates closed human relations systems dominated by feelings of suspicion, formalism and a discomfort with anything 'personal'. Bureaucracy, or rule boundedness, determines how open the organization is, not just vis-à-vis the outside world, but even inside the government system itself, encompassing relations between and amongst different sub-systems or departments.

¹ <http://integralleadershipreview.com/410-%E2%80%98koodam%E2%80%99-breaking-hierarchy-building-democracy>

In countries like India with a colonial history, government and governance systems were tools to aid the colonial state to control the local populations and assert its powers. The rapacious colonial state needed a bureaucracy which would ensure that there was no social or political challenge to its rule while the subject population remained subservient. At the same time, the colonial 'extracting' state also needed to ensure that all government systems functioned efficiently to enable 'exploitation' of all available resources for repatriation to the colonial masters. Unquestioning submission to authority, uncritical acceptance of commands and unswerving dedication to rules were accompanied by a deep rooted reluctance to share power, suspicion of demand for transparency of information and unwillingness to encourage innovative and independent thinking or action.

The bureaucracy thus became the 'steel' structure to assert its rule and hierarchy became the internal method of ensuring that people remained divided and submissive. To ensure an institutional continuity to maintaining the division of people, bureaucratic differences were heightened by accentuating status differentials and concentrating power in the hands of the few who managed to reach higher positions in the hierarchy. Hierarchy thus became the self-perpetuating instrument by which people remained continually separated and divided as 'rulers and the ruled' and 'masters and subject'. A little studied aspect of the colonial bureaucratic system was that it not only divided people from the rulers, but it also divided the bureaucracy internally and perpetuated a 'divide and rule' policy within the officialdom itself.

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Hierarchy was thus not just a structural context determining social and political relations of power, but also was reflected in a mental construct in which both the ruler and the ruled, the superior and the subordinate, internalized notions of difference and, very importantly, continued to act with deference, reverence and submission.

Any attempt at democratizing governance systems and transforming them to imbibe democratic mores of equity and egalitarianism, justice and integrity, inclusiveness and transparency, which does not address these deeply entrenched cultural and mentally internalised models is doomed to failure. Changes have to be brought about amongst both individuals and systems, and within and outside the bureaucracy. For this to happen a total transformation of structural, mental and emotional models of government, along with the creation of a new governance ethic, is absolutely necessary.

Here we paper share the experience of using a Tamil cultural concept called the '*koodam*' as a tool to enable free interaction and critical engagement amongst people from hierarchical systems who are intent on transforming the bureaucracy into a more people-responsive, individual friendly, risk encouraging and vibrant social system.

The '*Koodam*'—Tackling Hierarchies of the Mind

The '*koodam*' concept was first used by us when working on a major change programme initiated within the Department of Social Welfare of the Government of Tamil Nadu, India, in 1998. The context presented to us was to work with women officials from across different levels and differentiated both by status positions as also in exercise of power and authority. Two critical issues needed to be dealt with: the prevailing culture of a closed organization, unused to open and frank discussion and critical analysis of each other's views, positions and perspectives, and wary of any call to create egalitarian teams.

We needed to work with a concept that would thus enable multiple issues to be addressed. The challenge was to create a non-threatening, warm and caring interactional context, which at the same time helped collective reconfiguration of personal relationships.

We decided to use the cultural idea of the '*koodam*' whose literal meaning in Tamil is 'gathering place'. Though the literal meaning is ordinary, the cultural practice underlying the theme itself assumes importance. The '*koodam*' was also the place where 'learning' took place as in '*palli-k-koodam*' or school, or it was the place where the community would meet to gather, discuss and decide by consensus, as in '*oor koodam*' or village *koodam*. There was also the

'*thiruvizha koodam*' or festival space where collective interactions and festivities took place during cultural and religious events. Traditionally, houses were constructed with an open space in the middle of the house called the '*koodam*' or '*mitham*' where the entire joint family would meet during times of family decision making or festivities to decide collectively on issues that had arisen for resolution. Thus the *koodam* was not just a place where people met but a place where people met for a purpose.

Political and Ethical Dimensions of the Koodam

In traditional contexts the *koodam* represented a 'sacred area' that was more secular rather than religious. There was no specific geographical marking like a fence or enclosed structure; ordinarily it would be an open space under a tree or in a common area of the village that people treated with utmost respect. No one would think of defiling or defacing the *koodam* area by spitting, urinating or in any other way defiling the space.

More important was the manner in which the *koodam* operated. For those admitted as members, discussions inside the *koodam* were open ended and everybody's views were treated with respect. Decisions were generally by consensus. Implementation was measured by self-monitoring. In sum, there is a high degree of ownership of the *koodam* and personal assumption of responsibility to respect and implement decisions.

Recognising Diversity, Creating Unity—Koodam as the Panchayat

One of the most important aspects of the *koodam* was the fact that as a concept and a cultural practice it recognized that people were divided on class, caste, gender, education and other criteria in social contexts. But once inside the *koodam*, they were all treated as equals with an equal voice and opinion and had the same privileges as anyone else. The practice of consensus decision making also meant that multiple and contradictory positions were reconciled in the course of discussions with people realizing the importance of 'give-and-take' as an essential aspect of living together as a community.

The social and collective notion of the *koodam* was the basis on which the village '*panchayat*' or council was constituted. The *panch* or 'assembly' became the village common decision making space in which important decisions affecting the community were taken.

The *koodam*, as a cultural and social practice of course, had its share of problems. Entry into the *koodam* was very tightly determined on basis of caste, gender and residence. In many places, the practice had degenerated into closed and oppressive communities in which collective pressure was brought to punish and coerce dissenting members to fall in line or face social or collective stigmatization or exclusion.

Despite its shortcomings, the principles underlying the *koodam* practice allowed for the percolation of a consciousness and practice rooted in notions of egalitarianism, consensus and collective functioning. The ethical values of respecting divergent and different views, valuing self-regulation and self-implementation of collective decisions, community sharing and ownership and such other norms ensured both social commensality as also a political relatedness.

It was for this reason that we decided to experiment with giving a contemporary content and meaning to the *koodam* as the basis for relating, discussing and decision making inside the workshops. The idea was to use the space of the training site as a place to reconstruct a new mode of relating by simultaneously deconstructing the existing bureaucratic, social and authority-based systems and assuming full responsibility of creating an alternate space and mode of relating based on norms the participants felt best reflected their values for a new institution.

Creating the Koodam – Laying the Foundation for Change

There are several essential characteristics of the institutional transformation process we sought to initiate. First was the belief that all members of a community will have to be personally committed to notions of democracy, equality, egalitarianism, responsibility and such like. They must be willing to practice the same in their everyday action both within formal work spaces as also in interactions going beyond work. It was equally important for all individuals to

realize that mere professions of ethical values, vision and norms were insufficient without the attendant acceptance of making these values the basis of social responses and interactions within the organization.

All of this is easier said than done in the context of the highly stratified systems from which most government officials came. Not only did bureaucracy influence the way they interacted, it had also affected language itself. So much so, language itself became an impediment as there was no practice of open and critical discussion amongst persons. Talking the language of 'feelings' was therefore not just unusual but also produced discomfort.

Finally, the change process had to be seen and owned by all people, especially those at the top. It was equally important to demonstrate that the change process involved all levels in the organization and was not a programme confined to the operating levels alone, leaving the senior most out of the ambit of interacting as equals. Creating an open, egalitarian and democratic 'agenda' was thus a process to which all levels contributed. Finally, the transformation process would be complete only when the entire institution reflected the shared values of all the people making up the institution.

Given these perspectives, the 'change initiative' always involved multiple levels of the organization participating in the programme. The tool to enable people to deal with issues of hierarchy and status and to create the context for people to overcome their limitations was through the introduction of the concept of the *koodam*. We invited the participating members to form a shared space for critical engagement and relating as individuals bound by the common concern of creating a caring, sharing and democratic organization.. The invitation was also to ask members to decide collectively on the ethics and values that would guide them in the process.

Participants were informed that during the period of the engagement in the workshop (for whatever duration) they were responsible for the process boundaries, which covered the external facilitators, too. From the mundane, like deciding on issues of punctuality and late coming, to more profound subjects like deciding on whether to allow outsiders to participate in the proceedings, members had to decide and set the rules by themselves. Rule making and boundary regulation was a collective and shared responsibility. Within the *koodam* no rank or position could be pulled, all decisions were by consensus and monitoring of responses was self-driven.

***Koodam* – Entry Only by Invitation...**

The challenge of creating the new mode of relating was not so much in talking about it as much as in making it work. Learning to interact with one another as equals had to be learnt and did not automatically come about, however attractive the concept was. Where people came from bureaucracies with strong traditions of compliance, learning to relate equally was a new experience and had to be negotiated slowly. For most people from closed systems, keeping their opinions to themselves and maintaining silence were most often protective devices!!

However, in the last 12 years our experience of interacting with varied state level departments in several states has generally been met by a welcoming of the opportunity to create a non-hierarchical, non-segmented and more open space for interaction. Even in departments with very rigid and formalized modes of relating, the call to create an egalitarian space invariably was accepted as desirable. Even where institutional practices were inhibiting of free and frank interaction and sharing of views and opinions, our experience was that most people responded with interest to the challenge of creating their own interactional space. Each time the *koodam* was formed, participants were encouraged to find their own comfort level of interaction and to start the process of deconstruction of hierarchy from whatever level they chose. Even in this, our experience has been that as groups grew in confidence that the process was genuine and was mutually helpful. They started to own the process and invest in the growth of change processes amongst people in general and the institutional context in particular.

In places where senior policy makers also exhibited support and solidarity with the effort of officials to create a more wholesome, enabling and caring work context, the pace of change was faster and more intense.

Building Democracy and the *Koodam*

Koodam is not a magic wand; neither is it a formula which guarantees results, if replicated. Its strength is that it represents an `idea' and a vision of social relations based on widely sought after norms of equality and solidarity, concern and sharing. Since the attempt is at recreating social relations, the attempt to give a new sense of meaning, purpose and intent to notions such as democracy, consensus decision making, transparency and the like releases a major surge of creativity and positivism. What results is a rekindling amongst people, a resurgence of `hope' and excitement in the creation of new modes of relating.

The infectious character of the concept of the *koodam* is such that the attempt at creating a new mode of relating, which starts in the workshop space, has in many instances been taken up by people to experiment with rebuilding social relations at the level of local self governments (*panchayats*), collectivities of elected representatives (in the context of water management), groups of NGOs and other similar group-based activities.

Our introduction of the concept of the `*koodam*' seems to have tapped an undercurrent of traditional practices prevalent not just in Tamil Nadu, but all across South Asia. In state after state where we have experimented with the `*koodam*' we have found people responding to the idea, pointing out forgotten but previously prevalent practices referred to by local names—*choupal* in north India, *choupalia* in Orissa, *panchayat* in other parts.

What has been exciting is to find that in place after place people have responded with intensity to the chance for rediscovering the strength of democracy and democratic functioning. The concept of the *koodam* has been one of the best tools that has enabled giving a new resurgence to old concepts!

Practicability of the *Koodam*—Examples of Successful Experiments

Between 2004-08 a major change initiative was launched within the Tamil Nadu Water Supplies and Drainage Board (TWAD) in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu. In the context of a severe water crisis caused by a continuous period of drought and failed monsoons and with the looming threat of restructuring of the public sector utility due to pressure from the international lending institutions, the department embarked on a major programme to change the way it functioned. This included an intense and critical re-examination by the water engineers about their functioning, the way they related to citizens and civil society regarding the management of water, the limitations of the technocratic approach to solving issues of citizen involvement, participation in decision making and so on.

The *koodam* provided the context for self-critical, analytical and open discussions to take place, involving officials from all hierarchical levels of the TWAD Board. This was not easy in the beginning as the organizational culture was steeped in very formalistic, hierarchical mode of relating.

After the initial hesitation, people seemed to savour the benefits of relating in an open ended, frank and free manner amongst themselves—sparring, debating and challenging view points, insights and analyses. Over a period of 3 years over 550 water engineers and professionals went through the intensive core change workshops, each of 5 days' duration.

The attractiveness of the concept of the *koodam* was such that engineers introduced the same concept in their interaction with village communities in over 500 villages all over Tamil Nadu state, which had been selected as sites to experiment on democratization of water management. The experience was uniformly one of enthusiasm and acceptance of the invitation to form shared common spaces for discussion and decision making. The water engineers found that they had found a simple but effective tool to connect with ordinary villagers and to get them to work as a collective force. They had tapped into the latent memory of the village people and, therefore, created a space for shared ownership and equalized relationships that resembled the indigenous governance structures.

Within the TWAD too, the *koodam* triggered an organization wide change process. In many small but meaningful ways the open interaction amongst engineers helped to break the stranglehold of rigid rule bound behavior and helped generate a sense of camaraderie and common cause.

The high point came when within a period of a year after launching the change experiment programme, reports started pouring in that the small but significant changes in water supply, storage, distribution and satisfaction improved performance from across the state. Increases occurred in innumerable villages, all of them water starved with water service levels of a mere 10 to 20 lpcd (litres per capita per day) as contrasted to the government standard of providing a minimum 40 lpcd.

The report of an impact assessment study is revealing of the power unleashed by enlightened involvement and participation by the community in partnership with a similarly supportive and enlightened band of officials. The following table highlights the important achievements within the first year of the programme:

The Main Outcomes as of End-April 2006

(From 472 villages under 145 Panchayats across 29 districts)

Contribution: Rs.1.42 crores [10.42 million Rupees—roughly, USD230,658.55] contributed by 50,896 households in 145 village panchayats, in 29 districts reflecting their sense of ownership.

Investment cost: Overall reduction by 40-50 per cent: average project costs are Rs.1827 [USD40.44] per household, while regular schemes are Rs.4580 [USD101.38].

Low cost options: 50 per cent of schemes are now rehabilitation such as pipeline extensions instead of more expensive options.

Savings: Savings of between 8 per cent to 33 per cent have been achieved over the regular budget. Operation and maintenance expenditure reduced to Rs.18.6 [USD0.41] per household.

Equity: 65 per cent of schemes were for groups where the majority were below the poverty line including scheduled castes.

Sustainability: 90 per cent households are undertaking rainwater harvesting; 150 traditional water bodies revived.

Source: *Democratisation of Water Management: Establishing a Paradigm Shift in the Water Sector*, presented in a Conference organized by DFID in London, July 2006.

Resonating Beyond India: Introducing the *Koodam* in Foreign Climes

Is the concept of the *koodam* only of relevance to Tamil Nadu and south India alone? In a bid to test the response of people from different cultures and nationalities, the concept of the *koodam* was introduced in workshops/meetings in two international settings: one in a workshop organized by the University of South Visayas, Philippines, calling together a gathering of academics, field workers and community leaders of the Visayas region involved and engaged with agriculture, irrigation and land.

Not only did the group accept the principles underlying the notion of *koodam*, they added their own meanings and interpretations about the type of institutional culture and space they wanted to see built up amongst different stakeholders incorporating their shared concerns, beliefs and values. A most touching moment of the experience was the writing of a song on the *koodam* composed during the workshop itself and set to music by the end of the workshop. It was offered as their contribution to the spread of the *koodam* principle worldwide.

A similar welcoming response was the outcome of introducing the concept of the *koodam* as the basis for regulating the interaction amongst senior policy makers of a variety of international aid agencies in a half day meeting in Brussels.

The Name Does Not Matter—The Spirit Underlying the *Koodam* is Infectious

The experience of the *koodam* as a space in which people are encouraged to interact freely as human beings without having to place filters over their feelings and thoughts and not having to be politically correct or diplomatic in their interactions with others, especially those superior or senior to them, releases a tremendous sense of involvement, ownership and purposive action. Time and again, the response has been the demand for more such opportunities

and experiences. In a way of speaking the cry for egalitarian relationships seems to be a universal demand. It is perhaps for this reason that the spirit underlying the *koodam* still finds an echo amongst modern youth and generations. It is therefore not surprising that the vision of a social relationship based on norms of equality, egalitarianism and consensus decision making is widely accepted by many other Asian countries from South Asia to Far Eastern countries like Japan and South Korea, many of whom have the same concepts integrated in notions similar to the *koodam*. Adapting the popular saying “a rose is a rose whatever be the name you call it”—it does not matter whether the commonly owned space sought to be created is called a *koodam* or some other name. For a *koodam*, by whatever name it is called, is important for the principles it is based on rather the blind aping of the name itself. Therein lies the strength of the *koodam*—a vitality that is waiting to be awakened!

References

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About the Authors

V. Suresh and Pradip Prabhu have been engaged in engaged in institutional transformation and change management work of state wide service delivery government departments in several states in India for over 12 years. The core focus of their work on ‘democratizing governance’ has involved bringing together public officials, community and other stake holders to re-examine democratic ideals of equity, equality, justice along with systemic issues of sustainability, conservation and decentralization. The change process has centred around bringing about attitudinal changes, perspective shifts and institutional transformation of both government officials as also the community. The financial implications of governance reform and democratization work got highlighted in the work with the Tamil Nadu Water Supplies and Drainage Board (TWAD) which experienced savings of over Rs.60 crores over budgeted schemes. Since then the conceptual design of institutional transformation pioneered by Suresh and Prabhu has been accepted by the Planning Commission of India and integrated into the programme of decentralized development planning in the eleventh 5-Year Plan document.

Dr. Suresh also practices law in the Madras High Court, has been appointed by the Supreme Court of India as Adviser for Tamil Nadu to the Supreme Court Commissioner on Food Security and is national Secretary of the People’s Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL) India’s largest human rights body. Prof. Pradip Prabhu is Head – Center for Rights and Governance, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Tuljapur, Osmanabad Dt., 413601, Maharashtra. He is also National Convenor for the Campaign for Survival and Dignity and has over 40 years experience of working with tribal rights organization, the Kashtakari Sanghatana in Maharashtra.

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