

Searching Knowledge for Engagement in a Worker Cooperative Society: A Proposal for Rethinking Premises

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Abstract : While delving into the heart of any organization, the structural pre-requisites which form the framework of its system, allures and sometimes invokes great interest. In an attempt to understand the ecosystem of Knowledge that existed in organizations with diverse ownership and legal blueprints, Cooperative Societies, which form a crucial part of the neo-liberal movement in India, was studied. The exploration surprisingly led to the re-designing of at least a set of premises of the researcher on the drivers of engagement in an otherwise structured trade environment. The liberal organizational structure of Cooperative Societies has been empowered with certain terminologies: Voluntary, Democratic, Equality and Distributive Justice. To condense in Hubert Calvert's words, 'Co-operation is a form of organization wherein persons voluntarily associated together as human beings on the basis of equality for the promotion of the economic interest of themselves.' In India, largely the institutions which work under this principle is registered under Cooperative Societies Act of the Central or State laws. A Worker Cooperative Society which originated as a movement in the state of Kerala and spread its wings across the country - Indian Coffee House was chosen as the enterprise for further inquiry for it being a living example and a highly successful working model in the designated space. The exploratory study reached out to employees and key stakeholders of Indian Coffee House to understand the nuances of the structure and the scope it provides for engagement. The key questions which formed shape in the mind of researcher while engaging in the inquiry were: How has the organization sustained despite its principle of accepting employees with no skills into employment and later training and empowering them? How can a system which has pre-independence and post-independence (independence here means the colonial independence from Great Britain) existence seek to engage employees within the premise of equality? How was the value of socialism ingrained in a commercial enterprise which has a turnover of several hundreds of Crores each year? How did the vision of a flat structure, way back in the 1940's find its way into the organizational structure and has continued to remain as the way of life? These questions were addressed by the Case study research that ensued and placing Knowledge as the key premise, the possibilities of engagement of the organization man was pictured. Understanding that although the macro or holistic unit of analysis is the organization, it is pivotal to understand the structures and processes which best reflect on the actors. The embedded design which was adopted in this study delivered insights from the different stakeholder actors from diverse departments. While moving through variables which define and sometimes defy bounds in rationality, the study brought to light the inherent features of the organization structure and how it influences the actors who form a crucial part of the scheme of things. The research brought forth the key enablers for engagement and specifically explored the standpoint of knowledge in the larger structure of the Cooperative Society.

Keywords : knowledge, organizational structure, engagement, worker cooperative

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