



ATMANIRBHAR BHARAT THROUGH COOPERATIVES

Cooperatives are the purest and natural form of economic and business enterprise, synergetic with the resources bestowed by Mother Nature.

In cooperative enterprises, people can reach economic objectives by joining forces and pooling their resources, which an individual would be unable to achieve. Agricultural support and food security programmes entail heavy financial and governance burdens for the Government. India's strong cooperative roots and strategic focus on the agricultural sector provide enough justification for the Government to move out of the front line of food production and food security management and hand it over to the farmer cooperatives.

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'Cooperation' has remained the philosophy of India, and the cooperative movement is the backbone of the rural economy. Presently, around 29 crore people in the country are directly linked with India's cooperative sector. Cooperative societies, particularly, in agriculture, dairy, and fisheries sectors, provide rural population not just with livelihood opportunities but also

with financial safety net with a community-based approach.

The entire cooperative fraternity rejoiced when the Prime Minister of India gave a call, – 'Sahakar se Samridhi' and accordingly decided on 6 July 2021 to create a separate ministry for the development of the cooperative sector. It signalled the intention and deep commitment of the Government of the day for promotion and development of the cooperative



sector in the country. This also demonstrated that cooperatives are seen by the Government as the most appropriate alternative model through which the country can realise its dream of becoming an all-inclusive economy and realise the vision of Atmanirbhar Bharat.

Socio-Economic Empowerment Effects of Cooperation

Cooperatives are the best instruments of social and economic policy and programme implementation as they have inherent advantages in tackling the problems of poverty alleviation, food security, and employment generation. These have immense potential to deliver goods and services at the doorstep without any hassles, as they are people-centered citizen organisations.

In cooperative enterprises, people can reach economic objectives by joining forces and pooling their resources, which an individual would be unable to achieve. Cooperative enterprises can facilitate and ensure market access, create economies of scale and scope, and establish independent market positions. As a consequence, they are capable of

leaving a positive mark on a country's economic and social structures.

Cooperatives, Agriculture and Food Security

India needs novel ways to achieve farm prosperity and sustainable food security. In order to achieve this, transformative and disruptive changes, and innovation at every point along the food production, supply, and consumption chain are required. We need innovative systems that conserve, protect, and enhance the natural resource base while increasing productivity. It requires a transformative process towards 'holistic' approaches that also build upon indigenous and traditional knowledge, and recognise the importance, centrality, and criticality of community-based institutions like cooperatives. Farmers have to be actively and effectively engaged through their own cooperatives to enhance soils and protect biodiversity while improving crop resilience, productivity, and livelihoods. We must deploy nature-based solutions to support agricultural production while helping to regenerate ecosystems.

Agricultural support and food security programmes entail heavy financial and governance



burdens for the Government. India's strong cooperative roots and strategic focus on the agricultural sector provide enough justification for the Government to move out of the front line of food production and food security management and hand it over to the farmer cooperatives. The Government should recognise that cooperatives are the most appropriate institutions to contribute to and address some of the identified priority areas of concern, like food security, employment, poverty reduction, and financial inclusion. The biggest and most important strength of India lies in its people, particularly in its millions of farmer families. India

can achieve any goal by combining the strength of its farmers with professional management.

Sahakar Grams – The Future

As a step in this direction, it could be suggested that the Government, through appropriate policies and incentives, encourages farmers to organise themselves into cooperative folds, and every village in the country should be encouraged to move towards 'Atmanirbhar Sahakar Grams'. The concept of 'Sahakar Grams' is for shifting the gravitational forces of agriculture development and food management to the villages and farmers. Under this approach, the farmers will be encouraged to pool their natural and economic assets to ensure their efficient and sustainable use, preservation, and conservation. Rational and efficient management of land, water, and cattle resources would ensure that there is no wastage and chemical inputs are used only when there is no alternative.

A Case for Creating National Cooperative Food Grid

The Government can explore moving towards setting up a 'National Cooperative Food Grid (NCFG)'. Every Indian village should have one agriculture cooperative to run and manage its entire economic activities on cooperative principles. This will reduce production costs and improve productivity. Every village level cooperative should be equipped with farm machinery and a cattle management centre. Two or three such village-level cooperatives should jointly promote one Multi-Purpose Village Cooperative Society (MPVCS) with storage, sorting, grading, packaging, and trading facilities for perishables and non-perishables. This MPVCS should also be able to provide credit facilities to its members and run green energy, tourism, consumer, health, and education, including vocational training centres. MPVCS should also be designated as the sole agency for running food security programmes of the Government. The recent initiative of the Ministry of Cooperation regarding the creation of 2 lakh additional multi-purpose cooperatives at the community level would be a great step towards achieving self-reliance in India by following a bottom-up approach.

Every grain of food produced in the village should flow to NCFG through these cooperatives. This will completely eliminate food loss and wastage. The entire produce of the member farmer should be



collected by the village cooperative and taken to MPVCS, which will immediately credit the value of the produce at Government-determined rates to the member's account. In cases where Government-determined rates are not available, the best market rates may be given to the members. If any member does not want to sell his produce immediately then he can advise his cooperative accordingly. A farmer must be empowered to have his 'choice', 'voice', and 'price'. MPVCS may also stock the grain for operating food security programmes and be paid appropriate charges by the Government agencies for this purpose.

If the entire country is organised around this concept, then we will have around 7 lakh village agriculture cooperatives and around 3.5 lakh MPVCS. National Cooperative Food Grid (NCFG) may be created by digitally connecting the entire network of village-level cooperatives and MPVCS. I am of the view that NCFG can help India save around Rs 3 trillion annually by lowering the cost of food production and rationalising expenditure on food security programmes of the Government. NCFG will also generate enormous employment opportunities in rural areas and trigger a new wave of rural development.

NCFG may be complimented by setting up a dedicated 'National Rural and Farm Prosperity Fund (NRFPF)' for providing financial support to the movement for self-reliant and self-sustainable 'Bharat' through cooperative value-

based enterprise. With an innovative and creative approach, the required resource support for NRFPF and NCFG can be easily found within the existing budgetary allocations. If the financial assistance provided by the Government and corporates are used efficiently and judiciously, then this can become an important instrument for economic and social welfare that will not destroy the dignity and self-confidence of its citizens.

Efficient agriculture production system management, food security, and food supply chain management, energy security through clean and green routes, preserving natural resources, mitigating adverse effects of climate change, and protecting and preserving social harmony are the main future challenges for the country, and this is where enormous opportunities lie for cooperatives. Cooperatives are the most appropriate institutional form for harnessing these opportunities, and a true cooperative value-based entrepreneurial initiative can never fail, whatever the overall economic and market condition be. It is to be internalised on what a miracle an efficient member-driven cooperative can do, and that only through such cooperative exploitation of all types would stop and we would witness all-around prosperity. The route for 'Developed and Atmanirbhar Bharat' essentially passes through its people, villages, rivers, agricultural land, natural resources, and deep and strong cooperative roots. □

(Views expressed are personal)