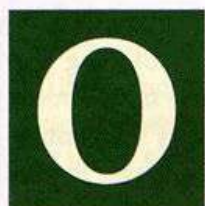


# National University for Cooperatives

## A Long Overdue Initiative

**The need to integrate, standardize, and disseminate cooperative education, 'Tribhuvan' Sahkari University as an apex institution with a unified effort will not only address the current gaps in curriculum across various cooperative training institutes, but also foster a more structured, transparent, and cohesive approach to cooperative training.**

**Dr. Umakant Dash**



One of the highlights of the 2025 Budget Session of Parliament was introducing the 'Tribhuvan' Sahkari University (TSU) Bill, 2025, and enacting it. The TSU bill was passed in the Lok Sabha on 26 March 2025, in the Rajya Sabha on 1 April 2025, and a Gazette notification was issued on 3 April 2025 through which the Institute of Rural Management Anand (IRMA) was established as the university, TSU. The TSU will be dedicated to providing technical and management education, research, and training in the cooperative sector to strengthen the cooperative movement in the country through a network of institutions and achieve global excellence.

### **What are Cooperatives?**

Cooperatives, as a form of organization, are different from profit-driven corporations. These are hybrid organizations with dual purposes: 'business' as an enterprise for financial sustainability and 'service to members' as a collective for social welfare. As per the International Cooperative Alliance, a cooperative is an "autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly owned and democratically-controlled enterprise."

The objectives of cooperatives are embodied in the phrase 'Value for money and value for many,' which is the guiding principle of Amul – the Indian popular milk brand that stands as the world's largest milk cooperative. 'Value for money' indicates that Amul serves the interest of the consumers by providing them quality products matching the worth of the money they spend. 'Value for many' means that Amul ensures that 85% of the money the consumers pay goes to more than 36 lakh dairy

farmers who contribute milk to their respective village dairy cooperative societies every day, both morning and evening. That exemplifies how cooperatives cater to social needs through economic means.

Cooperatives operate through collective action that organizes individuals into business entities. It reduces the vulnerability of individual farmers and fosters resilience among the communities. For example, a small or marginal farmer, individually, may not be able to afford high-quality inputs, or have to be at the mercy of moneylenders for access to capital, or may not be able to bargain for a fair price for their products and be forced to make distressed sales. However, a farmer cooperative, comprising small and marginal farmers, collectively has, by economies of scale, a greater bargaining power, a reduced risk, and a greater access to better technology and markets.

Collectives not only showcase 'strength in unity' but also foster equity and inclusion. Cooperatives uphold social justice by addressing social, political, and economic inequalities through *recognition* (admitting people of all castes and communities as members without bias), *representation* (equal votes to all members), and *redistribution* (providing essential services to all members). In short, cooperatives are community-driven and prioritize equitable wealth distribution and function with a democratic decision-making structure. The International Labour Organization has recognized cooperatives as embodiments of freedom, dignity, economic security, and equal opportunity. Cooperatives bring about just societies and sustainable solutions.

### **Why a University for the Cooperative Sector?**

The need for a full-fledged university dedicated to the cooperative sector was long felt in India. The cooperative movement in India had taken shape before Indian

independence in various informal forms. From time-to-time, British India had several acts to institutionalize and operationalize credit and non-credit cooperatives in the agriculture and non-agriculture sectors governed by central and provincial governments. Post-independence, cooperatives were emphasized as the principal means for economic and political development since the very First Five-Year Plan (1951-56), which recognized cooperatives as a method of organization suitable for all aspects of community development. The subsequent five-year plans reiterated the emphasis and envisaged that every family in a village would be a member of at least one cooperative society.

Several committees were constituted, legislations were enacted, policies were formulated, and institutions were built in all the ensuing decades to support the ecosystem of cooperatives. Currently, India has more than 8.5 lakh cooperatives and close to 30 crore members of cooperatives across different sectors: credit and banking, dairy, housing, fertiliser, sugar, marketing, consumer goods, handloom, handicraft, fisheries, women's welfare, etc. Compared to a global average of 12%, over 20% of the Indian population is part of the cooperative movement. The contributions of cooperatives to the national economy cannot be overemphasized. In an interview with the Employment News in 2023, Amit Shah, Union Home Minister and Minister of Cooperation, has stated that cooperatives account for approximately one-third of sugar production, one-fourth of fertilizer production, one-fifth of agricultural credit, paddy procurement, and fish production, and one-tenth of milk procurement and production.

A November 2024 report on 'Cooperatives in India- Opportunities by 2030' by Primus Partners has estimated that cooperatives in the country can generate up to 11 crore jobs by 2030. Compared with the breadth and depth of the cooperative sector and its future requirements, the education and training infrastructure in the country is largely inadequate. One of the very few bright spots in this endeavour is the IRMA, which was founded in 1979 by Dr. Verghese Kurien, the father of the White Revolution in India, with the mandate of breeding professional rural managers with ethos and values to cater to the rural sector. In the last 45 years, the institute has been professionalizing the rural organizations and developing leaders for the cooperative sector through education and training in rural management.

However, one IRMA is not enough for our country. Establishing the 'Tribhuvan' Sahkari University is precisely to fill this gap. As the act suggests, it can ensure a stable and sufficient supply of professionally qualified human

resources for different categories of jobs (managerial, supervisory, administrative, technical, operational, etc.) in cooperatives; it can also address the long pending issue of capacity building of employees and board members in the cooperative sector across India in a focused manner. In addition to education and training, the university can undertake research in some of the critical questions, such as: 'Why do certain cooperatives succeed, while others fail?', 'How can a level playing field be created between cooperatives and corporate organizations?', 'What are the cross learning opportunities for cooperatives of different sectors or belonging to different parts of India and the world?', among others.

### **Renewed Emphasis on Cooperatives by the National Government**

The present government recognized the importance of cooperatives in its last tenure by establishing the Ministry of Cooperation in July 2021. One of the most significant achievements since the ministry's inception is cataloging the national cooperative database. In less than four years, there has been a 10% increase in the number of cooperatives across the country. In Jammu and Kashmir, the cooperatives increased from 4,111 to 10,317, showing a 150% increase. Similarly, the growth is double the national average in states and union territories like Ladakh, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, Lakshadweep, Assam, and Uttarakhand. Currently, maximum shares of cooperatives are in Maharashtra (27%), followed by Gujarat (10%). In terms of sectors, the highest share is from the housing cooperative society (23%), followed by dairy (18%), and the primary agricultural credit society (PACS) (12%).

The Ministry of Cooperation upholds the spirit of cooperative federalism. A National Cooperative Policy is under finalization, whose draft has been prepared by a 48-member national-level committee after a series of meetings and workshops. To revitalize PACS, recent reforms were undertaken to align 25 economic activities. So, PACS has started functioning as a common service center through which more than 300 government schemes are run. There has been a massive scale computerization of PACS, and the services of two-thirds of the PACs are currently online. The government has reduced the tax on cooperatives from 12% to 7%. Since its inception, the ministry has introduced over 60 initiatives to strengthen the cooperative sector, creating potential employment opportunities. There are also plans for cooperatives in the taxi, insurance, and other sectors. The strategy is to cover all villages of the country through PACS, fishery, or dairy cooperatives in the next five years.

The first and current Minister of Cooperation, Amit Shah, who moved the TSU bill in the last Lok Sabha session, said, *"Cooperative is a sector that touches every family in the country in some way or another. There exists a unit in every village which is engaged in agricultural development, rural development, and self-employment through cooperatives and contributes to the development of the country."* He highlighted that, after 75 years of independence, India is set to establish its first cooperative university. He emphasized that this initiative will strengthen the rural economy, promote self-employment and small enterprises, enhance social inclusion, and encourage innovation and research, ultimately shaping a new generation of cooperative leadership with modern education. The Minister announced that the university will be named 'Tribhuvan' Sahkari University, honouring Tribhuvandas Patel, a pioneer of India's cooperative movement under the guidance of the first Home Minister of India, Sardar Patel. He cited the success story of Amul, which was founded by Tribhuvandas Patel in 1946 with 250 litres of milk and has now grown into India's largest dairy brand, with the turnover reaching up to Rs. 90,000 crores in the year 2024-25.

Amit Shah also emphasized how the institutional notion of cooperatives can be combined with the idea of enterprises to create 'Swarojagar' (self-employment). Employment through collective action has three essential benefits. First, unlike informal and low-paid jobs, this self-employment gives dignity and social security. Secondly, it develops a sense of 'we', instead of 'I', in both thought and action, which fosters belongingness in a community that blurs out the social divisions for a greater economic purpose, leading to social cohesion and harmony. Lastly, from the country's perspective, a development through cooperatives is a mass development; it's not about making a handful of billionaires but empowering a billion. In this sense, cooperatives can contribute to India's development while upholding the honour of the citizens.

For the cooperatives to achieve their potential, a national-level university was required to provide trained human resources. Recognizing this need, Amit Shah stated, *"Thousands of Cooperative Education Training Institutes are being run across the country, no common course is offered by them."* Need to integrate, standardize, and disseminate cooperative education, 'Tribhuvan' Sahkari University as an apex institution with a unified effort will not only address the current gaps in curriculum across various cooperative training institutes, but also foster a more structured,

transparent, and cohesive approach to cooperative training. The university will offer degree, diploma, and PhD programmes, including courses for 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> pass, both in classrooms and e-learning platforms, to provide employment opportunities to a wider population, including those in remote locations. The university will introduce a multi-disciplinary curriculum aligned with the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, allowing students to enter and exit courses flexibly. It will also introduce specialized short-term certificate courses for existing employees at all stages of their careers to upskill them and contribute significantly to the domestic and global value chain.

The university, acting as a think tank, will conduct in-depth research on cooperative governance, technology integration, financial sustainability, and community-led business models, providing policy recommendations to the governments and cooperative societies/federations. Through a hub-and-spoke model, with sector-specific schools in different parts of the country considering regional economic needs, the university is expected to train approximately eight lakh candidates annually, bringing fresh talent into the cooperative movement. Thus, providing structured academic programmes, fostering research, and creating a skilled workforce will ensure that cooperatives become transparent, accountable, and professionally managed enterprises.

Overall, the establishment of this university will help cultivate a new-age cooperative culture, ensuring that cooperative studies meet modern industry demands. It will aid in strengthening India's cooperative movement and position India as a global leader in cooperative education, governance, and innovation. As cooperatives evolve as key drivers of economic growth, the university will provide the necessary framework for a stronger, self-reliant, and sustainable cooperative ecosystem, serving as the foundation for a new era of cooperative excellence, empowering millions.

In conclusion, the government of the day has envisioned the 'Tribhuvan' Sahkari University as a first-of-its-kind institution. This Institute of national importance is mandated to contribute to country's stride towards a developed economy, riding on the growth of the cooperative sector ('Sahkar Se Samridhi'). Such a development will surely be more equitable, inclusive, and less inimical to the environment. In this positive light, we welcome the establishment of the Tribhuvan Sahkari University. In a collective spirit, we look forward to collaborating to work for the greater good of our cooperatives and the people of India and beyond. □