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# **Solidarity for Survival: Cooperative Building as a Solution to Overcome Vulnerability**



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**Solidarity for Survival:  
Cooperative Building as a Solution to  
Overcome Vulnerability**

**Rajat Kanti Sur**

**2022**



# Solidarity for Survival: Cooperative Building as a Solution to Overcome Vulnerability

Rajat Kanti Sur \*

## Introduction

The role of the cooperative is important both economically and politically to explain the idea of a class. Cooperatives also prove an important site of study on how migrant workers in particular rely on cooperatives as an alternative collectivisation outside the state control. Cooperatives, as suggested in this paper through a series of case studies, can be interpreted as a “form of contract, a mutual obligation to form the idea of political community”<sup>1</sup>. This paper argues about the role of cooperatives in building solidarity among the so called economically backward migrants from different castes and religious beliefs, especially during the socio-economic crisis. The arguments of this paper are based on case studies of four different types of cooperatives in Kolkata (i.e., a press workers’ cooperative in Beliaghata, the construction workers’ cooperative in Behala, the cooperative run by the sanitation workers under the Kolkata Metropolitan Development Authority or KMDA, and the sex workers’ cooperative in Sonagachi). Apart from the case study-based arguments in favour of the cooperative, this paper has tried to critically analyse the relevance of the cooperative for the welfare of migrant workers. The analysis has been done by using theoretical literatures, interviews of concerned persons and an analysis of the existing legal frameworks on cooperatives.

## Definition and Role of cooperatives

There are several ways to define cooperatives. According to the *International Cooperative Alliance* a cooperative is an “association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly owned and democratically controlled enterprise.”<sup>2</sup> The definition clearly stated that the institution should be democratically controlled and based on the electoral representations. The cooperatives in India have been built based on this definition. However, the Marxian idea of cooperative is a little different. Marx in the presidential address of *International Workingmen’s Congress* acknowledged the cooperative movement as “one of the transforming forces of the present society based upon class antagonism,” although he never elaborated on the potential of the cooperative system to “transform the capitalist society.” Marx was

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in favour of capturing the production process through the help of cooperative movements run by the workers instead of opening small initiatives (e.g., opening cooperative stores, housing societies etc.).<sup>3</sup> Explaining the problems of cooperative stores in Austria and firms in Germany, he was extremely critical about the idea of cooperative associations and the idea of cooperation. In the first volume of *Capital*, cooperation was defined as a common ownership on the conditions of production; on the other hand, it separates the individual from their tribe or community.<sup>4</sup> He believed that cooperation is a necessary part of all large-scale productions.<sup>5</sup> But according to Marx, cooperation is only be able to defeat monopoly when undertaken on national dimensions. Politics plays an important role in it.<sup>6</sup>

Both Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore believed that cooperative building could reduce class hierarchies. According to Gandhi, the ideal classless and casteless society could be created through the abolition of vertical divisions in the society. He believed that the ideal citizen of the classless society would be “those who have more use of their advantage not for themselves but as a trust to serve others who have less”.<sup>7</sup> The ideal society would be built through “a fascinating world of cottage crafts and intensive, small scale farming cooperatives”.<sup>8</sup> Rabindranath Tagore’s writings on cooperative policies presented almost the same vision. He believed that the cooperative building is the only solution to overcome poverty. According to Tagore, the future of a self-empowered society lay in the unification of all communities. He believed that ‘freedom’ came through the transfer of labour power to capital. Cooperative building was the only way to make this possible.<sup>9</sup> However, like Gandhi, Tagore was also in favour of building village-based cooperatives to strengthen the bonds between people. Although Tagore was influenced by his visit to the large-scale cooperatives in Russia and other socialist countries, he was critical about the functions of the large-scale cooperatives. He thought that such cooperatives could increase the risks of unfair domination on ordinary or underprivileged workers.

## **The History of Cooperative Building Initiatives in India**

The history of building cooperative societies in India began with agricultural credit societies. The first draft of the *Cooperative Societies Act* came in 1904. Modified in 1912, the act included provisions building Central Cooperative Banks. The category of the ‘membership’ was unspecified in the beginning. The government created several committees to fix the membership categories. However, the rules and regulations regarding the membership drafted in the *Fifteenth Conference of Registrars of Cooperative Societies* in 1947. According to the draft, the members of a cooperative should be open to all belonging to a particular area or effectively involved in activities of a factory.<sup>10</sup> However, states like Bihar and Maharashtra had their own individual laws on cooperative since early 1930s.<sup>11</sup> Although West Bengal was one of the prominent states in India that led the cooperative movement since the beginning, the partition created a negative impact to this initiative. West Bengal was unable to initiate building cooperative societies due to the violence and financial crisis that came as an immediate aftermath of the Partition. As a result, West Bengal had disproportionately few cooperatives (12) compared to Madras (681) and Bombay (498) and states like Bihar (52) in 1947.<sup>12</sup>

The provincial government of undivided Bengal followed the 1914 Act (with some amendments after the partition) till early 1970s. The West Bengal Government passed their own cooperative act in 1973. This Act was amended thrice (1983, 1995 and 2006). This paper refers to the 2006 Act for legal definitions. According to the Act, the “cooperative societies are democratic organizations controlled by their members who actively participate in setting their policies and making decisions.”<sup>13</sup> The functions of a cooperative are managed and administered by a group of elected or appointed persons. This group of members should be accountable to every member of the

society. The members of cooperatives have the right to vote in accordance with the principle of "one member one vote."<sup>14</sup> According to the Act, the cooperative societies should be responsible for any economic condition arising from its operations. It should work for the sustainable development of the group or communities through the policies approved by the registered members.

The Act provides a definition of labour cooperatives, according to which, the labour cooperative societies should be built by the skilled or unskilled manual labours. The members of the labour cooperatives have the power of voting to elect the members of the governing body like other cooperative societies.<sup>15</sup>

## History of Cooperative Building since 1980s: Case Studies

Labour cooperatives came to the fore-front during the left-front rule. However, West Bengal has a tradition to run small and village level cooperatives with the fishermen, weavers, agricultural labours and other small-scale workers in the villages since pre-independence. Tagore's experiment at *Sriniketan* was one of that. According to a survey report by the *Nagarik Mancha*, the initiative to build labour cooperatives began due to the crisis in the industrial sector since the beginning of 1980s. The report stated that the government made a provision to prioritise labour cooperatives for giving contracts in the industrial budget of 1987.<sup>16</sup> The decision helped a lot for the initiatives made by the workers in different sector. However, there was one successful example of the industrial workers cooperative in the tea gardens of North-Bengal happened in the early 1970s. The experiment of the Saongaon Tea and Allied Plantation Workers' Cooperative at the Sonali tea-gardens in the Jalpaiguri district of West Bengal began its brief journey in 1974. Gradually they started making profit. According to the data of the state cooperative department, the Sonali Tea Garden Cooperative made a profit of almost INR 6 lac (0.6 million) in 1977. Although known as one of the important experiments in the field of labour cooperatives, Sonali Cooperative could not run after 1979 due to several legal reasons.<sup>17</sup>

The survey report of the *Nagarik Mancha* found 45 labour cooperatives in all over West Bengal in the 1990s. They surveyed 12 labour cooperatives out of 45 to examine the acceptability of labour cooperatives among the workers. The survey showed that the factories which had either been closed or were suffering losses in the end of 1970s were taken over by a team of workers. The main aim of the survey was to show the success of labour cooperatives as a viable model to challenge the economic crisis. Naba Dutta, one of the surveyors and currently secretary of *Nagarik Mancha* recently mentioned that formation of cooperatives is the only way to solve the labour problems. It would help to solve the problems of unemployment. The labour cooperatives, Dutta believed, could produce goods at a cheap price, which may check the problems of inflation. But he also pointed out some problems concerning cooperatives.<sup>18</sup>

Supporting Naba Dutta's argument on cooperatives, Debanjan Chakrabarty, a labour leader and the Secretary of the Kolkata District Committee of the *Confederation of Indian Trade Unions (CITU)*, affiliated by the *Communist Party of India (Marxist)*, agreed on the fact that the cooperative was one of the viable solutions towards establishing solidarity among the labouring classes. Both of them had agreed that a successful cooperative movement could possibly solve the trends of uncontrolled outmigration from the state. They expected that the horrible experiences of the migrant workers during the COVID-19 pandemic could be reduced with the help of cooperatives.<sup>19</sup> According to Chakrabarty, the some of the functional cooperatives or *Self-Help Groups (SHGs)*<sup>20</sup> also helped the returnee migrant labours during the crisis.

Chitta Debnath, the Managing Director of the *Satyajug* Employees Cooperative Industrial Society Limited (henceforth *Satyajug*) also believed the same. The owner of the newspaper made some fraud deals with the bank. As a result, the banks filed a case against the owner for defaulter. The press workers bought the press from an auction by the Banking Tribunal. Debnath told that the ordinary press workers, journalists and other office bearers quickly form a cooperative society and appealed to run the press through the cooperative. The tribunal gave their verdict in favour of the cooperative. Through this incident one of the successful and large press cooperatives of West Bengal began their journey.<sup>21</sup> According to Debnath, the cooperative began with 70 members.

Debnath told in his interview that *Satyajug* press got orders from the state government and the government from North-Eastern states (Assam and Tripura). The press printed government gazetteers, school books and results of board and university exams of these two North-East Indian states. Apart from government orders the *Satyajug* cooperative also printed a lot of books and some vernacular newspapers. They receive orders from *Samarg* (a well-known Hindi daily), and *Ganashakti* (one of the Bengali newspapers). Debnath said that starting from scratch, the press gradually became one of the three important printing presses in all over Eastern India. They stopped publishing their own newspaper after getting the ownership of the press. The board members of the cooperative unanimously decided to remain as a printing press. They did not want to take the risk to diversify. The current yearly profit of the cooperative press is more than 70 crore (70 million) INR.<sup>22</sup>

The membership increased from 70 to 120 in the pre-pandemic time. But the pandemic affected a lot in the business of the cooperative. The increasing trends to use online resources in education, journalism and other sectors damaged the book printing business and circulation of printed newspapers created an adverse effect on the cooperatives. As a result, there was a decline in the rate of membership, which came down to 62 in 2021. Debnath accused the present government for a general apathy against the non-partisan cooperatives. Although, Debnath admitted the fact that all press workers were not members of the cooperative.<sup>23</sup> The cooperative has both part time and full-time workers, but the pandemic affected the flow of the workers a lot. Debnath noted that most of the workers of this press come from different villages of West Bengal. They were involved in both printing and binding activities. According to Debnath, the situation started changing from the 1990s. The success of the three-tier village administrative system generated jobs in villages. Most of the printing presses hired workers from outside of the state since then. The situation changed again after the COVID-19 pandemic. The financial crisis of the returnee migrants brought them back to their ancestral jobs. But the cooperative also affected a lot during this pandemic. As per the policy of the governing body, *Satyajug* cooperative had to revise their appointment policies due to their current financial status. They did not appoint a single full-time worker after the pandemic. Debnath said that the board had approved the proposal to begin some ancillary initiative (book binding etc.). But he admitted that the current political interventions by the ruling political party prevented hassle free running of the cooperatives.<sup>24</sup> “Corruption, bribery and nepotism gradually made ourselves vulnerable”, Debnath said.<sup>25</sup> The above-mentioned report of the *Nagarik Mancha*<sup>26</sup> also supported Chitta Debnath’s argument on *Satyajug* cooperative. According to Naba Datta, the *Satyajug* cooperative is the only profit earning industrial cooperative<sup>27</sup> in West Bengal. He said that the management of the cooperative successfully earned the trust of the ordinary worker members of the cooperative. The workers believed that the present management of the cooperative has been able to protect their interest.<sup>28</sup>

Shankar Das of the *West Bengal Construction Workers’ Federation* at Sarsuna, Behala agreed with Datta’s argument on the matter of earning trust. He said that the foundation of a cooperative was based on the trust of its members. The construction workers’ cooperative is not an exception. Das



and some of his co-workers in one of the left affiliated trade unions started this initiative to create an organisation comprised of, and for, the construction workers. These construction workers, as Das said, come from different part of the country to work in the construction sites of Kolkata. They are divided into three sections. The first group consists of those who settled in the slums, and are considered permanent construction workers. The second group comprises of those who migrate from different districts of West Bengal as construction workers during the peak seasons. They go back to their villages during the crop seasons. According to Das, these semi-permanent workers usually formed a group to rent rooms in the slum areas. The third group of construction workers come from outside West Bengal (mostly from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh). They are considered expert construction workers. They also take shelter in the slums as a group. Usually, the rents used to be very high for the migrant workers because most of them came with their families. According to Das, all of them faced difficulties in finding a good accommodation. Therefore, the main objective behind the creation of the Construction Workers' Cooperative was to bring a suitable solution to this problem. The cooperative started its journey in 2004 with 20-25 construction workers who resided in the Behala-Sarshuna area. Das and other organisers initiated the task. They requested the construction workers to give INR 20 per head per month from their income. The cooperative started as a *Self-Help Group (SHG)* in 2004. The name of the *SHG* was *Imarat Shilpa Sramik Union Swanirbhar Goshthi* (henceforth *Imarat SHG*). As Das mentioned in his interview, the *SHG* has 200 members in recent times. He admitted that the number of members was not always fixed.<sup>29</sup> A few acres<sup>30</sup> of land was bought in 2007 to build a cooperative housing for the construction workers. The cost of the land (INR 9 Lac/ 0.9 million) was paid by the construction workers involved with the group. Das proudly said that none of the political parties or the government helped them with a single rupee. However, he admitted that the then Left-Front government did not take the land registration fees from the workers. The workers built 30 semi-permanent houses<sup>31</sup> on this land in the beginning, and later, in 2016, they converted it into two five-storied buildings. At least 35 families of construction workers from different parts of West Bengal and India have their own flats. According to Das, the *Imarat SHG* is the only example of construction workers' housing cooperative<sup>32</sup> where workers themselves assembled the funds to build their own houses.

The efforts of the construction workers' society do not limit themselves to building a housing cooperative for themselves. They built a cooperative society office inside the premises of the *Imarat Shilpa Sramik Abasan*. The aim of the society is to ensure that all construction workers under this housing cooperative should find employment for at least ten days in a month. They contributed a certain amount out of their monthly income to build a distress fund. The main intention behind building this fund is to help the construction workers in distress.<sup>33</sup> The distress fund has been used for providing assistance for the families of the construction workers to access education. Shankar Das said that these workers had helped him through the distress fund during the treatment of leucoma.<sup>34</sup>

This distress fund saved the construction workers during the pandemic. While the construction workers who migrated to different cities outside West Bengal returned home empty-handed, construction workers under the *Imarat SHG* were able to send some money to their families in villages. The construction workers were one of the most affected groups among the migrant workers in India. Almost all of them lost their job during the two phases of pandemic. The ordinary members of the *Imarat SHG* took the initiative to help their comrades from different states. They collected money from their co-workers and created a community kitchen at the housing cooperative premises. They decided to distribute dry rations among the distressed people of their neighbourhood. Das said in his interview that the community kitchen and rationing system helped the migrant

construction workers, rickshaw pullers, and other poor labouring communities who lost their job during the pandemic. Apart from providing help to the helpless persons, the distress fund of the *Imarat SHG* helped the children of the members of the cooperative society to get higher education. Some of the children of these construction workers received trainings from technical schools. Apart from finding employment at established building firms, they helped the *Imarat SHG* to prepare modern construction plans.<sup>35</sup>

The members were critical about the recent attitudes of the cooperative department of the state government. They complained of the department being extremely unsupportive and politically biased. The department did not permit the *Imarat SHG* to participate in government tenders.

The same accusation of uncooperative attitude and political bias of the state government's cooperative department also came from Ashok Kumar Gupta of the *Calcutta Metropolitan Sanitation Workers Cooperative (CMSWC)*. Established in the middle of 1960s, the cooperative has 250-300 members at present. As a primary cooperative society,<sup>36</sup> the cooperative has some allied activities to increase their financial capital. They can bid for the government tenders and make profit from them if they get the contracts. The *CMSWC* has been receiving government contracts since the early seventies and according to Gupta, this was the main reason behind the increase of their capital to 1.5 crore (15 million). Apart from getting loans, the members of the cooperative received health benefits and other facilities from the cooperative.<sup>37</sup>

The cooperative was created to ensure a secured future for the sanitation workers. They were paid much less in the beginning, when most of them were working under government approved contractors. Only a few of them were hired on a permanent basis. So, according to Gupta, the contractual workers built their cooperative to gather help during their crisis. Later, the contractual posts gradually became permanent with the new political regime (i.e., the Left Front) in late 1970s. The Left government gave the cooperative a trade license and allowed them to bid in the government tenders. Thus, the cooperative began making a considerable amount of profit every year. Not only that, the government modified the rule regarding government tenders. Gupta accused the contractors affiliated by the ruling party of getting all the government orders since 2012. "They sabotaged the cooperative movement in a planned manner. The present government wants to destroy the cooperatives, the only survival method for the workers of all categories."<sup>38</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic became a curse for the labours of the *CMSWC*. The cooperative department postponed the election scheduled in 2020. They appointed an administrator for the cooperative. "This decision destroyed all the chances of revival. We have decided to appeal to the High Court and demand that the election be conducted under their surveillance."<sup>39</sup>

As a Left trade union worker, Gupta also biased with his own political ideology. As Naba Datta said, the unreasonable dominance of the Left dominated trade unions harmed the cooperative movements in most of the cases. The massive corruption and anti-cooperative attitude department was not a new phenomenon, but the trend became more prominent with the new government. The election of the industrial and other urban cooperatives was pending since 2016. According to Dutta, the state government or the ruling party (irrespective of affiliation or ideology) did this almost intentionally. They feared that they might lose control over the cooperatives due to their corrupted nature of operations.<sup>40</sup> "They wanted to prevent all kind of solidarity initiatives, especially those which made the ordinary people more capable."<sup>41</sup>

The role of a non-politically affiliated cooperative as a saviour for the marginal people, especially during the recent pandemic, had been reflected recently in the services offered by the only sex workers cooperative in Kolkata. Popularly known as "*Usha*", the cooperative started its operation on 21 June 1995.<sup>42</sup> The idea of building a cooperative came from an initiative by a group of doctors,

public health workers and bureaucrats directly related to the health and social welfare department of the government of West Bengal.<sup>43</sup> The main aim was to ensure social justice for sex workers, a marginal group who had been considered 'social outcasts' or sometimes 'dangerous outcasts' in the official papers of the early British colonial government, and even the democratically elected governments that came after Indian independence.

According to Shantanu Chatterjee, the manager of the *Usha Multipurpose Cooperative Society Limited*, the cooperative began their journey with 13 sex workers. The number increased up to 35,000, with members from all over West Bengal. According to Chatterjee, currently there were at least 12,000 beneficiaries in all over Kolkata in 2021. All the members of this cooperative live either as permanent residents of the red-light areas or as the fleeting mobile population who came from outside to do their job.<sup>44</sup> Initially beginning as a credit cooperative society<sup>45</sup>, *Usha* received recognition as a Multi-Purpose Cooperative<sup>46</sup> in 2007.

According to *Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee* (henceforth *DMSC*), an organization run by sex workers, the number of members varied from 50,000-60,000 all over the state, with nearly eighty per cent of them being women, and the rest transgender people.<sup>47</sup> These women and transgender persons in this profession were either trafficked from Bangladesh or Nepal or migrated from the remote villages of West Bengal and Bihar due to absolute poverty and scarcity of food. According to *DMSC* sources, it was difficult to find any valid identity documents in possession of the girls who came (or were trafficked) to the red-light areas. Therefore, the state-recognised banks did not allow them to open accounts in their respective branches. So, it had been the usual practice for the sex workers to deposit their savings either with the agents (known as “*dalals*”) or the landlady (known as “*malikin*”) who rented them rooms at Sonagachi and other red-light areas. In most cases, the sex workers were exploited by these people. They had to take loans from the local moneylenders at the end of the month and send the money to their families or spend it on medicines. The local moneylenders had connections with the local political leaders and charged a very high rate of interest (six to ten per cent) from the sex workers. The sex workers did not go to the police out of the fear that they would be marked as “illegal migrants”. Sometimes, these moneylenders asked for “free sexual services” from them for themselves or for local political leaders with whom they had some associations. Marjina Bibi and Sima Fokla, two senior members, described how vicious this cycle of exploitation is: “We were victims of police harassment almost regularly. The police harassed us physically and threatened us in jail if we complained against them. The moneylenders used us to provoke the local councillors of the civic body and got benefits from them. We did not get anything.”<sup>48</sup>

The team of doctors initially took the initiative to educate the sex workers to help them survive in their circumstances. Later they inspired these oppressed women to build an organisation to prevent all kinds of harassment. Several objections had been raised by the local political leaders, civic body members, police and government officials and some NGOs working in that area; but the *DMSC* started functioning in March 1995 and raised demands for forming a cooperative. They took training from retired officials of the cooperative department and submitted the application to build their cooperative. Several petitions were filed against this demand. The objections were not only raised by the local moneylenders or the political leaders who took the advantage of the vulnerable condition of the sex workers, but also by a section of the mainstream newspapers, social activists, and NGO persons, who did not want to allow the sex workers to build their cooperative.<sup>49</sup>

However, after many obstacles and technical conflicts, the cooperative finally received approval from the state cooperative department and started functioning. As per the latest survey done just before the pandemic, the cooperative has thirty thousand sex workers as their customers

with an annual turnover of around 19 lac (1.9 million).<sup>50</sup> Apart from banking, the cooperative runs cheap consumer stores for the sex workers and slum dwellers, and a few self-help groups for women. According to Shantanu Chatterjee, the reason behind shaping *Usha* as a “Multipurpose Cooperative” was to save the sex workers from the public humiliation which they faced in grocery shops (while buying essential food and stationary items) and medicine shops (where they had to buy condoms, sanitary napkins and essential medicines).<sup>51</sup> As a multipurpose cooperative, *Usha* also runs a small factory that produces sanitary pads for poor and marginal women workers and sells them through their consumer cooperative stores. As a part of their welfare activities for the members, *Usha* runs a residential school for the children of sex workers at Baruipur (a few kilometres away from Kolkata). The Cooperative Department of the West Bengal government recently recognised *Usha*’s contributions. They permitted *Usha* to organise training workshops and awareness programmes in the small village cooperatives. The trainers, accompanied by a member of the community, went to different red-light areas all over the country and encouraged the sex workers to form cooperatives.<sup>52</sup>

Apart from ensuring social and economic security, *Usha Multipurpose Cooperative Society* played an important role in ensuring citizenship identity for the sex workers who migrated or were displaced from different remote areas or bordering villages. Most of the women who joined this profession are either trafficked or migrate from bordering districts or remote areas of West Bengal and sometimes across the border, have no chance to get accepted into their homes. The risks of rejection for transgender persons are even higher. *Usha*, with the help of several human rights organizations, started a movement to secure recognition for its members as citizens of the state. Several petitions were filed in the high court in favour of the sex workers. As a result, the Food and Supplies and Cooperative Departments of the West Bengal State Government agreed to recognize their savings passbook as an identity certificate for applying for loan from any cooperative banks under the cooperative department. They became eligible to grants of food grains, edible oil and kerosine under a public distribution scheme for the government of West Bengal from 2020. Soon after that the nationalized banks and insurance agencies recognized the passbook of the *Usha* cooperative as an identity certificate as well as proof of address and allowed the sex workers to open an account in the nationalized banks.

The success took its ultimate turn when the Election Commission of India took the step to accept the savings passbook of the *Usha Multipurpose Cooperative* as the primary identity document to apply for the Electors’ Photo Identification Card and acquire voting rights. Through this, the sex workers became a part of the democratic process as “citizens” of the state. The sense of democratic power made them more confident. They developed an internal electoral body to choose the board members of the organization (DMSC) and the cooperative (*Usha*). The elections are held every two years in both the units (the organization and the cooperative) where the sex workers from each red-light area select the office bearers. This process of practicing democracy in their institutions has strengthened solidarity among themselves.

This sense of solidarity saved them even during the time of the pandemic. Despite facing a financial crisis in the last few years, especially after the decision of demonetization in 2016, *Usha* started a relief programme in almost all the red-light areas with the help of the local civil society organizations. They became one of the petitioners who filed the case in the Supreme Court of India to ensure food and proper health services for the sex workers. Due to this initiative, the Supreme court ordered all states and Union Territories to supply direct rations to sex workers identified by National AIDS Control Organization and issue food security cards to those who would not be able to submit any concrete documents. Bishakha Laskar, the president of the organization and a sex worker by profession, said that both DMSC and the *Usha* cooperative had appealed to the larger

sections of the civil society and the government to help them by donating money to create a relief account for the sex workers and their children. A few million rupees had been collected and deposited in the relief account of the cooperative. Therefore, the *DMSC* were able to provide relief in every red-light area till the end of March 2022.<sup>53</sup>

However, the cooperative suffered a lot due to the pandemic. The annual turnover declined from 24 lac (2.4 million) to 19 lac (1.9 million) in the last two years. This affected the annual turnover of the bank by a large margin and compelled those running the bank to sell some of their fixed assets.<sup>54</sup> Daily collectors of *Usha* Cooperative also blamed the shopping applications available in the mobile. They complained that most of the young women and transgender sex workers were addicted to these mobile shopping applications. They spent most of their savings in buying unnecessary goods and had less interest in saving money, and also showed little interest towards the cooperative. This trend has increased in last two years of the pandemic.<sup>55</sup> “They are not like us. We have a passion to maintain our organisation for our own interest”, said Putul Singh, acting member secretary of *DMSC* central committee and secretary of the *All-India Network of Sex Workers*.<sup>56</sup>

There were some complaints about internal problems between the shareholders and the managing body. The problem started very recently. These complaints harmed *Usha*’s goodwill among its members. Shantanu Chatterjee said in his interview that the cooperative lost a good number of members due to these ‘false’ allegations. “However, members started coming back since beginning of this year.”<sup>57</sup> “*Usha* remains an important weapon for the most deprived migrant communities to get their citizenship rights and ensure financial security.”<sup>58</sup>

## **Cooperative and the Issue of Trust and Solidarity**

A draft report of the 4<sup>th</sup> State Convention of the *Samabay Banchao Mancha* (Save the Cooperative Forum) also levelled accusations of discriminatory deprivation directed towards the workers of different cooperative societies. The report explained that the workers of different cooperatives have been threatened by the members of the ruling party on a regular basis. The report also said that at least 6,500 cooperatives are on the verge of closure due to the counterproductive activities and non-cooperation of the cooperative department. The forum sent a deputation to the cooperative minister of the West Bengal on 24 September 2019, where they explained the problems of the cooperatives and the unwelcome interventions of the village-based leaders of the ruling party. The deputation demanded a minimum salary of Rs. 18,000 for the employees of the cooperative along with an assurance of pension. They also demanded a quick revival of the milk and fisheries cooperatives and demanded special concessions for the labour cooperatives as one of the bidding parties in the government tenders.<sup>59</sup> The report also demanded recovery and revival of cooperatives once running in the tea gardens. The members of the committee accepted the fact that there are some complaints regarding malpractices in some of the cooperatives. According to them, the problems can easily be solved by the members. The report gives examples of women-operated Self-Help Groups (as a small-scale versions of cooperatives) where the complaints of corruption were much less than in the cooperatives operated by the men.<sup>60</sup> They said that only cooperatives will be able to help in the recovery of the economic status of the poor people, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>61</sup>

Mohd. Inasuddin, Additional Registrar of the cooperative and Secretary of the Cooperative Tribunal of the Cooperative Department, did not deny the allegations. He said that the complaints against the urban and industrial cooperatives was a regular phenomenon in his department. Explaining the category and the eligibility of membership, Inasuddin described how this corruption took place. The board members (or members of the governing body) of most of the cooperatives

became the de-facto owners. Therefore, the idea of equal status of the members became a myth in most of the cases. The board members and their close associates took all the profits of the initiatives. He alleged that these members took commission from the agents of the local political leaders and gave all the contracts to them, although he did not deny the political influence working against the cooperatives.<sup>62</sup>

Economists Achin Chakraborty and Manas R Bhaumik's work on cooperatives supported the complains of Inasuddin. The partiality among the distribution of surplus value between all the members, politicisation and misuse of administrative power by the board members play major roles in this exploitation.<sup>63</sup> The view of labour leaders like Naba Dutta and Debanjan Chakrabarty are also the same. Both of them categorically emphasise on distrust as one of the major failures behind the cooperatives. In his interview, Dutta put the blame on both the desire of the state government (both the current government as well as the previous left-front government) to run the cooperatives smoothly and the trade unions who spoiled the cooperative movement to keep their authority among the ordinary labours. He gave examples of different factories where the government, as well as the unions, acted negatively to ruin the initiative of the cooperatives from the root.

A survey conducted in the 1990s by the *Nagarik Mancha* proved Dutta's argument. The survey showed that the cooperatives made profit and the members got their due share, but they simultaneously raised some questions regarding the operations. The problems were related to the conflict between the board members and the ordinary members. There were accusations of corruption against the board members in many cooperative societies. The rates of such accusations were much higher in the case of labour cooperatives. The survey showed that the incidents of these kinds of massive corruption was impossible without the help of political parties. The survey found that the political parties and their affiliated labour unions created problems in the formation of labour cooperatives in some of the places. The incidents with the labour cooperatives at Kanoria Jute Mill, Hooghly or Basanti Cotton Mills at Panihati were the significant examples of the indiscreet attitudes of the trade unions.<sup>64</sup>

Consequently, *Nagarik Mancha* conducted a follow-up survey in 1994 enquire into the conditions of the labour cooperatives in West Bengal. The survey team found that most of the labour cooperatives had closed due to corrupt practices by the board members, disagreements among the workers and acts of sabotage by the trade unions. The report also indicated that these fundamental problems existed in every part of India. Although run by a leftist government, West Bengal was not an exception.<sup>65</sup> A team of economists on behalf of *Nagarik Mancha* conducted a study on the revival of industry in 1999. The study report showed how the cooperatives might play a crucial role in solving the plight of expert workers from West Bengal. They submitted the draft report to the then minister in charge of commerce and industries and proposed that he acquire the locked-out factories from the BIFR<sup>66</sup> and re-open those factories through creation of labour cooperatives.<sup>67</sup> But, as Naba Dutta said, the-then minister of the West Bengal Government did not consider following the report.<sup>68</sup>

## Conclusion

A team of economists drafted proposal to revive the economic status of the poor migrant workers during and after the pandemic. Led by retired economists from the Universities and research institutes in Kolkata, the proposal argued in favour of opening the locked down factories through the creation of labour cooperatives. The proposal put thrust on preparing the essential goods for the workers. The price of the commodities should be cheaper to cater the small income group of people.

The team of economists believed that cooperatives would be the only solution to reduce dependency on the relief-based politics. The marketing chain should be maintained by the hawkers who used to sell goods at a cheap price.<sup>69</sup>

The proposal tried to give a comparatively suitable solution for the survival of labour cooperatives; however, this vision appears utopic. According to the proposal, the state governments should provide land and initial support to cooperatives to start production. The dependency on government grants opened the possibility of political intervention by the ruling parties.

Recently, the Indian government proposed an amendment to the Cooperative Societies Registration Act. The amendment (bill no: 215 of 2022) proposed to make the central government the sole authority to provide licence to the multi-state based cooperatives.<sup>70</sup> The opposition parties as well as the state governments objected to the amendment on the ground of hyper-activeness of the centre. They thought that the ruling coalition at the centre was trying to reduce the power of the state governments and control the state cooperatives.<sup>71</sup>

However, the case studies proved that formation of successful cooperatives could be the way to create solidarity among the poor and helpless labours during the crisis. The role of all four types of cooperatives (industrial cooperative, housing cooperative, primary cooperative and multipurpose cooperative) during the pandemic proved the role of cooperative as an agency to create solidarity among people from different region and casts. The role of the cooperative is important both economically and politically to explain the idea of class. The scarcity of livelihood united them and the activities of the cooperatives gave confidence to fight against the crisis. The case of construction workers and sex workers were the important examples to prove how the initiatives of cooperative building supported the class struggle. Therefore, it can be said that despite different layers of negativity cooperative formation possibly becomes an important tool to overcome class oppression in the future.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Ranabir Samaddar. "The Layers of Solidarity". *Policies and Practices* 123 (2021): 13-29.

<sup>2</sup> International Cooperative Alliance, "Definition of a Cooperative", quoted in Manas R Bhowmik and Achin Chakraborty, "Class Process in Cooperatives", in *Capital in the East: Reflections on Marx*, ed. Achin Chakraborty, Anjan Chakraborty, Byasdeb Dasgupta and Samita Sen (Singapore, Springer, 2019), 222.

<sup>3</sup> Karl Marx, "The Different Questions", Instructions to the delegates of the Provisional General Council of the International Workingmen's Association, *The International Courier* (February-March, 1867), <https://www.marxists.org/history/international/iwma/documents/1866/instructions.htm>.

<sup>4</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume 1* (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 446.

<sup>5</sup> Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*, 453.

<sup>6</sup> *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Ed. Tom Bottomore (New Delhi, Worldview Publications, 2000), 111-112.

<sup>7</sup> M.K. Gandhi. *Village Swaraj*. Compiled by H.M. Vyas (Ahmedabad: Navjivan Publishing House, 1962), 7-8.

<sup>8</sup> Gandhi (1962), 8.

<sup>9</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, "Samabay Niti" [Cooperative Policy], *Rabindra Rachanavali* [Collected Works of Rabindranath Tagore], Vol. 14, (Calcutta: Visva Bharati Press, 1990), 311-318.

<sup>10</sup> Pranab Kumar Chakrabarti, *Problems of Cooperative Development in India: With Special Reference to West Bengal* (New Delhi, S. Chand & Company Ltd., 1983), 4-5.

<sup>11</sup> The Bihar Cooperative Society Act formed in 1935.

<sup>12</sup> Chakrabarty, *Problems of Cooperative Development in India*, 39-40.

<sup>13</sup> Law Department, Govt. of West Bengal, West Bengal Cooperative Societies Act 2006, (Kolkata, The Kolkata Gazette Extraordinary, May 25, 2010), 9.

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- <sup>14</sup> Law Department, Govt. of West Bengal, West Bengal Cooperative Societies Act 2006, 9.
- <sup>15</sup> Clause 39 of West Bengal Cooperative Societies Act 2006, 12.
- <sup>16</sup> Nagarik Mancha, *Paschimbanke Sharimk Samabay: Ekti Samiksha* [Labour Cooperatives in West Bengal: A Survey] (Kolkata, Nagarik Mancha, 1989), 3-4.
- <sup>17</sup> Sharit Bhowmik, “A Workers’ Cooperative in Tea: Success Turned into Failure”, *Economic and Political Weekly* 37, no. 31 (31 July, 1982): 1224-1226.
- <sup>18</sup> Naba Dutta (Secretary, Nagarik Mancha), in discussion with the author, Kolkata, Nagarik Mancha Office, 6 May 2022.
- <sup>19</sup> Debanjan Chakrabarty (Secretary, Kolkata District Committee, CITU), in discussion with the author, Kolkata, Kolkata State Committee Office, 16 June 2022.
- <sup>20</sup> **Self Help Groups (SHGs):** According to the West Bengal Cooperative Societies Act 2006, the definition of Self-Help Group is “a group of persons, men or women of five to twenty in number coming from different families belonging to economically weaker sections of the society and having their residential address within a contiguous place for effective implementation of viable economic activities.” Clause 60 of WBCSB Act 2006, Kolkata Gazette Extraordinary, Kolkata 2010.
- <sup>21</sup> Chitta Debnath (Chairman and Managing Director, Satyajug Employees Cooperative and Industrial Society) in discussion with the author, Kolkata, Satyajug Press, 23 June 2022.
- <sup>22</sup> Chitta Debnath (Chairman and Managing Director, Satyajug Employees Cooperative and Industrial Society), 23 June 2022.
- <sup>23</sup> Chitta Debnath, 23 June 2022.
- <sup>24</sup> Chitta Debnath, 23 June 2022.
- <sup>25</sup> Chitta Debnath, 23 June 2022.
- <sup>26</sup> Nagarik Mancha, *Paschimbanke Sharimk Samabay: Ekti Samiksha* [Labour Cooperatives in West Bengal: A Survey] (Kolkata, Nagarik Mancha, 1989), 16-17.
- <sup>27</sup> **Industrial Cooperative Society:** According to the West Bengal Cooperative Societies Act 2006, an Industrial Cooperative is an association of workers & craftsmen whose primary goal is manufacturing and marketing of goods with the help of their members and providing benefit from the profit to all its members. These kinds of cooperatives should help other cooperative societies from the share of their profit. Clause 37 of *WBCSB Act 2006, Kolkata Gazette Extraordinary*, Kolkata 2010.
- <sup>28</sup> Naba Dutta (Secretary, Nagarik Mancha), in discussion with the author, Kolkata, Nagarik Mancha Office, 6 May 2022.
- <sup>29</sup> Shankar Das (Secretary, West Bengal Construction Workers Federation and Imarat Shilpa Sramik Union Swanirbhar Ghosthi), in discussion with the author, Kolkata, Behala, 31 July 2022.
- <sup>30</sup> According to Shankar Das, the SHG bought 9 Kathas (0.2811 acre) land for the cooperative housing for the construction workers.
- <sup>31</sup> According to Shankar Das, these houses were built with bamboo stripes, earthen tiles. Only the floor of those houses were built with bricks and cements.
- <sup>32</sup> **Housing Cooperative:** According to the WB Cooperative Societies Act 2006, a Housing Cooperative is “a cooperative society which is to provide its members with dwelling house, flats or lands or construction of dwelling houses or flats or maintenance of common services in connection therewith, and includes a federation of such societies. Clause 36 of WB Cooperative Societies Act 2006, Kolkata Gazette Extraordinary, Kolkata 2010.
- <sup>33</sup> Dulal Naskar and Ekramul Ali (members of the Imarat Shilpa Nirman Sramik Union Swanirbhar Ghosthi and the housing cooperative), in discussion with the author, Kolkata, Behala, 3 September 2022.
- <sup>34</sup> Shankar Das, 31 July 2022.
- <sup>35</sup> Shankar Das, Dulal Naskar and others claimed that the children of these construction workers has engineering degrees in architecture.
- <sup>36</sup> **Primary Cooperative Society:** According to the West Bengal Cooperative Societies Act 2006, “Primary Cooperative Society” means a co-operative society which is to create fund for lending money to its members



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and which undertakes other credit and non-credit activities commensurate with the primary object.” Clause 54 of the Act, 14.

<sup>37</sup> Ashok Kumar Gupta (General Secretary, Calcutta Metropolitan Workers and Sanitation Authority Cooperative), in a short discussion with the author, Kolkata, CITU Kolkata State Committee Office, 16 June 2022.

<sup>38</sup> Ashok Kumar Gupta, 16 June 2022.

<sup>39</sup> Ashok Kumar Gupta, 16 June 2022.

<sup>40</sup> Naba Dutta (Secretary, Nagarik Mancha), in discussion with the author, Kolkata, Nagarik Mancha Office, 6 May 2022. There were acquisitions against the Left-Front government regarding the anti-cooperative attitude. Prafulla Chakraborty, who initiated the labour cooperative at the Kanoria Jute Mill accused the Left-Front for the partiality. Details of the history of that cooperative is available in Prafulla Chakraborty, *Kanoria Jute Mill e Noi er Dashak e Shramik Andolan er Udbhab o Kramavikas* [Emergence of the Labour Struggle at Kanoria Jute Mill in the 90s], 4<sup>th</sup> Jayanta Dasgupta Memorial Lecture (Kolkata, Calcutta Research Group, 2015), 21-26. The union leaders of the Sonali Cooperative also accused the Left-Front government for their anti-cooperative attitude. For details please see Krishnapriya Bhattacharya, “Upekshar Andhare Swapner Cha Shramik Samabay er Subarna Jayanti” [Impaired with ignorance the only Tea Garden Cooperative celebrates its Golden Jubilee]. *Uttar Banga Samvad* (29 November, 2022): 4.

<sup>41</sup> Naba Dutta, 6 May 2022.

<sup>42</sup> Smarajit Jana, *Kakhano Jeet Kakhano Har* [Sometime we Won, sometime we face the Defeat]. Kolkata, Durbar Prakashani, 2011, 41-42.

<sup>43</sup> The idea began with the anti-AIDS campaign began by the All-India Institute for Hygiene and Public Health. The campaign had been supported by the Health and Welfare Department, Government of West Bengal. The team of doctors, led by Smarajit Jana took the initiative to run the programme through an active involvement of the sex workers. For details, please see the website of Durbar Mahila Samawaya Committee, last modified 4.01.2023. <https://durbar.org/>

<sup>44</sup> Shantanu Chatterjee (Manager, Usha Multipurpose Cooperative and Credit Society Limited), in discussion with the author, Kolkata, Usha Multipurpose Cooperative and Credit Society Office, 19 August 2022.

<sup>45</sup> **Cooperative Credit Society:** According to the West Bengal Cooperative Societies Act 2006; “Cooperative Credit Society means a cooperative society, the primary object of which is to create funds for lending money to its members”. Clause 20 of the Act.

<sup>46</sup> **Multi-Purpose Cooperative Society:** According to the West Bengal Cooperative Societies Act 2006, “Multipurpose Cooperative Society” means “a Primary Cooperative Society, the object of which is to provide various services including credit, business, industry and consumer to its members”. Clause 43 of the Act.

<sup>47</sup> Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee, Membership Register, 2021.

<sup>48</sup> Marjina Bibi and Sima Fokla (Ordinary member, *Usha Cooperative Society* from 1997 onwards), in discussion with the author, Kolkata, Sonagachhi Red Light Area, 30 August, 2022.

<sup>49</sup> Smarajit Jana, *Kakhano Jeet Kakhano Har* [Sometime we Won, sometime we face the Defeat]. 2011, 68-69.

<sup>50</sup> Usha Multipurpose Cooperative and Credit Society Limited, *Annual Report 2020-21*, Kolkata, 2021, 19-20.

<sup>51</sup> Shantanu Chatterjee, 19 August 2022.

<sup>52</sup> Shantanu Chatterjee, 19 August 2022.

<sup>53</sup> Bishakha Laskar (President, Durbar Mahila Samanaya Committee), in a discussion with the author. Kolkata, Durbar Mahila Samanaya Committee Office, 18 February 2022.

<sup>54</sup> Shantanu Chatterjee, 19 August 2022.

<sup>55</sup> Rita Roy (Collector, Usha Cooperative and former secretary of the cooperative governing body), in a discussion with the author, Kolkata, Usha Multipurpose Cooperative and Credit Society Office, 3 September 2022.

<sup>56</sup> A brief conversation with Putul Singh for a book review. Kolkata, Durbar Mahila Samanaya Committee Office, 18 February 2022.

<sup>57</sup> Shantanu Chatterjee, 19 August 2022.

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- <sup>58</sup> Bharati Dey (former Chairperson of the governing body of Usha), in a discussion with the author. Kolkata, Usha Multipurpose Cooperative and Credit Society Office, 3 September 2022.
- <sup>59</sup> Paschimbanga Samabay Banchao Mancha [Save the Cooperatives Forum of West Bengal]. Draft Report of the 4<sup>th</sup> State Convention. Kolkata, Krishnapada Ghosh Memorial Hall, 27 September 2022, 4-6.
- <sup>60</sup> Paschimbanga Samabay Banchao Mancha [Save the Cooperatives Forum of West Bengal]. *Draft Report of the 4<sup>th</sup> State Convention*, 13.
- <sup>61</sup> *Draft Report of the 4<sup>th</sup> State Convention*, 11-12.
- <sup>62</sup> Mohd Inasuddin (Additional Registrar, Cooperative Department, WB), in a discussion with the author, Kolkata, WB, Cooperative Department, 27 September 2022. He retired on 31 October, 2022.
- <sup>63</sup> Achin Chakraborty, “Class Process in Cooperatives”, in *Capital in the East: Reflections on Marx*, ed. Achin Chakraborty, Anjan Chakrabarty, Byasdeb Dasgupta and Samita Sen (Singapore, Springer, 2019), 232.
- <sup>64</sup> Nagarik Mancha, *Paschimbange Shramik Samabay: Ekti Samiksha* [Labour Cooperatives in West Bengal: A Survey], 15-16. For detail information about the role of the trade union in Kanoria Jute Mill please see Prafulla Chakrabarty, *Kanoria Jute Mill e Noi er Dashak e Shramik Andolan er Udbhab o Kramavikas* [ Emergence of the Labour Struggle at Kanoria Jute Mill in the 90s], 4<sup>th</sup> Jayanta Dasgupta Memorial Lecture (Kolkata, Calcutta Research Group, 2015), 21-26.
- <sup>65</sup> Nagarik Mancha, “Paschimbange Shramik Samabay: Jemon Cholchhe” [The Conditions of the Labour Cooperatives in West Bengal] in *Akranta Shramik* [Invaded Labour in West Bengal], (Kolkata, Nagarik Mancha, 1994), 9-29.
- <sup>66</sup> **Board for Industrial and Financial Reconstruction.** It was an agency of the Government of India and a division of the Department of Financial Services of the Ministry of Finance, created under the Sick Industrial Companies Act (SICA), 1985.
- <sup>67</sup> Nagarik Mancha, Study Report on the Plight of Industrial Revival in West Bengal: A Non-governmental Investigation (Unpublished Manuscript. 14 September 1999)
- <sup>68</sup> Naba Dutta (Secretary, Nagarik Mancha), 6 May, 2022.
- <sup>69</sup> The proposal was drafted and circulated by a team of retired economists led by retired economics professor Subhendu Dasgupta. Dasgupta, in his interview, gave the original handout to the author since there were no printed copy left. (Interview date: 24 October, 2022).
- <sup>70</sup> The Multi-State Cooperative (Amendment) Bill 2022. Tabled on the Lok Sabha ( The House of the People in Indian Parliament), 2 December, 2022. [https://prsindia.org/billtrack/the-multi-state-co-operative-societies-amendment-bill-2022#:~:text=Budget%20Session%2C%202023-,The%20Multi%2DState%20Co%2Doperative%20Societies%20\(Amendment\)%20Bill,in%20more%20than%20one%20state.](https://prsindia.org/billtrack/the-multi-state-co-operative-societies-amendment-bill-2022#:~:text=Budget%20Session%2C%202023-,The%20Multi%2DState%20Co%2Doperative%20Societies%20(Amendment)%20Bill,in%20more%20than%20one%20state.)
- <sup>71</sup> G. Sampath, “Decoding the Multistate Cooperative Societies (Amendment) Bill 2022.” *The Hindu*, December 21, 2022, <https://www.thehindu.com/podcast/decoding-the-multistate-cooperative-societies-amendment-bill-2022-in-focus-podcast/article66288436.ece>.

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- 29 Nation Building and Minority Alienation in India
- 30 Environment and Migration Purulia, West Bengal

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