

Role of Community Media in Building and Strengthening Communities—A Case in Indian Cooperatives

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ABSTRACT

Considering cooperatives as an important component of social economy, my paper will contend that cooperatives due to their strong community roots have a strategic advantage in building and strengthening communities as compared to other organisations. Taking the case of Indian cooperatives, the paper will point out that the cooperatives in India with a huge network and reach have strong community linkages, which has not been effectively depicted by the mainstream media. Based on conceptual theorizing and analysis of topical developments, my paper will visualize a Community Media model for cooperatives. The paper will explore the potentialities of Community Radio, a vital medium of Community Media in the cooperative organizations. A major finding of my paper will be that the cooperatives in India can strengthen their competitive edge in the market economy by devising powerful community media strategies which will lend a new dynamism to the communities in which they are embedded.

1. Introduction

Amongst the various catalytic factors involved in strengthening and building communities in Social Economy, the role of media has a predominant place. Media plays an important role in not only voicing the concerns of the community, but it has also a constructive role to play in social cohesion by wielding the communities together and cementing the ties between the conflicting forces in the community. The mainstream media in today's era of commercialization has very

little space for the stories reflecting the community ethos. Besides, it has its own business calculations where it has to succumb to stories of popular taste due to its own compulsions.

Viewed against the above perspective, it is imperative to explore an alternative paradigm which can not only preserve the community identity but also strengthen it through effective communication so that concerns and aspirations of the community are well expressed. Though exposed to the evils of globalisation, the social economy organizations are best suited for community-building. In this respect they need to evolve their own communication medium which is devoid of commercial considerations, and which can sustain the local community in an effective manner. The ability to do so will also enable these organizations to provide useful insights to other commercial-oriented organisations that are aware of community responsibility, but are not strategically placed to contribute to community development. My Paper will discuss the role of cooperatives, with specific case study on Community Media while making some references to India which has a vibrant cooperative movement and where cooperatives have immense potentialities to contribute to community development in the wake of competition from the private sector.

2. Cooperatives and Social Economy

Cooperatives are an important component of Social Economy. It is generally agreed that being community-based organizations they have to work towards developing of the communities in which in which they operate. This in-built trait of cooperatives provides them a distinct character as compared to other organizations. Cooperative principles and values build up a democratic culture, which is rooted in ethical and socially responsible policies. Strategically speaking, cooperatives are better placed than others in strengthening community because they do not

jettison traditional cooperative values while pursuing commercial objective. The corporate which are aware of formulating socially responsible policies are still governed by the market forces, a reality from which they can not shrug off. They lack spontaneity of community consciousness which comes from cooperative mode of functioning. The cooperatives being embedded in the communities in which they operate try to ensure that market reflects the community, instead of manipulating the market for vested interests. Community is an end as well as means for cooperatives. Increased solidarity with the community strengthens the community, which no doubt creates an atmosphere which helps in preserving community identity. The customers, members, suppliers, and employees form part of the community and have shared values and goals, which creates a participatory culture in which everyone feels part and parcel of the community.

The cooperatives the world over by being involved in almost all areas of socio-economic activities are no doubt contributing a lot to community development. They have played an important role in creating conducive atmosphere for cementing community ties which are threatened with fragmentation sometimes due to social disruptions. A dispassionate analysis of the scenario clearly shows that cooperatives have not been able to strengthen the community as they have not been able to connect the communities through a medium which understands the voice of the people. This means that due to weak communication policies they have not been able to show their uniqueness as compared to other organizations in developing and sustaining local community.

The strategic advantages which cooperatives enjoy as compared to other organizations in understanding the dynamism and vibrancy of the movement can be fully utilized only if the

cooperatives have strong communication strategies which reflect the uniqueness of their position and the environment in which they operate. Lack of strong communication channels for cooperatives which have a significant grass-roots presence defies logic. Their dependence on commercial channels of communication like popular newspapers, TV channels, etc has stunted their ability to innovate through devising a media channel which can understand the dynamics of cooperative sector well.

In this era of vigorous advocacy, effective communication strengthens the social dynamism of a sector. It must be admitted that cooperatives lag in this respect. The social change which a cooperative form of organization represents as compared to other business enterprises needs a medium which can communicate the messages to a wider audience both cooperative and non-cooperative. Due to absence of this the cooperatives have not been able to vigorously advocate that they are the only institutions which can strengthen the community. Similarly, benefits of market-orientation of cooperatives based on larger community objectives and cooperative values has not been vigorously advocated as compared to other types of business enterprises which are purely dominated by commercial dictates. As a result of this the cooperatives have not been able to project their strengths in an aggressive manner which can establish their identity in the market-place.

3. Importance of Media

The communication strategies revolving around cooperatives have yet to realize the immense potentialities of media in strengthening the community base of cooperatives. That media's powerful role in the preservation of democratic culture of the grass-root institutions is a fact, which is well recognized. However, media's tilt towards commercialization is a reality, which

cannot be brushed aside. Media is not using its effective communication power to stop the cultural rot which the society suffers from due to un-inhibited display of commercialisation which can stoop to any level to appease the masses.. Media, which could have played a pioneering role in vividly portraying the social-cultural vibrancy of the community-based organizations has somehow become oblivious of its strong developmental role in the society, and the community. Media by highlighting the stories on empowerment of the people of the cooperative community can act as a strong force of social change if the effects of development at the grass-root levels are well and adequately covered. The power of people in transforming their lives, and creating a strong community feeling is immense if they have a say in decision-making and actively participate in the affairs of the society.

Mainstream media containing the vital components of print, electronic and radio acts as a strong catalyst for enhancing the image of any organization as it portrays the popular mood of the masses. Internal media has an important place in internal communication strategies of any organization. Internal publications and journals have an important role in enhancing the image of an organization by communicating strongly with the stakeholders within the sector.

A review of the current trends reveals that the cooperative sector in general despite having significant achievements and landmarks is still struggling to establish strong links with mainstream media. Due to inherent weaknesses of cooperative sector in communicating with mainstream media in a professional manner, the mainstream media generally highlights the negative stories of the cooperatives and positive stories or success stories weaved around community life are given minimal coverage. The cooperative sector as a whole does not have a comprehensive or unified mainstream media policy as a result of which cooperatives at all levels

suffer bad publicity, except those which are well off and who are in a position to devote more resources for publicity. The internal cooperative media consisting of sectoral publications related to various fields of cooperatives do not have a professional approach in highlighting the internal dynamics of the cooperative sector at the grass-roots levels. Stories with emphasis on triumph of cooperative community spirit with comparisons drawn from other organisations are negligible. The editorial/PR staff in this case have to face several constraints. The major ones are—resource crunch, lack of opportunities for professional training in editorial/PR fields, lack of conceptual clarity for the basic tenets of cooperative journalism, etc.

In the above scenario, the cooperative sector needs to explore other avenues of communication so as to highlight its inherent strengths instead of relying on external factors. This endeavor will definitely lead to coming up with fresh insights as far as community- building exercises in the cooperative sector are concerned.

4. Community Media and Cooperatives

The communication trends worldwide clearly indicates that community media in the recent times has emerged as a strong alternative to the mainstream media which is purely driven by commercial considerations. Social objectives are the cornerstone of community media. Community media empowers people rather than treat them as passive consumers. It nurtures local knowledge rather than replace it with standard solutions. Ownership and control of community media is rooted in the communities in which they serve. Community media has due regard for human rights, social justice, environment and sustainable approaches to development. Community media has strong cultural overtones, as it is an effective medium to strengthen the culture of grass-root institutions.

Community media is the best alternative to connect the rural communities who are unable to understand the various facets of information provided by the commercial media. Community media offer means for public participation and for defending cultural diversity. Community media through news and views provide a strong platform for active involvement of all sections of the poor community, dissemination of community messages related to the field of development, cultural entertainment, etc. The channels of community media are—community radio, video collectives, popular theatre, local television channels, etc.

Cooperatives are the organizations, which are deeply embedded to the communities in which they serve. Cooperatives provide a strong democratic medium to empower the people.

Community media and cooperatives work on the same principle of empowerment. The mainstream media's coverage of issues is dictated by political and commercial considerations. A bias toward political and sensational issues is definitely witnessed. The mainstream media treats people as passive consumers. Especially at the grass-root levels, this tendency is well noticeable, as the people in the rural areas do not connect themselves psychologically to programmes of mainstream media. Even in the case of cooperatives, those issues which are controversial and have political overtones are constantly highlighted. In this scenario, the cooperatives do not fit into the strategic considerations of mainstream media. If starting of community ventures is undertaken in the cooperative sector, the cooperatives will have several advantages. Community media will provide cooperatives a strong grassroots rural communication medium which will not only provide them a constant feedback mechanism which will be useful for them to review their operational strategies at the grass roots level. The poor and downtrodden which form the major constituency of cooperatives by their involvement in community media ventures will have a strong medium to ventilate their grievances as it is generally felt that the benefits of

liberalization have not percolated to the lowest strata of the society. Social dynamism of the cooperative sector and its ability to forge bonds within the community can be best exemplified by the community media which through comprehensive grassroots level reporting can highlight the role of cooperatives as a strong model of development. Fostering of open discussion and debate is also facilitated by the medium of community media.

5. Community Media and Indian Cooperatives

With more than 5 lakh cooperatives and 100 percent coverage in the villages, the Indian cooperatives have a strong and wide network, which is unparalleled. The cooperative credit institutions are disbursing about 46.15% of agricultural credit and the share of cooperatives in the total fertilizer production in the country is over 36%. The tremendous hold of the cooperatives in the rural community is well evident from the fact that cooperatives cover 75% of the Indian rural households. Dairy cooperatives have ushered in milk revolution in the country, and this has been possible due to strong community mobilization. The cooperatives have created a niche for themselves in various areas of socio-economic activities. The cooperative organizations like IFFCO, KRIBHCO, AMUL represent cooperative organizations associated with high growth profile and excellent results. They have helped in establishment of infrastructural facilities in the rural areas with the opening of schools, hospitals, and creating a better environment through social forestry. The success of AMUL which is the largest food production organization in India has been mainly due to social integration of the members of differing backgrounds in the community. At micro level, there are numerous success stories of strong community mobilization through the cooperatives. The Indian cooperatives have developed strong community linkages due to democratic ethos and tolerant diverse culture in the

country. The members of the cooperatives have strong attachment to the community. The cooperative movement has played a pioneering role in socio-economic transformation of the country. Though lot of potential exists for cooperatives in excelling in other areas of socio-economic activities, the fact remains that the cooperatives have emerged as a strong model of community development. That they are considered strong vehicles for empowerment is a big change from the past when cooperatives were considered as mere appendages of government machinery.

Despite being the world's largest cooperative movement, the cooperatives contribution to community development is not being strengthened due to dependency on mainstream media, and lack of efforts to build up indigenous form of media, which can effectively present the Indian cooperative community relationships. The Indian mainstream press highlights the stories of failure of cooperative model. There is an immense scope for community media to succeed in India if the cooperative organisations sensitise the field functionaries on the importance of community media, and provide them adequate training to help the poor and downtrodden sections of the society. to start community media ventures. Lack of education, skills, infrastructure, etc. are the stumbling factors in the starting of community ventures. But the huge network and reach of the cooperative organisations presents strong opportunities to remove the impediments in this respect by devising suitable strategies.

6. Recent Trends in Indian Cooperatives

The rapid march of liberalization and globalisation have affected the onward march of Indian cooperatives. The cooperatives have not been able to devise effective strategies to- stop the onslaught of privatization by highlighting their community advantage. The cooperatives have

allowed the private enterprises to dictate terms as they have huge resources to devise publicity strategies which are mostly driven by profit-motive. The big corporate have not only shown their inclination to encroach on the cooperative domain by making effective plans to enter retail, rural farming, horticulture, etc the areas in which cooperatives are strong or where they have immense potentialities. For example, Reliance's foray in retail by leveraging the strong base and huge network of cooperatives by forging collaborations is a strong pointer in this regard. Though in the changing market scenario, the cooperatives are open to collaborate with the private parties, they have not been able to project their community power through a media which can understand their psyche very well. As a result, the mainstream media has highlighted stories on Reliance where the main message comes out that as cooperatives are weak in their internal functioning, the private sector collaboration may take the cooperative to new heights. This misleading notion about the characteristic of cooperatives creates more misgivings in the minds of the general public about the capability of the cooperatives. The Indian cooperatives should collaborate with private parties for increasing their functional efficiency, but they should at the same time communicate their identity through a media which can project the view that the private sector is compelled to come to cooperatives for increasing their business. Super Bazar in Delhi at one time was a highly successful cooperative consumer store which was wound up after several irregularities had emerged in its functioning. Recently, when a cooperative won the bid to revive Super Bazar after Reliance failed to take over the ailing cooperative, it appeared that the cooperative would again regain its glory. Though only time will tell about the future of Super Bazar, one thing is certain that due to weak advocacy in the mainstream press, and lack of a media which understands cooperative concern, public opinion is not strong about the possible revival of cooperative spirit as exemplified in Super Bazar.

7. Community Media Model for Indian Cooperatives

Buidling up an effective Community Media Model for cooperatives is the paramount need for the Indian cooperative sector considering the fact that the cooperatives with weak communications are struggling to compete with the private sector which is well equipped to project a robust image of itself despite its acknowledgement of the areas where it is weak as compared to the cooperatives. The private sector knows that in the rural areas the cooperatives have a huge presence, and here they have established themselves with a diverse and multiple range of societies which are handling various socio-economic activities. Even in the urban areas some of the cooperatives, like dairy cooperatives, housing cooperatives, etc are strong and they have developed a competitive edge over the private sector. Any model of community media for the cooperatives in India must consist of the following components :-

Ownership

Ownership is vital in any strategic consideration for starting a community media venture. As opposed to commercial form of media this component is very important because community media initiative can not succeed if the ownership is not vested in the people in the community. The people themselves decide how to manage the media. The commercial norms of media management are not applicable in this form of media. At present, the cooperatives in India suffer bad publicity mainly because the business houses who run the media show are purely commercial in orientation, and the developmental issues are very low on their agenda. They seem to thrive on sensational issues which sell a newspaper, Cold business statistics is the prime logic for these commercial media houses.

Vesting ownership in the community in the case of Indian cooperatives for starting community ventures can be a smooth affair considering the paradigm shift in Indian polity which is favouring decentralization. The cooperatives can easily seize upon this opportunity to initiate community media ventures by providing ownership to the people who are the best judge to communicate the functioning of cooperatives to the outside world, and who have played an important role in the success of cooperatives.

Democracy

This is vital for community media venture. Without democracy, the true entity of community media can not emerge. Authoritarian form of media can not be successful for Indian cooperatives because the cooperatives have themselves not been able to show their true worth because they are still used to operate in a regulated environment despite numerous pretensions of democracy. The cooperative policy initiatives in India have time and again harped on democratization of cooperatives. The cooperatives no doubt have taken steps to democratise their functioning through numerous steps like creating a conducive legal atmosphere, de-bureaucratising their functioning, ensuring wider participation of all sections of the society, etc., but they have yet to formulate strategies for visualizing a community form of media based on democratic norms where everyone irrespective of status and power is free to participate in the functioning of media.

Participation

A community media venture is based on a participation of all sections of the society as compared to commercial form of media where the business class which is powerful calls the shots. Wide

participation ensures two-way communication which leads to meaningful dialogue which is paramount for a community form of media to tell the true story of a cooperative to the outside world. The cooperative trends in India in the recent years indicate that cooperatives have developed a wide participatory base by providing wider representation to women, youth and marginalize sections of the society. This shift in cooperative policies is ideal for the cooperatives to evolve a grass-root communication medium in the form of community media where the people involved in its functioning can themselves act as media persons in the form of reporters, writers, announcers, etc. The benefits of this are two –fold. Firstly, the beneficiaries can tell the story of cooperative development which is generally neglected. People in the cooperative community talk about the progress of cooperatives without an fear or prejudice, Secondly, corrective action which is based on the feed-back of people involved in cooperatives is important for cooperatives competing in the liberal economy. Community media provides that medium.

Empowerment

It is generally accepted that the cooperatives by empowering the people have helped eliminate poverty, sustain environment, enrich social standards and provide employment. Media which is the fourth pillar of democracy in the country has yet to recognize its catalytic role in empowerment if one reviews the cooperative trends in India. Media has not only to highlight the contradictions of democracy, but also power of democracy. When we consider the contradictions of democracy, the deviation between the ideals of democracy and practice of democracy immediately comes into focus. Through stories on politics and power struggles, the media in India is highlighting the evils of politicization. However, when we consider the aspect of power of democracy, one feels that media by highlighting the stories on empowerment can really

strengthen the democratic ethos of the country. Though the definition of empowerment has several interpretations, the fact that it embraces the key areas of change, choice and power clearly indicates that the concept is quite rich. The role of media in highlighting change, choice and power in the case of grassroots institutions is immense. Media can act as a strong force of social change if through extensive reporting the media covers stories highlighting the effects of cooperative development at the grass-root levels. The power of people in transforming their lives and environment around is immense, if they have say in decision making and actively participate in the affairs. Media has its own role to play as a supporting agent in this process.

Training and Education

Without training and education, the people who are engaged in operationalisation of community media can not participate in its functioning. In India training of grass-root cooperative functionaries who act as big agents of communication is totally neglected. Training modules on community media must be formulated if the cooperatives are serious to make forays in the field of Community Media. Educating the people in the cooperative community on the advantages of community media can be an uphill task in India considering the wide level of illiteracy, but some of the cooperative programmes which have literacy component can easily take up this work. Information, education and communication should be the distinguishing features of the training programme.

8. Success Story Through Community Media

Despite several achievements, the cooperative sector in India is today surrounded by an atmosphere of doubt and uncertainty. The media is not supportive of the sector. The cooperative

sector as a whole should formulate a policy in which forceful presentation of its success stories should form a distinctive plank. At present the cooperatives have a vast reservoir of success stories which are not projected to the fullest extent. The cooperative organisations at the national level in India should pool in their resources in this regard which is necessary in a scenario where a coordinated or unified approach is extremely vital. The success stories in cooperatives if projected in a vibrant manner can alter the cooperative picture in India in a revolutionary and refreshing manner.

At present, the coverage of success stories in cooperative journals is not up to the desired level which can provide a true glimpse of the multi-farious achievements of the various sectors of the cooperative movement. The success stories are written as if they are reported with cold statistics, figures, some landmarks, etc. The success stories are not written in a lively manner which can enhance the interest of someone who is new to the cooperative sector. A professional and interactive approach is definitely lacking in this regard.

Community media can be the best tool to depict the success stories of cooperatives. If the people evolve a participatory form of media, they are in a best position to highlight the “success” factor of their cooperative. Not much concerned with the statistics, their full attention can be devoted to the impact of the cooperatives on their general lives. They can narrate the success in a best way as they are not dependent on outside journalists who cover the story due to professional pressure.

Success stories can stimulate the reader and enhance the imagery of the sector in a big way. They are the life-blood of any sector. Cooperative sector is not exception to this. The more the cooperative sector comes out with success stories through community media in an innovative manner, the more will be the chances of a strong image of the cooperative sector coming up.

9. Community Radio in India—A Case Study

A major paradigm shift with the Government of India finally allowing NGO's and community-based groups to set up and run community radio stations has given a good opportunity to cooperatives to leverage their community strengths through a medium which can understand the concerns of the deprived sections of the society. While the NGOs have become quite active in applying for licenses to start community radio ventures after government approval it is surprising that cooperatives have yet to take a pro-active stance.

Community Radio can prove to be an effective tool for tapping the vibrancy of the cooperative sector. Despite few programmes on radio and TV, the powerful messages in the silent revolution triggered by the cooperatives have not been properly conveyed to the policy-makers due to weak communication, and lack of a medium which can connect with the psyche of the community. The unsung tales in the stories of cooperative triumph have not been popularized amongst the masses.

Cooperatives are the organisations which are participatory in character. Similarly, in community radio people participation is vital for highlighting the first-hand experiences of the people in the community. There exists a strong case for the cooperatives and community radio to join hands and work together. Both the business and promotional cooperative organisations in India have a very strong field presence in the rural areas. No doubt, devising strong community radio strategies keeping into account the local conditions based on people participation would not be difficult in this case.

For venturing in the field of Community Radio, the forays which the cooperatives have made in ICT [Information Communications Technology] based solutions can be very useful in showing a definite direction. IFFCO, a global cooperative through record production and marketing of fertilizers every year has played an important role in agriculture development. The rural portal of IFFCO which has been developed in eight Indian languages catering to 16 states provides information on a large number of areas relevant to the farmers. For approximate dissemination of information to the farmers, IFFCO has set up 100 kiosks in various parts of the country. The grass-root functionaries of IFFCO provide ready help at the kiosks to educate farmers on how to operate computers and understand the portal. If community radio is established in these areas, the internet can be used to collect and accumulate news and information which can be broadcast through radio. In Warana [Maharashtra] cooperatives are actively involved in dairy, sugar, farming, etc., in the rural areas. The setting up of 54 village information kiosks under an ICT project has led to increase in efficiency of sugarcane growing and harvesting process. The farmers also get ready information in local language about crops and agriculture market prices. Setting up of Community radio and finding the right connections with ICT in Warana would definitely provide a good platform to the voice of the farming community. Similarly, National Cooperative Union of India, the apex organization of the Indian Cooperative Sector has been implementing 46 Cooperative Education Field Projects in under-developed rural areas of almost all the states. These projects with the help of project staff educate the farmers in the rural areas to form cooperative societies for solving their livelihood problems.

Community radio here can be used in propagating the advantages of a cooperative society and airing programmes based on the experiences of those who have benefited from cooperatives in increasing their income levels.

The cooperatives in the recent times have come under pressure in the market economy due to their inability to project their strong ties with the community. At a time when the corporate are re-orienting their policies towards the community by taking out leaves from the pages of cooperative functioning, the cooperatives need to strengthen their identity through community radio. If the people-centric stories with focus on cooperatives are aired through community radio all over the country, this can popularize the cooperative model of development in a big way. While this will project a true voice of the cooperatives to the Government, it will also become a good weapon for cooperatives to exhibit their strengths in poverty eradication in the rural areas as compared to other organisations.

10. Conclusion

In all the countries of Asia-Pacific Region the cooperatives are working hard to strengthen their identity at a time when the forces of privatization have become dominant. The community media model in India strengthening the community base of Indian cooperatives has wider applicability in the entire region. This is mainly because unlike other countries the nature of Indian democratic polity and the huge network of cooperatives provide an ideal combination for a community media model to emerge which can show a definite direction for the future. The mainstream media coverage of the cooperatives issues in all the countries of the Region is not satisfactory. The cooperatives in all the countries are under pressure to propagate the ideals they cherish. In this scenario the community media model for cooperatives in India can be an ideal framework which the other countries can replicate in varying socio-cultural conditions.