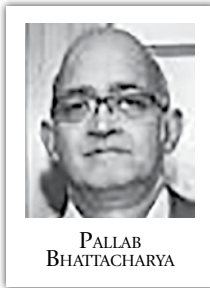


India's new cooperatives ministry

Will it lead to cooperation or confrontation?



PALLAB BHATTACHARYA

ON July 6, the Indian government came out with the announcement of a separate Ministry of Cooperation with the avowed aim of realising

the vision of "Sahkar se Samridhi" ("Progress Through Cooperation"). The creation of the new ministry, a fulfilment of the announcement made during the budget presentation in February this year, came a day before Prime Minister Narendra Modi undertook his mega expansion and reshuffle of his council of ministers, and promptly came under the charge of Home Minister Amit Shah, Modi's trusted aide.

According to the official statement, the Ministry of Cooperation will provide a separate administrative, legal and policy framework for strengthening the cooperative movement in the country and help deepen co-operatives as a "true people-based movement reaching up to the grassroots." Spelling out the rationale behind the creation of the new ministry, it said a cooperative based economic development model is very relevant for India, where each member works with a spirit of responsibility. The ministry will work to streamline processes for ease of doing business for cooperatives and enable the development of multi-state co-operatives.

The history of cooperatives in India goes back more than a century. What makes them still relevant is their reach right down to the grassroots and their ability to serve the population (mainly in rural areas) who find it difficult to access commercial banks for their credit needs. The Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation says cooperatives are of immense significance for 65 percent of India's population who depend on agriculture and related activities.

The strength of unity is at the very base of cooperatives, whether it comes

to collective bargaining for prices of products or financial requirements. Various kinds of cooperatives in India include cooperative banks, cooperative credit societies, and consumers' and producers' cooperative societies. The producers' cooperative societies protect the interest of small producers by enabling access to raw materials and equipment while consumers' cooperatives procure goods directly from the growers or manufacturers and reach consumers by doing away with middlemen. Among the biggest success stories of the cooperatives in India is Amul, that has developed itself out of the Gujarat Cooperative Milk Marketing Federation, owned by 3.6 million milk producers and formed by dairy farmers who find it difficult to sell their products individually. According to the annual report of the National Dairy Development Board for 2020-21, India has 194,195 societies in the dairy sector and, according to *The Indian Express*, 35 percent of India's sugar comes from cooperative sugar mills. Big money is involved in cooperative banks in rural and urban areas.

Cooperatives may be a sound economic development model but behind good economics lies good politics. The same is true as far as the cooperation ministry is concerned. Earlier, the Cooperation department was under the Ministry of Agriculture. So, will a separate ministry for cooperatives help the cooperatives?

Cooperatives may be a sound economic development model but behind good economics lies good politics. The same is true as far as the cooperation ministry is concerned.

The cooperative movement in India flourishes mainly in a handful of states like Maharashtra (the most industrialised state), Gujarat and Karnataka. The cooperatives in these states have a great say in controlling their respective economies. Hence, the political significance of cooperatives. Electorally, Maharashtra, with 48 Lok Sabha seats, is the second most important state of India after Uttar

Pradesh, where 80 seats are up for grabs in general elections.



India has 194,195 cooperative societies in the dairy sector and 35 percent of India's sugar comes from cooperative sugar mills.

PHOTO: REUTERS/PARIVARTAN SHARMA

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Opinions are divided as to whether cooperatives are on the Concurrent list of the Indian Constitution—which means both the federal and state governments can have control over them—or if they exist only in the domain of state governments. This creates an area of potential turf war between the parties that are in power at the centre and those ruling the states. The opposition parties, which let no opportunity go by to accuse the central government of concentrating powers in its hands and demand more autonomy for states, have frowned upon the new ministry and questioned the motive

behind creating it.

The Congress, CPI(M), and CPI General Secretary Sitaram Yechury fired the first salvo at the new cooperation ministry, alleging it would further erode the space of states in running the cooperatives in a cooperative federal system of India. However, a number of cooperative societies spanning the banking and dairy sectors welcomed the setting up of the new Ministry for

Congress and to make inroads into dairy cooperatives in northern part of Gujarat, which had been the BJP's Achilles' heel.

The cooperative institutions in Gujarat and Maharashtra have been the nursery for politicians who have honed their leadership skills and built up a strong support base for their parties. Some leading instances of this at present are octogenarian Sharad Pawar, who leads the Nationalist Congress Party, his party colleague Ajit Pawar in Maharashtra, and Indian Home Minister Amit Shah in Gujarat. The leadership of the Shah and Pawar duo emerged from the cooperative sector.

Many successful politicians in Maharashtra have cut their teeth in politics by joining the cooperative movements, and have gone on to become chief ministers. It is from the cooperative bodies that state-level satraps draw their political and financial sustenance even when they are not in power, either in parliament or in state assemblies. The central government pumps funds into the cooperative bodies as working capital or equity, especially at times of funds crunch, which gives it some leverage in controlling them. On the other hand, cooperative banks at the village, district and state levels also serve as centres of considerable political and financial clout to parties holding power in states. That explains the fierce competition among political parties in Maharashtra and Gujarat for establishing their hold over the cooperatives. The political parties have also bickered over scams in cooperative banks, which have allegedly turned into hotspots for parking the unaccounted money of some of the rich and powerful.

Details regarding the areas of jurisdiction and functioning of the central Ministry of Cooperation are not yet public. It remains to be seen how these details will add up. Cooperation and competition among cooperative bodies is desirable, but it should not be a stage for confrontation.

Pallab Bhattacharya is a special correspondent of *The Daily Star*. He writes from New Delhi, India.

PROJECT SYNDICATE

The pandemic threat to female leadership

MICHELE BARRY and GEETA RAO GUPTA

ONE in four. That's the proportion of American women who are considering downshifting their careers or leaving the workforce due to the impact of Covid-19. In just one year, the pandemic has driven more than two million women in the United States out of the workplace, resulting in the largest male-female unemployment gap in two decades.

Working mothers, more than 40 percent of whom are their family's primary breadwinner, have been especially hit hard. Many simply are unable to balance their careers with overwhelming increases in household responsibilities at home. This mirrors similar trends globally—across all regions, women lost jobs at a greater rate than men in 2020, as they took on an average of 30 more hours of childcare per week.

Covid-19 is causing women to leave the workforce in droves just when we urgently need to elevate more of them into leadership positions across sectors, including in our own field of global health. Without women's expertise, leadership talents, and unique perspectives, the road to recovery could be far longer, and we risk being underprepared for the next health crisis, particularly given the pandemic's clear gendered effects.

And having women in leadership

positions has been shown to result in more policies that improve people's quality of life and reflect the priorities of families and marginalised communities—the very groups disproportionately affected by this pandemic. In global health, women's voices are crucial to driving intentional, holistic action on important challenges that too often are missed when the vast majority of decision-makers are men.

When women are not at the table, the consequences are serious. This pandemic has led to increases in domestic violence and suspensions or delays in sexual and reproductive health services, often leaving



Across all regions, women lost jobs at a greater rate than men in 2020, as they took on an average of 30 more hours of childcare per week.

PHOTO: STAR

unprepared governments struggling to respond. For too long, we lacked sex-disaggregated data, including on how both Covid-19 infection and vaccination affect pregnant women, simply because researchers do not routinely investigate these questions. We will continue to struggle with these and other issues unless women are better represented in decision-making.

But as we rebuild from the devastation of Covid-19, we have an opportunity to embrace new and better ways of working so that parents do not have to choose between their careers and their family responsibilities—and so that women can thrive and lead.

Millions of women have already left the workforce during this pandemic, and many more are thinking of doing so. If we do not act now to reverse this trend, the gap may become insurmountable.

In global health, like in other fields, this starts with acknowledging and breaking down barriers and urging those in positions of power to embrace the necessary changes in policies, allocation of resources, and cultural norms.

For starters, we must make our workplaces more family-friendly through measures such as flexible schedules, subsidised childcare, and family leave. We must also dismantle the sexist biases that hold back women in their careers, including false, negative assumptions about mothers that have adverse implications in hiring and promotion decisions.

Furthermore, we need to recognise that pandemic-related challenges have not affected all women equally. In

the US, like in many other countries, women who already face additional hurdles—whether because they are black, Hispanic, or unpartnered mothers—have shouldered an even heavier load. We must advocate for policies that can correct this imbalance. In particular, such policies should include universal childcare, which helps address inequalities faced by marginalised women.

Women should not have to sacrifice their health, work or leadership potential in the pursuit of the mythical "work-life balance." The best leadership we can muster—drawing from all humankind, and not just 50 percent of it—is needed to improve health outcomes and the well-being of people around the world.

Millions of women have already left the workforce during this pandemic, and many more are thinking of doing so. If we do not act now to reverse this trend, the gap may become insurmountable. We cannot afford to lose the very people who will help lead us out of this health emergency and future ones, too.

Michele Barry, Founder of WomenLife Health, is Chair of the Consortium of WomenLife Health and a professor of medicine and tropical diseases at Stanford University. Geeta Rao Gupta, Global Advisory Board Chair of WomenLife Health, is a senior fellow at the United Nations Foundation.

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QUOTABLE Quote

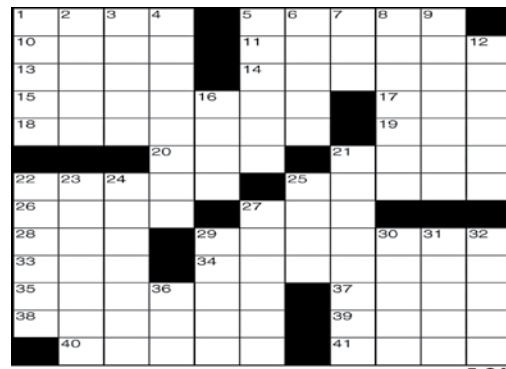


SANDRA CISNEROS American writer (1954)

Revenge only engenders violence, not clarity and true peace. I think liberation must come from within.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- 1 High point
 - 5 Hawaiian greeting
 - 10 Libya neighbor
 - 11 Swamp
 - 13 Damage
 - 14 Early round, for short
 - 15 Like some messages
 - 17 "Not - million years!"
 - 18 High group
 - 19 Rockies tree
 - 20 Golf peg
 - 21 Long for
 - 22 Power provider
 - 25 Some die rolls
 - 26 Nerve impulse relay
- DOWN**
- 1 Massage targets
 - 2 Monk's music
 - 3 Senator Rubio
 - 4 Alberta's capital
 - 5 Current unit
 - 6 Some nobility
 - 7 Mine rock
 - 8 Nova Scotia's capital
 - 9 Ridiculous
 - 12 Know-how
 - 16 Glade grazer
 - 21 Manitoba's capital
 - 22 Monsieur's wife
 - 23 Rust-causing agent
 - 24 Ontario's capital
 - 25 Database option
 - 27 Western sight
 - 29 Airline prices
 - 30 In the know
 - 31 Poultry buy
 - 32 Make blank
 - 36 "... man - mouse?"



YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

C O A S T S C O B B
 O N E T W O A X L E
 S T R A I N B I O S
 T A I N T G O D O T
 S P E D D O T I M E
 B E A N Z E D
 J O Y B U Z Z E R
 Y A P O B O E
 O N I O N S S H A W
 K E N N Y S T O N E
 E D I E R E F U S E D
 L O O N A M U S E D
 S E N D M I L E R S

BEETLE BAILEY

BY MORT WALKER



BABY BLUES

BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT



WRITE FOR US. SEND US YOUR OPINION PIECES TO dsopinion@gmail.com.