

# **Social Media as an Effective Tool for Social Innovation in Indian Cooperatives: Potentialities for Youth Employment**

**SANJAY KUMAR VERMA**  
**Dy. Director (Publications/PR)**  
**National Cooperative Union of India**

## **Introduction**

The cooperative movement in the digital era today faces a big challenge to build up connectivities and forge wide-ranging collaborations at all levels (membership, internal and external stakeholders, wider community, public, etc.) so as to usher in innovations which can enhance the well-being of the people in the society. This is not only the demand of the competitive economy, but also highly imperative for image-building of the cooperative sector. Cooperatives are emerging strongly in the field of innovation, whether they are elderly care cooperatives, waste picker associations, driver cooperatives, platform cooperatives, snake catchers' cooperatives, etc. Cooperatives being member-driven organizations, the innovation is driven by collective force of members, and not a single person, which leads to improvement in social relations, communication, solidarity, shared values, etc.

Cooperatives and social media work on the same principle of empowering people in their own ways. The tools of Social Media (Facebook, Twitter, etc.) give the citizens a free platform to engage as well as strengthen their connections which pave the ground for social innovation. The cooperatives in India despite their wide network and reach have not been able to utilize social media to build up strong connectivity within their membership base and build wide-ranging collaboration with the government, civil society, private sector, etc. Due to this, the cooperatives have not been able to utilize the power of social media to highlight the stories of social innovation as well as also usher in social innovation which can tackle the problems of unemployment, poverty, inequality, sustainable development, etc. Besides, the cooperatives have also not been able to strengthen their voice through social media which can enable collaborative forces to not only innovate, but also influence the policy-makers to give due recognition to cooperatives in the socio-economic policies of the country. It is well known that the youth in India face a big problem of unemployment, but the cooperatives have not been able to provide any solution as they have not been able to attract them to their fold through suitable job openings.

Viewed against the above backdrop, the first part of my paper will define 'social innovation', and review the literature in the field. The second part will explore how social media can be an effective tool for social innovation, its potentialities in the functioning of cooperatives, more particularly in the field of social innovation. The final part of the paper will point out that in the wake of negligible youth participation, youth can be employed in social media jobs in cooperatives so that the professional and technical capabilities of cooperatives are strengthened for ushering in social innovation. A roadmap in this regard will be chalked out.

# **PART 1**

## **Definition, Review of Literature and Methodology**

The academic literature on Social Innovation goes back to Max Weber who defined new relationship between social order and innovation by impact on social change and behaviours considered to be abnormal. Social innovation re-emerged as concept in 1990s as a way to cope with results of economic restructuring, changes introduced by IT developments and mass unemployment. In the new context, social innovation has a broader meaning, it can be macro, micro, structural or local, introduced by entrepreneurial spirit and through solidarity, either to improve the functioning of an organisation or transform the organisation into a social enterprise. Stanford Social Review (Phills et al 2008) defines social innovation as a 'novel solution to a social problem that is more effective, efficient, sustainable or just the existing solutions and for which the value created accrues to society as a whole rather than private individuals.' A review of the recent literature shows presence of a multi-disciplinary approach drawn from economics, public finance, labour market, technology and innovation, etc.

Due to rapid advances in the field of social media, the literature in this field has broadened its horizons through inter-linkages with the subject of social innovation. The recent trends in literature broadly acknowledge the role of social media with its emphasis on dissemination of messages, building up collaborations, etc in facilitating the process of social innovation

When one takes cooperatives into account, we find that there is lack of substantial literature in the field of cooperatives, social innovation and social media, though few of the articles have covered this field. A recent article by Simel Esim and Walttler and Katajamaki from ILO entitled 'Social Innovation and the social and solidarity economy' emphasizes the need for multi-dimensional approach to social innovation that is well grounded in locally identified needs and priority areas of action.

A review of the literature in the Indian case related to cooperatives, social media and social innovation shows that there has not been any effort to explore the linkages between these aspects. My paper based on analysis tries to explore these linkages based on secondary sources. The vital factor of youth employment is also explored in the paper, as in development cooperation projects social innovation is emerging as a priority area for promoting youth employment.

## **Social Innovation and Social Media**

Social Innovation has become important for organizations wanting to meet the scale of current global challenges, increase their impact, find solutions to the problems of the community around despite limited resources, and stay relevant in the changing times. Innovators should show different levels of competence, social entrepreneurship, and new ways of combining and organizing productive resources. Ideas for innovation should come from all quarters, from both internal and external stake-holders, and most importantly the people who are the initiators for any innovation.

For social innovation, there is social change which is participatory in character. This happens when members of the community freely share their values and encourage others to join them. Mass communication channels play an important role as a catalyst in this as they forge

inter-connections between the individuals which provide a stimulus to change the system through wide dissemination of messages by the people who feel involved to act and make a difference. Social media in the recent times has played an important role in spreading messages of the organizations, both business and promotional as a result of which the organizations have been able to target their audience, expanding their business, as well as promoting cause. The various tools of Social media like Facebook, Twitter, etc are good examples of how communities around the world are inter-connected.

No doubt, social media has created a space for the ideas of an individual which plays an important role in social innovation. It has given the world a voice needed for powerful expression. The mainstream media without the involvement of people in a participatory role has its own limitations in building up connections amongst the people. Social media by providing a free platform to citizens to strengthen their connection has given them a powerful tool to initiate a change and organize themselves towards social innovation.

### **Cooperatives in India; Spread and Social Innovation**

With around 8 lakh cooperatives covering 100 % of the villages, the cooperative movement is the largest in the world. The cooperatives have significant presence in all the areas of socio-economic activities. While AMUL, IFFCO, KRIBHCO, etc are the huge success stories of cooperatives, there are numerous cases of small cooperatives in the rural areas which have played an important role in socio-economic transformation both in the rural and urban areas.

Due to rising levels of poverty, inequality, lack of resources, etc., the cooperatives in India have embarked on the path of social innovation which has impact on the local communities in which these cooperatives are embedded. This innovation is fuelled by the collective strength of members, and their eagerness to improve not only economic condition, but also make a social impact. Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) is a fine case of social innovation in India which employs self-employed workers organized in a trade union whose membership is open to self-employed women workers all over India. SEWA empowers these workers saving them from middlemen while organizing them through cooperatives under which they start income-generating activities. SEWA Bank started by SEWA is a cooperative bank of women which is now a successful case of innovation after facing the initial problem of developing banking habit among the poor illiterate women workers.

Similarly, Shri Mahila Udyog Lijjat Papad, a women cooperative has provided self-employment to mostly urban poor women, which has provided self-employment to mostly urban poor women, whose core product is papad, exported worldwide. This cooperative through innovation supports local production and develops creative skills of women to support their families thus creating social impact. On the other end of the spectrum, Irula Snake Catcher's Cooperative near Chennai is a good example of social innovation as it uses indigenous skills of tribals to produce snake venom which is commercially used for medicinal purposes providing self-employment to the poor tribals who earlier faced problems of survival. Swachh Cooperative in Pune is also a notable example of social innovation where the cooperative of rag-pickers has taken up the challenge of providing effective and sustainable waste management services, through doorstep waste collection initiative, thus in the process improving their income and working conditions. Of late, some cooperatives have made effective interventions in solar power

generation which is environment friendly, considering the high cost of electricity, as these are run by unemployed village youth providing them viable mode of employment.

### **Communication Strategies for Cooperatives and Social Media**

The communication strategies for cooperatives in India are weak due to which the vibrant functioning of the cooperative movement, its success stories, its strengths/uniqueness as compared to other organizations, and stories of social innovation are not well communicated to both internal and external stake-holders. There is not proper awareness of cooperatives amongst the general masses due to absence of professional communication strategies, lack of effective campaigns to generate people's interest, poor media relations, etc. While the internal cooperative media consisting of the cooperative journals lacks a professional approach in highlighting the success stories of the cooperative movement, and coming up with lively stories of the innovative action of the cooperatives at the grass-root levels, the mainstream media generally ignores the issues of the cooperatives. Though some success stories of cooperatives are reported time and again, but these are very few considering the widespread reach and impact of the cooperative movement in the country. The electronic media of late, has been highlighting the issues of the cooperatives, but a specialized treatment of this subject is lacking, instead the cooperatives are clubbed with agricultural issues. Some of the resourceful and cash-rich organisations like AMUL, IFFCO, some cooperative banks, etc have good budgetary resources for PR and communications due to which they get good publicity. However, for most of the cooperatives, communications remains their weakest link.

Considering the depth, wide penetration, and stronghold of the cooperatives, with wide-ranging impact on the rural communities, it is felt that a participatory mode of communication with a two-way approach based on dialogue, engagement and feedback can be the best way of communications to tap the dynamism of the cooperative sector, and highlight the stories of social innovation as well as upscale them. While there may be many stories of social innovation in Indian cooperatives, not all innovations have upscale potential. One prime reason is that social media development in cooperatives is very weak, as it is recognized that social media has the potential to upscale and spread social innovation. There is no proper awareness of the multiple benefits of social media in the functioning of the cooperatives.

### **Social Media for Social Innovation; Potentialities for Cooperatives**

The stories of social innovation in cooperatives in India do not make wider impact due to lack of awareness, and they also do not find supporters due to absence of a collaborative platform. Social Media creates this awareness due to easy reach, and is a cost-effective solution which creates instant communication, inspires further innovation by generating ideas amongst like-minded people devoted to a cause, builds up a cohesive community of users and also catalyses civic action. Social media is an effective platform to disseminate the messages of social innovation to a wider audience, who may feel encouraged to take suitable action to upscale the innovation. It has been seen that while strong advocates of the cooperative concept are there, they are not brought together into a common platform through two-way communication. This hampers the ideas of innovation to flow in the cooperative sector. Social media opens the avenues of two-way communication which leads to better feedback, constructive criticism/suggestions which open the ground for social innovation.

It has been found that many of the cooperative organizations are not utilizing the potentialities of Facebook, Twitter and other social media platforms for effective communications. Some have facebook pages, but they are inactive due to lack of professionals who can leverage the platform for forging wide-ranging collaborations. Similarly, many do not have Twitter accounts at a time when Twitter has emerged as the most effective medium to highlight the causes/campaigns of NGOs and keep them aligned with the global issues of sustainable development, climate change, etc. The cooperatives in India lack effective communications with the members and other external stake-holders due to which the issues are not discussed with shared concern, as a result of which problems remain unresolved, and ways are not found to find solutions. If cooperatives in India use Facebook and other social media platforms effectively, then effective collaborations can lead to impactful solutions to the problems. Organisations can share innovative solutions to understand each other's problems, and build up necessary strategic alliances.

It is seen that the cooperatives in India remain aloof from effective campaigning of the causes they stand for, like environmental protection, poverty reduction, gender-equality.etc. They are also inhibited by budgetary constraints in this regard. Facebook Causes provides them a strategic opportunity to connect with the members and wider community to attract new supporters, and even raise money, as most of the cooperative organizations do not undertake serious fund-raising due to which they lack the necessary resources. Use of crowd funding websites to generate funds, start a project which has social concern, and find supporters is an area in which cooperatives have yet to take significant steps, but which is very vital for opening the rich doors of social innovation.

Due to lack of two-way effective communication, the cooperative business organizations are not able to handle effectively their product innovation which is very important considering the need to strengthen their brand based on customers' feedback. If the cooperatives use social media effectively, they can change the relationships between them and customers to partnership. Social innovation can be in-built here as the customers can tell a cooperative what is important for them. For example, it has been found that customers of fertilizer cooperatives, dairy cooperatives, cooperative banks are very loyal. However, if through professional use of social media, their inputs/suggestions are taken into account in product design/better delivery of services then social innovation can be strengthened in a significant way. For those cooperatives who have to solve their problems of resources by strengthening and widening their customer base, this can be a very good exercise to strengthen innovation by taking the customers' feedback. However, for this, professional monitoring and engagement with the customers is very important.

For cooperative organizations, live video streaming is an effective way to enhance their reach and impact to new audience both nationally and globally so that new forms of networking emerge which lead to innovation. Cooperatives today are not able to come out of their closed domain i.e. extend their reach beyond cooperative world to non-cooperative organizations. Live video streaming of the cooperative events/launch of new products or brands can be a very good experience which can benefit the cooperatives in social innovation. While geographical boundaries do not remain a constraint in these live video streaming events, audience feedback also play an important role in building up ideas for innovation.

The cooperative organizations in India have their mission/objectives, but they do not have a mechanism to fine-tune the mission in accordance with the feedback of the constituents, changing times, and interactive engagements. Slide rocket is a good social media tool that illustrates the mission of a cooperative organisation by adding interactive engagement such as poll question, viewer comments, etc. This will help monitor overall satisfaction, determine areas/issues of interest to constituents.etc.

Twitter is a social media network that consists of its users broadcasting short messages as 'tweets'. There are 280 million active users on twitter. Cooperatives in India today need communication which is short, precise, and which can engage people in its activities/programmes so that good opinion/effective feedback emerges. As cooperatives in India handle social issues related to the needs of community, Twitter provides a good platform through effective use of hashtags.

Digital story-telling is an effective method to communicate the stories of social innovation in cooperatives at a time when it is felt that the lively success stories of cooperatives are not effectively communicated to a wider audience in an interactive format with the first-hand experiences of the cooperative officials, beneficiaries, etc. The actions of people who are the initiators of change in these stories are not highlighted in a powerful manner. Compelling motivating stories create emotional resonance and human connection while serving strategic purpose such as driving people to take meaningful action. The cooperatives must embrace digital story-telling in their communication strategy. The cooperatives today lack an effective communication strategy to tap the power of Youtube video considering the immense popularity of visuals. Such videos on stories of cooperative social innovation can inspire more such stories.

Social media for social innovation consists of utilizing tools for developing a voice of the sector which can bring in innovation and lead to influencing government policy. It has been found that cooperatives in India do not have a strong voice as they are not able to unite on issues, or challenges which can build up pressure on the policy-makers. For example, the cooperatives every year are neglected in budget formulation. They are not included in the five-year plans. They have been denied tax exemption too. On these issues the cooperatives can combine together to prepare an online petition on Twitter or [www.change.org](http://www.change.org) so that people can sign these online petitions which can reach the concerned authorities so that a policy change in favour of cooperatives is initiated.

Social innovation presents many opportunities for crystallization of new ideas, which can lead to creation of digital platforms which are managed by members of cooperatives who provide services and sell products through collective ownership and governance. While these types of cooperatives are fast emerging in other countries, the potentialities of development of such cooperatives are enormous in India due to rising level of unemployment amongst youth, the need for marketing of products online globally, and also re-designing the products based on feedback of the users on the digital platform. If these platforms are supported by social media, then their impact would be more in wider dissemination of messages and building up strong collaborations.

Many of the cooperatives in India do not have effective mechanisms for collaborative decision-making despite the presence of cooperative democratic structure. Inputs/suggestions from all the stakeholders are not taken into account due to lack of good communication.

Widespread use of social media in this regard with active participation of users can enable collaborative decision-making which can lead to social innovation.

### **PART 3**

#### **Youth Unemployment in India and Cooperatives**

With two-thirds of its 1.3 bn people under the age of 35, India has the world's largest youth population. Today most of the youth population are absorbed in low-paid jobs in the informal sector. They have little education to get higher-paid jobs in the organized sector. It is a worrisome trend that GDP growth in India is increasing by about 7 percent every year, but this is coming without any significant addition of jobs.

The cooperative sector faces a big challenge to employ youth in the jobs, both at the lowest levels, as well as the managerial/technical level. Being attracted to private companies/multi-nationals which pay more, the cooperatives are aware that they need to tap the best talent of youth population so that professional and technical competence of cooperatives is strengthened. The MBA Programme designed by the Institutes of Cooperative Management in the country under the aegis of NCUI are designed to attract the youth into the cooperative fold. Leading cooperative organizations like AMUL, IFFCO, KRIBHCO, etc. are always in lookout for management/scientific and technical graduates. The youth who graduate from IRMA also take up career in cooperatives. While managerial and technical jobs are preferred by youth in cooperatives, the youth do not opt for media/communication jobs in cooperatives in India. Communication/media remains a low area of priority as far as job creation in cooperatives is concerned.

There is a heavy demand for youth professionals in social media jobs in all types of industries/sectors/organizations. Youth themselves are social media savvy, and they are equipped to understand the finer nuances as well as requirements of social media in various organisations. We have seen that while opportunities for social innovation through social media are tremendous in the functioning of cooperatives in India, all this requires technical competence and good social media understanding which is not present in the cooperative organizations.

The cooperatives in India face a big challenge to utilise social media for social innovation so as to build up their image as compared to other sectors so as to compete in the market economy. Their need for strong image-building considering the low priority to cooperatives in national policies has become a crying need of the day. The cooperatives also cannot shrug off the reality that youth are indifferent to their involvement in the functioning of cooperatives. Of late, due to NCUI's initiatives, youth sensitization programmes/training workshops have tried to create awareness amongst youth about the benefits of associating with cooperatives, but there is no attempt to formulate an employment policy/action-plan for youth so as to employ them in cooperative jobs.

Against the above perspective, it is the most opportune time for cooperatives to create social media jobs in their organizations. A large number of youth population can be employed in these jobs which will also help the cooperative sector to bridge the gap between them and the youth in a constructive way. A basic orientation in cooperatives may be provided to such youth before start of the jobs so that they understand about the ways in which in which they can fine-

tune their technical competence against the requirements of cooperative organisations which are different from commercially-driven organizations. Such youth can become the ambassadors of their organisations if they are nurtured and given freedom to operate. They can also conduct on-going training programmers on social media for the officials of cooperative organizations considering the fact that there is very low level of awareness regarding the advantages of social media amongst the officials of cooperative organizations.

## **Conclusion**

Social Media has emerged as an important cost-effective communication tool for the cooperatives in India, the opportunities of growth and development are tremendous in this field. At a time when social innovation has emerged as a prime area of concern for all the institutions in the wake of global social challenges like rising inequality, sustainable development, climate change, etc. the policy-makers want to encourage social innovation which can solve the problems and reduce wide disparities in development despite the limitations of resources. The cooperatives in India with their wide network, reach and based on members' strength can emerge as a lead player in social innovation if they devise effective policies to tap the power of social media and create job opportunities in this field for youth. This can also turn out to be a big image-building opportunity for them.

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<http://slideplayer.com/slide/6154446/>

## **Websources;**

[www.swachcoop.com](http://www.swachcoop.com)

<http://www.uwcc.wisc.edu/pdf/Providing%20clean%20energy%20through%20cooperatives.pdf>

[http://unosscl.undp.org/GSSDAcademy/SIE/Docs/Vol3/Snake\\_Venom.pdf](http://unosscl.undp.org/GSSDAcademy/SIE/Docs/Vol3/Snake_Venom.pdf)

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[http://www.researchersworld.com/vol3/issue3/vol3\\_issue3\\_1/Paper\\_07.pdf](http://www.researchersworld.com/vol3/issue3/vol3_issue3_1/Paper_07.pdf).