

Cooperative Action

Many opportunities for increased participation of women are open to a fisheries cooperative in an underprivileged community in Maharashtra, India

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Maharashtra is a prominent fishing state in India, with a coast line of 720 km and a fisher population of around 450,000, of whom around 55,000 are active fishers. The state has 304 registered primary marine fisheries cooperatives with a total membership of 114,000. The fisheries cooperatives are part of the strong producer-cooperative sector of rural Maharashtra with a history of over 100 years.

The fisheries cooperatives are formed with the objectives of production and marketing of fish. Many cooperatives have diversified their operations and added ancillary activities such as rendering economic assistance to fishers, undertaking grading, preservation, storage, transport and processing of fish. They also supply necessary fishery requisites like nets, ropes, oil and other requirements to cooperative members on economical rates.

The Adivasi Koli Machhimar Sakhari Sanstha (Tribal Fishermen Cooperative Society) is a cooperative with members from the Scheduled Caste community of the village Shrivardhan of Raigad district in Maharashtra. It was established in the year 1999 to improve competitiveness of its members through services, supply of fishery inputs and access to

Government benefit schemes for the fishing community.

The Cooperative Society has its own office building, office furniture and computers at the centre of village connected with telephone and internet facility. It owns assets worth around INR 840,000 (USD 12666). It has 162 members, all from the so-called Scheduled Caste community called Mahadev Koli. Ten members have Below Poverty Line (BPL) status, which serves as an entitlement to certain welfare provisions. Around sixty members were reported to be illiterate. This illiteracy was found especially among women members and the elderly. Most of the younger members were educated.

The male members of the cooperative are engaged in trawl net, *dol* net, gill net and traditional fishing practices. Seven members own trawlers. Twelve members have businesses related to *dol* net operations. Only one member operates with gill nets and there are no purse-seine net operators. There are 35 women members in the Society. They are involved in either fish processing or marketing of fresh or dry fishes in the local market.

The Cooperative members generally sell their own catch as the Cooperative is not able to provide marketing support to their members. Hence, data on quantum of fish caught by members of is not available with their office. Members sell their fish catch through auction at the landing centre of village after every fishing trip.

The Cooperative Society functions according to the Indian Cooperative Society Act of 1960. Its activities fall under the purview of the Registrar of Cooperative Societies of Raigad district. The Cooperative accounts are audited every year by an internal auditor as well as a Government auditor. The Cooperative holds an Annual General Meeting every year when the annual accounts are presented and passed and important decisions are ratified.

The Board of Management meets every month to discuss administration and financial issues. Two women members are part of the Board of Management. It was however observed that women's participation in the decision making of the Cooperative was poor. Most decisions were being taken by men. Women were not much aware of the operations of the cooperative

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and most did not attend the Annual General Meetings.

The Cooperative Society has three permanent employees, all from Scheduled Caste community.

The main functions of the Cooperative are supply of subsidized diesel to members, and getting members insured under Group Insurance schemes implemented by Maharashtra Government. However, many Government schemes and services meant for the Scheduled Caste community are not being accessed by the Cooperative. The Cooperative leadership attributed the poor implementation

of Government schemes to reasons such as lack of awareness, complex documentation requirement for availing Government schemes and lack of financial assistance from nationalized banks.

Members felt that the Cooperative should take initiative in marketing of fish catch, providing infrastructure facilities for landing and berthing of vessels, providing basic facilities at landing centres such as electricity, roads, drinking water, ice plant and fishery requisites shops. They also felt the Cooperative should proactively work to avail various Government schemes. ❏

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