

A Comparative Study on the Distribution and Membership of Primary and Multi-State Cooperative Societies in North East India: Trends and Regional Disparities

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Abstract

Cooperative movement in North East India has a major role to play in inclusive economic development and participation of the community. This paper provides a comparative account of the distribution and membership strength of Primary Cooperative Societies and Multi-State Cooperative Societies (MSCS) in the eight North Eastern states of India as on March 2024. The research, based on secondary data from the Ministry of Cooperation's Annual Report (2023–24), reveals significant disparities in the number and size of cooperatives among states. Assam and Manipur are fairly well connected but others like Mizoram, Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh are under-represented. Moreover, the limited presence of MSCS in the region requires more inter-state collaboration and policy support. The study concludes with proposals to strengthen the cooperative structures in less developed states to promote regional equity and sustainable economic participation through cooperatives.

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Introduction

Cooperatives have been acknowledged as a main tool for inclusive economic growth and social development for long, particularly in rural and marginalised areas. They are member-owned institutions guided by democratic principles and organised to facilitate collective action for mutual benefit. The cooperative sector in India has evolved as a strong backbone for agriculture, credit, marketing and allied activities with Primary Cooperative Societies (PCS) playing an important role at the grass root (Ministry of Cooperation, 2024) ^[5]. Besides, the Multi-State Cooperative Societies (MSCS) provide a distinct model that goes beyond state boundaries, building larger networks of economic cooperation and scale. The North Eastern Region (NER) of India consisting of eight states namely Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura, is characterised by a diverse socio-economic landscape marked by ethnic diversity, geographical isolation and uneven development. In some states like Assam and Manipur, cooperatives have a strong presence and member participation while in other states like Mizoram and Sikkim, cooperative penetration is poor (Ministry of Cooperation, 2024) ^[5]. The variations noted above suggest that the impact of state specific factors on the development and functioning of cooperative societies needs to be studied.

The present study is an effort to make comparative analysis of distribution and strength of membership of Primary and Multi-State Cooperative Societies in NER as on 31st March 2024. The study will utilise secondary data available in the Annual Report of the Ministry of Cooperation to detect patterns, disparities and policy gaps in the cooperative movement in the region. Understanding these patterns is important for developing region-specific strategies to strengthen cooperative infrastructure and improve socio-economic inclusion in the North East.

Review of Literature

The cooperative movement in India has been extensively studied for its role in rural development, poverty alleviation and community empowerment. Cooperatives have had an important role in promoting financial inclusion and agricultural development, especially through credit societies and marketing federations (Bedi, 2009) ^[1]. The democratic and participatory nature of the model makes it particularly relevant in socio-economically diverse and underserved regions like North East India.

Chandrakant and Shah (2015) ^[2] note that primary cooperatives help bridge the credit gap in rural areas through provision of affordable financial services, which lessens dependence on informal moneylenders. Verma (2020) ^[9] also emphasises the role of cooperative societies in the generation of local employment and the encouragement of small-scale entrepreneurship particularly in tribal and remote areas. However, the cooperative societies in the North Eastern Region (NER) are affected by multiple variables, including weak institutional support, low awareness, poor financial management, political interference (Das & Deka, 2016) ^[3]. Roy and Dey (2018) ^[7] noted that the cooperatives in states like Mizoram, Meghalaya and Sikkim are still not performing up to the mark due to infrastructural and administrative issues. Multi-State Co-operative Societies (MSCS) which transcend state boundaries are expected to help in greater integration and pooling of resources. However, the Ministry of Cooperation (2024) ^[5] states that their penetration in the NER is minimal, indicating a lack of inter-state collaboration and structural policy focus. The literature suggests that comparative regional analysis is needed to understand the socio-political and institutional dynamics that affect cooperative performance in the NER. The paper adds to the existing literature by analysing new data (2023–24) and assessing regional differences and proposing evidence-based policy interventions.

Objective of the Study

1. To analyse the primary cooperatives distribution and sectoral presence of MSCS in Northeast India.
2. To evaluate the possible impact of cooperative societies on rural and semi-urban development in the region.

3. To recommend policy options for enhancing the capacity of cooperative institutions and promoting inter-state cooperative models for inclusive development.

Research Methodology

This study employs a secondary data-based research methodology, using official statistics from the Annual Report 2023–24 of the Ministry of Cooperation. The data relates to the number and membership of Primary and Multi-State Cooperative Societies in eight North Eastern states. A comparative and descriptive analysis is used to pinpoint regional disparities and trends. The study highlights the need for quantitative assessment as it will provide meaningful insights into the patterns of cooperatives' distribution and the levels of participation, which can then be used as a basis for evidence-based policy recommendations to ensure balanced cooperative development.

Result and Discussion

The analysis of secondary data obtained from the Annual Report 2023–2024 of the Ministry of Cooperation reveals significant inter-state variations in the membership and distribution of Primary and Multi-State Cooperative Societies in Northeast India. The differences in cooperative development are caused by the differences in infrastructure, financial literacy, administrative assistance, and population size. States like Assam and Manipur have benefited from the historical foundations of cooperative movements and comparatively better institutional frameworks. In contrast, low penetration states are facing challenges such as difficult geography, poor connectivity, low knowledge and poor policy execution.

Greater awareness, easier ways to register, and international cooperation are also needed, as reflected in the under-representation of MSCS in most states. Cooperative education can be reinforced, member participation can be encouraged and digital infrastructure can be enhanced to bridge the development gap. Overall, the results highlight the need for regional policies and state-wise interventions to promote equal economic participation and balanced cooperation development in Northeast India.

Table 1: Status of Primary and Multi-State Cooperative Societies in North-East India (as on 31st March 2024)

Sl. No.	State	Primary Cooperatives	Total Members	Avg. Members per Society	MSCS Registered	Remarks
1	Arunachal Pradesh	1197	89545	75	1	Low overall scale, limited MSCS presence
2	Assam	11148	4318231	387	6	Highest membership and MSCS concentration
3	Manipur	11256	829340	74	4	High no. of cooperatives, low average size
4	Meghalaya	2656	240205	90	0	Moderate size, no MSCS
5	Mizoram	1229	49466	40	0	Lowest average membership, no MSCS
6	Nagaland	8118	310933	38	1	Strong base, but low MSCS representation
7	Sikkim	3793	116193	31	0	High society count with low outreach
8	Tripura	3142	511559	163	0	Moderate reach, lacks multi-state cooperatives
Total		42539	6465472		12	

Source: Ministry of Cooperation, Annual Report 2023–24

The data as presented in the Table 1 brings out the varied development of cooperative movements in the North-Eastern states of India. The region has 42,539 primary cooperative societies registered with membership of over 64.6 lakh. But societies and their members are unevenly distributed, suggesting differences in reach, participation and institutional support.

Assam leads in terms of number of members (43.18 lakh) and societies (11,148) indicating a strong cooperative infrastructure and deeper penetration in rural and semi-urban areas. Assam's cooperatives are also fairly populous, with an average membership per society of 387. Manipur has a marginally higher number of societies (11,256) but a lower membership base (8.29 lakh) which works out to an average of just 74 members per society. This indicates the existence of fragmented or smaller cooperatives,

perhaps community-oriented or sector-oriented. In contrast, states such as Mizoram, Nagaland and Sikkim have average membership per society ranging between 31 and 40 members. This could be a sign of weak outreach, operational inefficiencies or limited engagement. Tripura has a better membership density (163 per society) with more than 5.11 lakh members and 3142 societies, indicating moderate cooperative strength.

In the entire Northeast, there are only 12 registered Multi-State Cooperative Societies (MSCS). Assam has the most MSCS (6), Manipur is next (4) and Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland have just one each. Importantly, there is no MSCS presence in these states (Meghalaya, Mizoram, Sikkim and Tripura), which suggests the absence of inter-state cooperative collaboration, institutional bottlenecks or awareness.

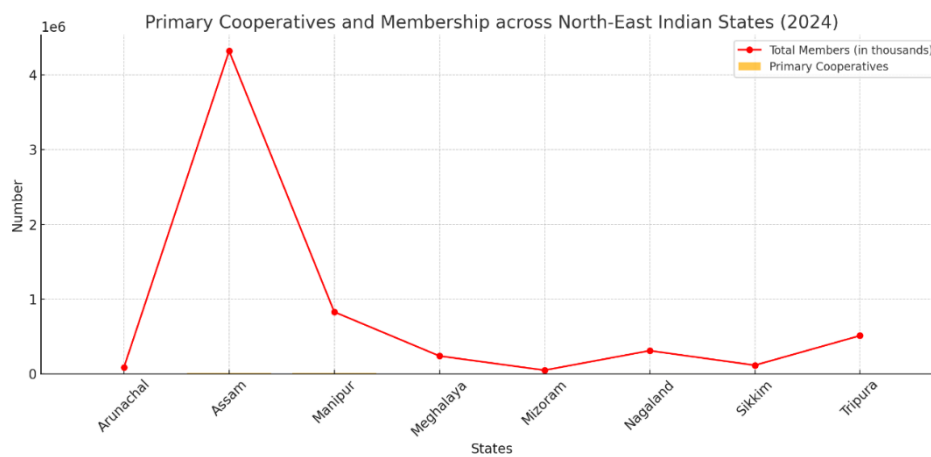


Fig 1

The data reveals the need for targeted policy interventions, capacity-building, and regional cooperative promotion strategies especially in underrepresented states. Encouraging the formation of larger and better-managed cooperatives, along with the registration of MSCS, could play a pivotal role in enhancing economic inclusion and local governance in the region.

• The Potential Impact of Cooperative Societies on Rural and Semi-Urban Development in the Region

Cooperative societies are well placed to promote equitable and sustainable development of rural and semi-urban areas of North East India. Their member-led structure fosters economic participation, mutual support and grassroots empowerment. In regions with dispersed settlements, ethnic diversity and limited access to formal institutions, cooperatives play a critical role as intermediaries connecting people to resources, markets and services.

1. Promoting Financial Inclusion and Credit Access: One of the major benefits of cooperative societies is their contribution toward providing access to affordable credit. In the region in particular in tribal belts and hilly areas most of the rural households do not have access to commercial banking facilities. Cooperative credit societies make small loans for agriculture, petty trade, livestock and emergency needs at relatively low rates of interest. It reduces the indebtedness of rural households and builds resilience amongst the vulnerable (Chandrakant & Shah, 2015) [2].

2. Rural Livelihoods and Employment: Cooperatives through collective enterprises in agriculture, horticulture, handloom, sericulture, dairy and fisheries provide income generating opportunities to rural youth, women and small producers. Consumer cooperatives and service-based cooperatives (e.g. transport and housing societies) provide employment and business avenues in semi-urban areas. These efforts contribute to curbing the rural-urban migration and fostering local economic stability.

3. Support for Agricultural Development and Food Security: Agricultural cooperatives provide access to high-quality seeds, fertilisers, farm equipment and irrigation assistance. They also advocate organic farming, community farming and storage infrastructure in the form of cold chains and godowns. Cooperatives play a key role in improving food security and farm incomes by reducing input costs and increasing yields.

4. Empowering women and marginalised communities: Women's cooperatives and federations of self-help groups are emerging as powerful platforms for gender empowerment. Cooperatives provide an opportunity for women from several tribal and matrilineal communities of the North East such as those in Meghalaya and Nagaland to run enterprises, manage finances and take on leadership roles. Cooperatives are also a social safety net for the elderly, differently abled and marginalised ethnic groups.

5. Improving Market Linkages and Economic Integration: Cooperatives enhance the market power of small producers through aggregation and collective bargaining. These are useful for branding, value addition and direct to consumer marketing especially in industries such as handloom, handicraft, agro processing. Inter-state trade, exchange of knowledge and investment can be further promoted to integrate the region economically by encouraging Multi-State Cooperative Societies (MSCS).

6. Promote Democratic Governance and Community Development: Cooperatives are based on the principles of voluntary membership, democratic control and equitable sharing of benefits. This model of participative governance encourages transparency, accountability and community ownership. Cooperatives serve as local governance institutions in remote areas where state institutions are less accessible to mediate services such as education, health and civic amenities.

The cooperative model presents a decentralised, inclusive and culturally adaptable approach to rural and semi urban development in North East India. While some states have been successful in cooperative outreach, other states remain unrepresented. Capacity building, digitalisation, legal reforms and financial support can all improve the cooperative ecosystem and unlock its full potential. Cooperatives as vehicles of socio-economic transformation should be strategically placed in regional development planning to bridge disparities and promote sustainable development.

- **Policy Recommendations to Strengthen Cooperative Institutions and Foster Inter-State Collaboration for Inclusive Development in North East India**

Cooperative institutions play a vital role in promoting inclusive development, especially in diverse and underdeveloped regions like North East India. Strengthening these institutions through targeted policy measures and encouraging inter-state collaboration can address regional disparities, improve resource sharing, and enhance socio-economic outcomes across the eight North Eastern states.

1. Strengthen Institutional Capacity and Governance

- **Capacity Building:** Conduct regular training programs for cooperative members, board officials, and local leaders on financial management, governance, digital literacy, and compliance.
- **Professionalization:** Appoint trained managers and auditors in larger cooperatives to ensure efficient and transparent operations
- **Democratic Functioning:** Enforce timely elections, transparency norms, and active member participation to uphold cooperative principles.

2. Enhance Financial and Technical Support

- **Credit and Capital Access:** Establish a dedicated cooperative development fund at the regional level for infrastructure, working capital, and innovation grants.
- **Subsidized Loans:** Provide concessional loans and refinance options through NABARD and State

Cooperative Banks, especially for weaker and tribal-area cooperatives.

- **Technology Adoption:** Promote the digitization of cooperative operations (MIS, mobile banking, e-marketing) with technical support and incentives.

3. Promote Inclusive and Sector-Specific Cooperative Models

- **Women and Youth Cooperatives:** Encourage gender-focused and youth-led cooperatives with targeted schemes, seed funding, and mentorship.
- **Value Chain Integration:** Support agro-based, handicraft, dairy, and eco-tourism cooperatives that utilize local resources and promote employment.
- **Health and Education Cooperatives:** Incentivize cooperatives delivering community-based services in remote areas, bridging state service delivery gaps.

4. Facilitate Inter-State Cooperative Collaboration

- **Promote Multi-State Cooperative Societies (MSCS):** Simplify MSCS registration, provide guidance cells in each state, and incentivize cross-border cooperatives in marketing, warehousing, and value chains.
- **Regional Cooperative Forums:** Establish a North East Cooperative Council (NECC) to coordinate efforts, share best practices, and harmonize cooperative policies across states.
- **Joint Ventures and Federations:** Support the creation of inter-state cooperative federations in sectors like handicrafts, bamboo, and organic produce for scale and branding.

5. Improve Policy Convergence and Institutional Linkages

- **Convergence with Flagship Schemes:** Link cooperative development with programs like PMFME, DAY-NRLM, PMKSY, and Atmanirbhar Bharat to enhance outreach and resource flow.
- **Academic and Research Collaboration:** Promote partnerships between cooperatives, research institutions, and universities for evidence-based planning, monitoring, and innovation.

6. Monitoring, Evaluation, and Accountability

- **Data Systems:** Create a regional cooperative data dashboard for tracking performance, finances, membership, and impact across sectors and states.
- **Impact Audits:** Institutionalize social and economic audits of cooperatives to measure development outcomes, inclusion, and sustainability.
- **Grievance Redressal:** Set up cooperative ombudsman mechanisms at state and regional levels for conflict resolution and grievance handling.

By adopting these policy interventions, governments and stakeholders in North East India can revitalize the cooperative movement as a people-centric, inclusive, and sustainable development force. A robust cooperative sector not only enhances local economies but also builds regional solidarity and resilience.

Conclusion

This comparative study of Primary and Multi-State Cooperative Societies across North East India highlights significant regional disparities in the distribution and membership of cooperatives. While states like Assam and Manipur demonstrate strong cooperative networks with high membership, others such as Mizoram, Sikkim, and Arunachal Pradesh reflect limited outreach and institutional presence. The analysis also reveals a striking underrepresentation of Multi-State Cooperative Societies (MSCS), suggesting untapped potential for inter-state collaboration and integration.

These disparities point to broader issues such as uneven policy implementation, lack of awareness, inadequate infrastructure, and institutional weaknesses. Strengthening cooperative institutions through targeted policy interventions, capacity building, and financial support is essential to ensuring that all states benefit equitably from the cooperative model. Promoting multi-state cooperative ventures can further enhance market access, resource pooling, and economic resilience across the region. Ultimately, revitalizing the cooperative movement in North East India can play a transformative role in achieving inclusive, sustainable, and community-driven development.

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