

*In First Person***Strength in Solidarity: The Power of Cooperative Societies in India**

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In the evolving landscape of India's socio-economic development, cooperative societies remain one of the most enduring models of collective empowerment. From the dairy revolution led by Amul to the financial security mechanisms established by legal fraternities, cooperatives have continuously proved their relevance by bridging systemic gaps and fostering economic resilience among vulnerable communities.

My journey with the Advocates' Mutually Aided Co-operative Society began in 1999, born out of a deep concern for the welfare of legal professionals. For over 13 years, I had the privilege of serving the society—as its Founder Secretary, President, and Director. Our story is a compelling testament to how grassroots action can bring about structural change.

The economic reality in the early 1980s was sobering. While about 10% of advocates in Hyderabad enjoyed affluence, nearly 50% lived below the poverty line. The legal profession, once dominated by the elite, had opened its doors to aspirants from modest backgrounds, thanks to the proliferation of law colleges. However, without institutional financial support—no pension, no provident fund, and strict prohibitions on alternate employment—young advocates faced a decade-long struggle before attaining financial stability.

It was during this period that we witnessed distressing incidents that exposed the fragility of the profession's support systems. A seasoned advocate died of a heart attack, and his family couldn't afford to transport his body. Another leading lawyer succumbed to illness after depleting all his savings, leaving his family destitute. These tragedies galvanized the legal community into action.

In 1999, the City Civil Court Bar Association of Hyderabad resolved to establish a cooperative society modelled after the successful Bangalore Advocates' Society. Registered under the Mutually Aided Co-operative Societies Act, our society began with modest operations—selling court fee stamps and legal stationery. Despite early setbacks, including the fallout from the Telgi stamp scam, we diversified and expanded. Today, the society operates

14 branches across Hyderabad and Ranga Reddy districts, offering deposit services, stationery supplies, and critical welfare benefits to thousands of advocates.

Over time, our society has significantly expanded its welfare footprint:

- i. Health Insurance: Enhanced from ₹20,000 to ₹2,50,000 per member and nominee.
- ii. Death Benefits: Increased from ₹1,00,000 to ₹7,00,000.
- iii. Funeral Support: Raised from ₹20,000 to ₹50,000.
- iv. Infrastructure Contributions: Funded libraries, e-libraries, court halls, and lobbies.
- v. Cultural and Educational Support: Instituted scholarships and hosted cultural events for the legal fraternity.
- vi. Land Acquisition: Secured prime real estate in Munnerabad and Uppal Bhagayath to develop future facilities for advocates.
- vii. Annual Revenue: The society recorded a remarkable income of ₹21 crore in 2023–2024, reflecting sustainable operations and prudent financial management.

Despite scepticism in its initial years—especially in light of a previously failed cooperative effort—our society has thrived due to its structured governance. We adopted a three-tiered membership system:

1. Waiting List Members – entitled to basic benefits, viz. , disbursement of Rs. 50,000/- ex gratia payment for funeral expenses within one hour of knowledge of death, Rs. 5 lakh ex gratia compensation in case of natural death and Rs. 10 lakh ex gratia compensation upon accidental death.
2. Associate Members – 250 promoted annually from the waiting list, members entitled to all benefits except shareholding and voting rights.
3. Shareholders – 250 promoted yearly from associates, eligible for all schemes and voting rights.

## **Governance and Management Framework**

### **1. Democratic Governance Structure**

The Society is governed through a grassroots democratic process, ensuring representation and rotation of leadership:

- Every year, Co-Directors are elected from each of the four branches of the Society.
- Directors who serve for a continuous period of three years step down, allowing space for new leadership and preventing concentration of authority.

- Among the 12 elected directors, the President, Vice President, Secretary, and Treasurer are chosen internally for a term of one year, ensuring balanced responsibilities and collective leadership.
- At present, the Society has 14 branches in various districts of Hyderabad and Ranga Reddy.

## **2. Transparent Decision-Making Process**

All major decisions are made exclusively by the Board of Directors. For key welfare schemes or policy proposals. A 4-member study group—comprising current and former directors—is formed to conduct feasibility assessments and provide recommendations.

The Board of Directors then deliberates thoroughly on the report and passes a formal resolution before implementation. This layered approach ensures consultation, consensus-building, and thoughtful execution of all initiatives.

## **3. Financial Integrity & Accountability**

Not a single paisa is spent without a resolution passed by the Board. Directors do not have any individual discretionary power over funds or operations. The Society's General Body Meeting is convened annually to ratify financial accounts, receive feedback and suggestions from the broader membership base and Propose and approve new welfare schemes.

## **4. Orientation and Ethical Commitment of Directors**

All first-time elected directors undergo an orientation to understand the foundational purpose of the Society, their duties and ethical responsibilities. They are made aware that serving the Society is a rare and noble opportunity, and that such service is akin to doing the work of God—a reflection of the Society's core values rooted in empathy and duty.

## **5. Institutional and Judicial Support**

The Society enjoys unwavering institutional support from the Judiciary. Premises, counters, and office space are provided free of cost by the High Court and judicial authorities. This support reinforces the Society's standing and enables it to function efficiently without incurring overhead burdens.

**6. Generation and Increase of Revenue:**

The members are required to pay a one-time membership fee of Rs. 10,000/- at the time of application. The Society has a designated office within the Court premises, out of which the society sells stationery, court fee and notary stamps. That apart, the society also lends money by mortgaging gold, and these activities account for merely 5% of the revenue generated by the society. The major chunk or residual revenue comes from issuance of Fixed Deposits to be placed as surety or bail bonds. The said amount is thereafter deposited with a nationalised bank, which earns interest that adds to a major portion of the revenue. At present, the Society has Rs. 1000 crores worth of deposits, and its own assets running into Rs. 200 crores.

**7. Welfare Initiatives**

The Society provides scholarships, and awards students in proportions of Rs. 10,000/- for achieving 85% marks, Rs. 15,000/- for 85% and so on. In addition thereto, the Society has set up e-libraries in all Courts, constructed two canteen buildings for advocates, and renovated most bar associations including AC facilities. Notably, in the silver jubilee year, all members were given silver coins of 10 gm each.

**8. Consistency and Internal Stability**

Over its 25-year journey, the Society has never faced any major disputes or legal challenges. Minor issues that arose were resolved amicably through internal mediation, underscoring the strength of internal trust, mutual respect, and cohesive leadership.

**Conclusion**

This deeply rooted governance model—marked by democratic participation, ethical leadership, robust financial accountability, and transparent policy formulation—has made the Advocates' Mutually Aided Co-operative Society a model institution in the cooperative sector. Its exemplary management practices have laid a strong foundation for trust, sustainability, and service-oriented growth, earning the confidence of advocates and institutional stakeholders alike.