

Efforts to rejuvenate primary fisher cooperative societies in South 24 Parganas District, West Bengal

Subrato Ghosh

122/1V, Monohar Pukur Road, P.O. Kalighat, Kolkata – 700026, West Bengal, India. Email: subratoffa@gmail.com

Importance of fisher cooperative societies

In 1988, the Secretary of the West Bengal Fisheries Department stated that the development of fisheries and the welfare of fishing communities must go hand in hand. One cannot succeed without the other. Cooperatives were seen as essential to this joint development process¹.

An article in this magazine (July–September 2024) argued that fishermen and women should be organised at the community level. This would help solve problems like weak management of local fisheries and lack of institutional support. Many people working in fisheries and aquaculture come from disadvantaged backgrounds. They need better systems for livelihood support.

Fisheries Cooperative Societies were created in India to meet these needs. They play a key role in improving the economy and sustainability of the fisheries sector. These cooperatives encourage teamwork and help members share benefits. They also provide jobs, food security, and social protection to poor and rural communities. By working together, members can get better access to nutritious foodfish².

At the Sixth Indian Fisheries Forum in 2002, a speaker explained how cooperatives can help farmers use both open water and confined water more efficiently. Scientific methods and teamwork can improve fish production and meet market demands—both domestic and international. In India, strong farmer cooperatives can boost fish production and help the country become more self-reliant¹.

According to a former Managing Director of the West Bengal State Fishermen Cooperative Society, a Fishery Cooperative Society (FCS) is a group where professional fishers voluntarily join together. They work as equals to improve their own economic conditions through honest and fair means. Developing fishery cooperatives is an important way to raise the income of fishermen. In West Bengal, support from government departments has made it easier to grow these cooperatives³.

Many Fisher Cooperative Societies (FCSs) have been established near medium and large freshwater bodies across West Bengal. These include beels, which are large, closed freshwater wetlands. Most members of these societies are villagers with low incomes and limited education. The aim is to improve their socio-economic conditions.

It would be beneficial to fix the term of any Board of Directors or newly formed Committee in a Primary Fisher Cooperative Society (PFCS) to either three or five years⁴.



Author conducting Election process at Nalban 2-1 FCS.

In rural West Bengal, cooperative-based fish production is vital. This approach should be expanded widely, as it can help increase the income of fishing and fish-farming families⁵.

According to Prof. V. Sapovadia of the National Institute of Cooperative Management in Gujarat, the fisheries and aquaculture sector becomes stronger through mutual cooperation among individual fishermen and fish farmers.

Currently, there are 906 registered PFCSs in all 23 districts of West Bengal (Source: Handbook of Fisheries Statistics, Department of Fisheries, Government of West Bengal).

Fisheries and aquaculture in South 24 Parganas, West Bengal

South 24 Parganas has strong potential for producing valuable finfish and shellfish. The district is suited for both freshwater and brackish water aquaculture, as well as marine fisheries.

It is the largest district in West Bengal by area. It includes 7 municipalities, 29 community development (CD) blocks, and 312 gram panchayats.

The district is close to Kolkata, a major city. This helps fish farmers easily transport their products—such as ornamental fish, shrimp, prawns, and inland finfish—to large wholesale markets within and outside the state.

West Bengal is the second-highest fish-producing state in India, after Andhra Pradesh. Among West Bengal's 23 districts, South 24 Parganas ranks second in annual production of table fish.

In 2021–2022, the district produced 262,000 tonnes of table fish. This rose to 288,000 tonnes in 2022–2023. The supply now exceeds the district's annual demand for fish.

Vested water bodies handed over to PFCSS

Most large water bodies in West Bengal are vested, meaning they are owned by the government. The state government has leased many of these to Fisher Cooperative Societies as a matter of policy.

Two major reforms in West Bengal have helped this process^{9, 11}:

- Management and administration of FCSs were transferred to the Fisheries Department.
- Government-owned fishery waters were allocated to fishermen's cooperatives.

The government leases inland water bodies larger than 5 acres (about 2 hectares) to PFCSS. These leases usually last 3 to 7 years, with an option to renew for another 3 to 5 years. The leases are given through a bidding process to encourage sustainable fish farming and improve the livelihoods of fish farmers.

The leasing process is managed by the office of the Additional District Magistrate (Land and Land Reforms) or the Sub-Divisional Officer, depending on where the water body is located. South 24 Parganas has five such subdivisions.

According to the West Bengal Inland Fisheries Policy, 2023 (published in the Kolkata Gazette on 27 July 2023), the state will amend rules to allow private groups and community-based organisations to take part in the first round of the bidding process. PFCSS and Fish Production Groups (FPGs) will get a 5% price preference over the highest bidder.

Auction notices for leasing ponds and larger water bodies are published by the Zilla Parishad of each district or the office of the ADM (Land Reforms).

Members of all PFCSSs are responsible for using their leased water bodies properly. They must follow correct fish farming methods and avoid destructive or banned fishing gear.



Author as ARO giving winning certificate to a candidate at Nalban 2-1 FCS.



Author with members of Nalban 2-1 FCS.



Fish fingerlings released into water body of Nalban 2-1 FCS.

They should not harvest Indian major carps (IMCs) from culture ponds if the fish weigh less than 500 grams. Instead, they should focus on producing stunted fingerlings or yearlings of IMCs for stocking.

Members are also encouraged to plant trees, flowers, or vegetables on the embankments around the water bodies.

Only those who earn their livelihood from fish catching, fish farming, or related activities are eligible to become members of a PFCS.

Election of active fisher cooperative societies

There are 158 FCSs in South 24 Parganas District. These are located in areas under the Kolkata Municipal Corporation, municipalities, and community development blocks. All are registered with the Assistant Director of Fisheries (ADF), under the Directorate of Fisheries, Government of West Bengal.

Currently, 43 of these societies are actively functioning. This includes 2 Central Fishermen Cooperative Societies (CFCSs) and 41 PFCSs. Among the PFCSs:

- 26 are involved in freshwater carp farming, mostly in government-owned water bodies leased to them.
- 3 focus on ornamental (aquarium) fish rearing.
- 12 are engaged in marine and estuarine capture fisheries and fish drying.
- Nine PFCSs use domestic wastewater (sewage-fed water) for carp culture. Six PFCSs are located within the Kolkata Municipal Area.

At the village level, PFCSs are responsible for fish production. CFCSs, which operate mainly at the district level, handle the supply of inputs for fisheries and aquaculture.

According to regulations, each PFCS involved in freshwater fish culture must have at least 10 active members. Each member must own a fish pond (of any size). The combined water area managed by the PFCS must be at least 10 acres (about 4 hectares).

In recent years, some PFCSs at the block level have continued operations without a CEO or Board of Directors. These societies are not eligible for government support. As a result, it became urgent to start the election process.

During September and October 2024, secretaries or acting secretaries of several PFCSs sent formal requests to the Cooperative Election Commission (CEC) of West Bengal and the ADF of South 24 Parganas. They asked for permission to hold elections for their Board of Directors, since the terms of their elected committees had expired in 2022 or earlier. In the meantime, nominated boards had been managing these societies with ADF approval.



Winning certificate presented by ARO at Chachcharia FCS (Courtesy CEO of the Society).



Supply of pelleted fish feed to Chachcharia FCS (Courtesy CEO of the Society).



CEO and members of Chachcharia FCS.

These letters were supported by the respective CEOs of the FCSs. Following a directive from the Secretary of the CEC dated 11 September 2024, it was decided that elections must be held for all CFCSs and PFCSs in the district. After completing their audits and annual general meetings, several PFCSs requested the ADF to take steps and approve elections for their Boards of Directors.

Election Procedure

The Cooperative Election Commission in West Bengal was set up under Section 96 of the West Bengal Cooperative Societies Act, 2006. This was done through a government notification dated 15 March 2012. As per a later notification dated 10 April 2012, the CEC is responsible for conducting elections for all cooperative societies, including Fishermen Cooperative Societies.

According to the West Bengal Cooperative Society Rules, 2011, the CEC appointed the Assistant Director of Fisheries, South 24 Parganas, as the Returning Officer (RO) for elections in all FCSs in the district. The RO assigns duties to Assistant Returning Officers (AROs), following the CEC's notification dated 16 May 2012.

The ADF/RO also serves as the Ex-Officio Assistant Registrar of Cooperative Societies in the district. The RO appoints departmental officers (such as Fishery Extension Officers or Assistant Fishery Officers) as AROs to manage the elections of Delegates and Boards of Directors for each FCS.

The ARO asks the PFCS CEO to submit the following documents:

- Certified copy of the Member Register.
- Bye-law (Upo-bidhi, in Bengali).
- Draft Electoral Roll.

These are used to prepare and publish the electoral roll and set the election schedule. All PFCS members are then informed about the upcoming election.

Each PFCS has 6 to 9 seats for election, as per its bye-law. These include reserved seats (for women or Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribe members) and unreserved seats (General category).

The steps of the election process, carried out on specific dates, include:

- Publication of Draft Voter List.
- Period for claims and objections.

Author (left) with new elected Board of Directors of Naraharipur Agradut FCS Ltd.



Author conducting election process at Naraharipur Agradut Khunti FCS.

- Hearing and resolution of claims and objections.
- Publication of final voter list.
- Distribution and submission of nomination papers.
- Scrutiny of nomination papers.
- Declaration of valid nominations.
- Withdrawal of nominations (if any).
- Announcement of final candidates.
- Allotment of election symbols.
- Notification of polling date, time, and location.
- Vote counting and result announcement on the same day.

The draft voter list is displayed at the PFCS office notice board. A responsible person (usually the manager, past secretary, or acting president) is assigned to manage communication under ARO guidance. The CEO of the PFCS also plays a key role.



The final voter list includes each member's name, membership number, registration date, age, gender, address, and membership date. The ARO also checks the meeting resolution register, latest audit date, previous Board of Directors list, and financial records.

On election day, results are declared, and the ARO gives certificates to the winners. These elected members then form the new Board of Directors.

One week after the election, a formal meeting is held in the presence of the ARO and PFCS CEO to appoint office bearers. These include the Chairman (or President), Vice-Chairman (or Vice-President), Secretary, and Treasurer. The remaining members are designated as Board Members.

The ARO then issues an official notification listing the names and roles of the newly elected BoD.

Between December 2024 and April 2025, with the help of AROs, elections were successfully held for most of the 41 PFCSs and 2 CFCs in South 24 Parganas. New Boards of Directors have now been formed. The ADF of South 24 Parganas, as the district's fisheries head, is also the registering authority for all PFCSs.

Declaration of Election When a Seat Is Uncontested

During the PFCS election process, if the number of valid candidates is equal to or fewer than the number of available Board of Director (BoD) seats, the election is not held for those seats.

In such cases, the Assistant Returning Officer (ARO) officially declares, as per the rules in the CEC notification, that the nominated individuals are elected unopposed to the BoD of the PFCS.

Benefits provided to PFCSs in South 24 Parganas in recent times

Between January and mid-February 2025, seven selected Primary Fishermen Cooperative Societies (PFCSs) received inputs under the "Development of Sewage-Fed Fisheries" scheme (2024–2025). The Department of Fisheries, Government of West Bengal, provided Indian major carp fingerlings weighing 50–75 grams and calcium oxide (lime). This scheme supports PFCSs that use treated domestic wastewater from Kolkata for carp culture in grow-out ponds.

In 2024–2025, another group of PFCSs received inputs under the "Big Fish Production in Big Water Bodies" scheme. These included Indian major carp yearlings (100–150 grams), floating pellet fish feed, and quicklime. This scheme aims to promote large-scale production of major carps in big freshwater ponds managed by PFCSs.

During 2023–2024, under the scheme "Distribution of Fishing Nets and Fishery Requisites in Inland and Marine Sectors", eligible PFCSs received fishing equipment. These included drag nets (66 metres long) and aluminium hundis (50 cm diameter), with more than one unit provided to each PFCS.



Newly-elected BoD of a FCS with ARO Madam (Courtesy FEO, Canning-I CD Block).



New Board of Directors of Madhabnagar Young FCS (Courtesy FEO, Patharpratima Block).

Under the Fishermen Old Age Pension scheme, elderly and infirm fishermen who are members of CFCs and PFCSs in South 24 Parganas receive a monthly pension of ₹1,000. This provides financial security to poor fishermen in their old age.

One PFCS was selected to receive a subsidy under the "Medium-Scale Ornamental Fish Rearing Unit" scheme in 2022–2023. This falls under the Pradhan Mantri Matsya Sampada Yojana / Banga Matsya Yojana and is jointly funded by the Central and State Governments.

In February and March 2023, members of all active PFCSs in South 24 Parganas participated in need-based training sessions organised by the Department. These were held over three days in batches at conference halls in CD Block offices.

The training covered a wide range of topics, including:

- Fishing ban periods and marine fishery regulations.
- Government relief schemes for marine fishermen.
- Conservation of important species like *Tenualosa ilisha* (hilsa).
- Hygienic fish drying and improved methods.
- Safety at sea and post-harvest loss reduction.
- Fish preservation, processing, and handling.

- Prohibition of harmful chemicals.
- Management of beels and promotion of pen culture.
- Inland Fisheries Act and wetland conservation.
- Scientific farming of new freshwater and brackish water species.
- Monitoring water and soil quality in ponds.
- Cooperative registration, by-laws, audits, and inspections.
- Management of PFCSSs, including AGMs, accounts, and records.
- Appointment of CEOs and special officers.
- Internal functioning of PFCSSs and fair benefit sharing among members.

These training programmes were designed to strengthen PFCS operations and improve fisheries management.

End note

My first abstract paper was published in the Abstract Book of the National Seminar on Human Resource Development in Fisheries and Aquaculture for Eastern and North-Eastern India, organised by ICAR-CIFE Kolkata Centre, held on 14–15 March 2002. I was a second author while studying MSc (Previous Year) at Barkatullah University, Bhopal. The study examined the success of a Fisheries Federation managing the Tawa Reservoir in Hoshangabad District, Madhya Pradesh. The federation included 33 FCSs and over 1,000 fish farmer members, and significantly improved fish production.

Since India's independence, fishermen in West Bengal have formed Fisher Cooperative Societies (FCSs) wherever water bodies were available, driven by the need to earn a livelihood. The state government's policy of leasing vested freshwater bodies to fisher cooperatives helped strengthen the cooperative movement in the region. Over time, substantial support—both financial and managerial—has been provided to these societies⁶.

There is great potential for improving fish productivity and income generation in local communities through cooperative formation⁷. According to a former Joint Director of Fisheries (Technical), Government of West Bengal, village fishermen—by caste and profession—have organised into FCSs to manage fishing in rivers, beels, and reservoirs in a planned and sustainable way. This contributes not only to fish production but also to livelihood security and wise use of freshwater resources⁸.

Such cooperatives can support sustainable social development in rural and semi-urban areas, improving the welfare of their members.

Since the Cooperative Societies Act of 1904, efforts have focused on supporting collective rights through cooperatives. West Bengal was the second state in India to form FCSs, beginning in 1918¹⁰. One of the oldest is the Captain Bhery



Stocking of Indian major carp fingerlings by members of PFCS in a beel.



Government scheme on pisciculture in big water bodies at Mudyaly FCS.

Fishermen Cooperative Society, founded in 1927. Several such societies remain active, successful, and self-supporting. Their contributions to fisheries development and community welfare have been recognised at both the state and national levels through Fish Productivity Awards.

Fishing cooperatives are inherently focused on maximising resource use, improving livelihoods, and supporting the economic well-being of their members. Importantly, these cooperatives must grow out of the needs and aspirations of fishermen themselves¹².

In December 2025, I completed a five-day 'Training of Trainers' program on Cooperative Management and relevant Acts and Rules, organised by the West Bengal State Cooperative Union. It was aimed at building the capacity of Fisheries Department officers.

In South 24 Parganas, I served as Assistant Returning Officer for elections in the Nalban 2/1 Fishermen Cooperative Society (Bhangore-I CD Block) and Naraharipur Agradut Samudrik Matsyajibi Khuti Samabay Samity (Sagar CD Block). These elections were held on 20 January 2025 and 11 April 2025, respectively. I also served as Presiding Officer for the Board of Directors election of the Mudyaly Nature Park Fishermen Cooperative Society, KMC area, on 18 November 2024.

Most PFCS members are elderly and have low to moderate literacy levels. However, they are respectful, courteous, and carry valuable indigenous technological knowledge, grounded in experience and practicality.

Acknowledgement

This article was prepared in early 2025, designated as the United Nations International Year of Cooperatives. I sincerely thank the Assistant Director of Fisheries, South 24 Parganas District, Directorate of Fisheries, Government of West Bengal, who is also my departmental head. I also express my gratitude to all Fishery Extension Officers, Assistant Fishery Officers, and the District Fishery Officer of South 24 Parganas for their support and cooperation.

References

- Prasad, K. R., 2002. Role of Cooperatives in fisheries development and contribution towards sustainable food security by 2020. Souv. Sixth Indian Fisheries Forum, ICAR-CIFE (Deemed University), Mumbai publication, pp 186-193.
- Borkar, A. N., Yadav, H. and Kadam, M. M., 2024. Fish cooperatives: Development and performance through sustainable development goals for food and feed ecosystems. *Aquaculture Asia*, 28 (3): 22-26.
- Khulbe, B. and Majumdar, A. K., 1992. Sound fishery movement depends on effective member education programme. *Meenbarta* (quarterly journal of Department of Fisheries, Govt of West Bengal), pp 6-10.
- Mukherjee, S. 2014. Baponno Motsyojibi Samabaay Samity. *Anotito*, 1, March 2014.
- Zamaddar, Y. A. 2004. Sombhabonamoy samabaay motsyochaas. *Anotito*, 4, April 2004.
- Banerjee, A. R., 1992. Some issues before Fishery Cooperatives. *Fishamity*, Journal published by West Bengal Junior Fisheries Service Grade-I Association.
- Panigrahi, A. K. and Dana, S. S., 2002. HRD in aquaculture development through formation of Fishermen Cooperatives. In. *Nat. Sem. Human Resource Development in fisheries and aquaculture for eastern and north-eastern India*, ICAR-CIFE Kolkata Centre publication, pp 105.
- Department of Fisheries, Government of West Bengal, 1988. Fishermens' Cooperatives, In. *Fisheries Development in West Bengal at a glance*, pp 14-16.
- Biswas, S. N., 2015. Moystojibider unnoyon o machh chaas. *Panchayati Raj*, 7, 11-15.
- Mahanayak, B. and Panigrahi, A. K., 2024. An overview of Fishermen Cooperatives in West Bengal with special reference to Murshidabad district. In. S. Das, R. Stiffin, A. K. Panigrahi and J. K. Das (Eds). *Life as Basic Science – an overview and prospects for the future*, 1, pp 104-119.
- Roy, B. K., 2002. Glimpses of the activities of the West Bengal State Fishermen's Cooperative Federation Ltd. *Fishing Chimes*, 22 (1), 27-29.
- Director, ICAR-National Bureau of Fish Genetic Resources, 2009. Role of fishing cooperatives as potential co-managers of fish germplasm resource, pp 1-6.