

# Remembering Baviskar, Revisiting Cooperation

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Recalling B S Baviskar's very influential contribution to the sociology of cooperatives is a much-needed corrective in these times when markets are supposed to provide all the answers. This article looks back on this and the long-running difference of opinion he had with the National Dairy Development Board and Verghese Kurien.

The sad news of the passing of B S Baviskar (1930-2013) came rather late with a small obituary written by his long-time associate Donald Attwood. Baviskar lived a low-key life, focused on his work, and was meticulous and insightful in his research. That he was low key does not take away from the importance of his work, particularly in explaining cooperatives through the prism of society. In an era when sociological and anthropological research were looking at the caste structure, and extending the explanations of Sanskritisation and Westernisation following the influential work of M N Srinivas, Baviskar took to the unusual path of understanding cooperatives.

Till Baviskar came, cooperation was seen as something desirable and needed by society, but to be promoted by the state. The success of cooperatives was attributed to good leaders; failures to lack of autonomy, state interference and bureaucratisation. Cooperatives were placed nearer the state in the state-markets continuum, as an instrumentality in market intervention, and as an extended arm to deliver benefits. This was symbolised in the twin statements of the All India Rural Credit Survey Committee – “Cooperatives have failed, but they must succeed” and “If cooperation fails, there fails the last hope of rural India”. The committee advocated state partnership with cooperatives.

The counterpoint came from practitioners rather than literature. Verghese Kurien, spearheading the replication of Anand model cooperatives in dairying, vehemently argued for independent cooperatives located near markets in the state-market continuum. He said that there would be no Anand without Bombay (Mumbai), and if cooperatives in parts of the country had failed, the antidote was more cooperation, not state intervention. This was also the

time when sugar cooperatives emerged in Maharashtra.

Baviskar's research is to be located in this context. His explanation of cooperatives skirted the state (but not mainstream and party politics), and did not talk about charismatic leaders or about the “desirability” of cooperatives as a developmental tool. His work examined why co-operation worked in certain settings and failed in others; whether co-operation was inclusive (as it was touted to be); and what the fallout of successful cooperatives were. He provided a better understanding of cooperatives using a different framework.

## What Works

Baviskar's initial work focused on sugar cooperatives in Maharashtra. He later extended it to the sugar cane system in north India, and the dairy cooperative system in Gujarat. While most of his work on sugar cooperatives, and their caste and political economy dimensions was co-authored with his long-time research partner Attwood of McGill University, his work on the developmental dimensions of cooperation was in partnership with his one-time student Shanti George. The work with Attwood explained the conditions under which cooperatives worked. The work with George questioned the fallout of commercialisation of cooperatives, and created controversy. Baviskar, however, was unperturbed by controversy and continued to work in his understated way.

On why cooperatives work in certain settings, Baviskar and Attwood had an interesting explanation. Much of that work was initially published in the *Economic & Political Weekly*. The argument was that the sugar economy works extremely well when the farm is integrated with the factory. International examples showed sugar production units having captive plantations. This structure was not possible in India given the land distribution pattern. On this structure, they superimposed technology – sugar cane crushing and processing required heavy capital investment and these investments paid back only when there was adequate utilisation of capacity. Added to this was the perishability of cane,

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which had to be crushed within a day of the harvest, pointing to the need for detailed and meticulous coordination between growers and the factory.

Keeping the above factors in mind, they explained that the activity was successful in western Maharashtra because the caste structure brought large, medium and small farmers together. These farmers, all coming under the broad classification of Marathas, shared a common cultural and political identity with scope for economic mobility and kinship. While they did not attribute this to solidarity across classes, they attributed it to pragmatic alliances between different strata. The advantage for large farmers was that there was more efficiency and returns due to volumes, while for small farmers sugar cane became “viable” because of the factories. While small farmers individually supplied insignificant amounts of cane, their collective share was large enough to affect the economies of scale of a factory.

### The Politics of Cooperation

Applying this argument to north India where cane supply unions were organised as cooperatives but were not successful, showed the difference. The technical, perishability, and scale arguments remained, but the caste scenario changed. The north had many high-caste non-cultivating landlords confronting middle- and low-class tenants, and they were not amenable to pragmatic alliances. There was less cultural identity and more rigid relationships. Thus larger farmers supplied cane to private mills and got a decent return, while small farmers diverted their cane to local processing, or the suboptimal *gur* and *khandsari* (jaggery) units.

This argument was applied to the dairy cooperatives of Gujarat to explain the alliance between Patidars and Barias. After establishing the technical, scale, perishability, and alliance factors in the milk cooperatives of Gujarat, they went a step further to look at why there were differences in the interface with mainstream politics between sugar cooperative leaders and dairy cooperative leaders. The elections for sugar cooperatives were fought hard. Leaders

nurtured this constituency to enter mainstream state politics. The domination of Marathas was evident in cooperation and state politics. In the case of dairy cooperatives, Patidars controlled the milk cooperative system, but Barias were larger in number. It was therefore imperative that Patidars keep the cooperatives insulated from mainstream politics by using the rhetoric of depoliticisation. While in other parts of their research Baviskar and Attwood allude to the complex nature of processing that needed a range of professionals and technocrats working in the dairy system as an intervening variable, they stopped short of closely examining the role of one dominant personality in the Gujarat dairy system, Kurien.

The work of Baviskar and Attwood went unchallenged, except for a response by Gail Omvedt, which questioned the rigour of the work in Koprugaon. It was much later when Baviskar had almost moved on to the developmental dimensions of cooperatives that his initial work was challenged. This came from Tushaar Shah, then the director of the Institute of Rural Management, Anand (IRMA). Before this, Baviskar (with George) had a long-standing disagreement with the National Dairy Development Board (NDDB) and its chairman, Kurien. Baviskar’s work was from within the frame of sociology, development and inclusiveness. He raised larger questions on the design of the dairy programme, and the NDDB was unwilling to tolerate criticism. While the NDDB could have engaged with Baviskar, it chose not to and was dismissive of his arguments.

In this phase, Baviskar argued that milk cooperatives with their unique alliance of interests benefited large, medium and small farmers, but not landless labourers. The labourers had no access to fodder, which came from having access to land. Therefore, it was difficult for the landless to undertake dairying at the household level. He also questioned the technology of cross-breeding, and the effects of commercialisation on nutrition, particularly on the protein requirements of the poor. This criticism came on the heels of an explosive article written by Claude Alvares, which basically questioned

Operation Flood, the flagship programme of the NDDB. While Baviskar’s work was not related to the article by Alvares, the timing was too close for the NDDB’s comfort and it was too much for Kurien and the board to take.

Baviskar and George analysed the responses of the NDDB in a later paper, arguing that this controversy was not because of corruption, nepotism or misappropriation of resources. This was an honest, efficient, and dynamic programme, having widespread support, but what was being questioned were its design and delivery parameters. For a long time, Kurien and the NDDB had got away with multiple claims – on providing access to markets, on improving the incomes of farmers, on inclusiveness, on making the country self-sufficient in milk, and on improving cattle breeds. In some speeches, Kurien even claimed an effect on the caste system. In one of them, he asked, “Is it not a slap on the Indian caste system when a brahmin has to stand behind a harijan in the milk supply queue just because he came a minute later?” Similar claims of developmental impacts were made time and again. Baviskar pointed out that these were “selective alliances” made for specific purposes without calling for a communal system of production. While he was met with a rebuttal every time he wrote, the academic in Baviskar never lost his dignity. He would only respond with a well-considered research paper with further insights.

While Kurien and the NDDB defended their turf, there was some action from their side that acknowledged some of the points made by Baviskar. For instance, on the charge of commercialisation of dairying leading to protein deficiency at the household level, the Amul dairy began supplying soya nuggets to farmers to compensate for protein deficiency. They also argued that the poor could do with coarse grains and vegetable protein, while those who could afford it could graduate to animal protein. Like many a critic of the NDDB, Baviskar was unofficially declared persona non grata in Anand.

Shah’s criticism was unrelated to the tension between Baviskar and the NDDB, though the IRMA, with Kurien as its chairman, was considered a part of the NDDB

family. An economist, Shah argued that Baviskar's thesis of caste as an explanation for the success of cooperatives was insufficient; it lacked economic insights. While one could have applied the theories of the firm and transaction cost to cooperatives, Shah chose to use his own framework. He talked about the subsystems around which a cooperative worked, and argued that much more than caste, it would succeed if it was central to the inherent household economy of a member and assumed a position of salience. To buttress his argument, Shah cited a series of cooperative failures under the shadow of Amul in Kheda district – in chicory, cotton, tobacco and sugar – arguing that these operated under the same caste assumptions that Baviskar had propounded.

Baviskar was dignified in his silence and did not get into a war of words with Shah. For a change, the response from Anand was not acrimonious, but academic. Possibly Baviskar felt that he should leave Shah to his economic arguments. However, a little later, Shah blunted his criticism of Baviskar and came round to appreciating his work much more. Shah's fieldwork in Olpad of Surat district opened his eyes to a totally different explanation why cooperatives work – here, setting up cooperative institutions was “social work”, something that defied the economic logic of profit maximisation. Shah's later work was conciliatory to Baviskar. Thanks to Shah, Baviskar was able to make peace with Anand and he visited the IRMA several times after a

symposium on cooperatives in 1992, when there was a workshop to discuss the works of Baviskar and Shah.

I was neither a student nor a personal friend of Baviskar, though I had occasions to meet him at conferences. But like many in the field of cooperatives, I have benefited immensely his insights. Every time I saw him, I saw in him a dignified academic, tolerant of divergent views, insightful and without malice. His contribution to the field of cooperation is nothing short of seminal. In these days when markets seem to be providing all the explanations, we need more voices that understand markets in a larger social context. Baviskar was one of the rare academics who provided us with that insight.