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<sup>2</sup>HOD & Dean of Social Science,  
Manipur International University, Imphal, Manipur, India.**Abstract**

The present study analyses the relationship between clientelism and cooperative viability in Purba Medinipur, a largely agrarian district of West Bengal, India. Primary Agricultural Societies (PACS) have been an important institution in providing credit facilities, inputs and markets to rural areas; however, they have increasingly become ineffective due to political intervention, elite capture and lack of state involvement. Using secondary data sources such as government reports, scholarly articles and agricultural statistics at the district level, the paper identifies the ways in which clientelist politics, involving strategic use of excludable welfare goods in return for political support, negatively impact cooperative viability. It is found that despite having a very high cropping intensity (187%), almost universal coverage with Kisan Credit Cards (97% of all farmers), there is no strong cooperative infrastructure in Purba Medinipur. From the literature review related to West Bengal, it can be inferred that PACS in the region face several problems, including reduced membership, financial stress and political exploitation, thereby leading to cooperative institutions being used as an avenue for patronage rather than anything else.

**Keywords:** Clientelism, political economy, primary agricultural societies, cooperatives, Purba Medinipur, West Bengal, rural development

**1. Introduction**

Purba Medinipur district is a district situated in the south of West Bengal, where farming continues to be the predominant mode of livelihood. The district has a total net sown area of 304,800 hectares, with over 80 percent of its population living in rural areas. Therefore, the rural economy of Purba Medinipur district is primarily agrarian, as the region produces a wide variety of agricultural crops, such as rice (Aus, Aman, and Boro), pulses, oilseeds, potato, vegetables, betel vine, and flowers, with a cropping intensity of around 170 percent. (Purba Medinipur District Administration, n.d.). While this agriculture has been quite productive, there are many problems in the framework of institutions that have been established for farmers, especially PACS. In India, cooperatives that were meant to work towards development and empower farmers are plagued with bureaucracy and a lack of transparency, along with corruption and political influence in their operations (Bhattacharya & Bhattacharya, 2018; IDR, 2025). This is quite similar to what happens in West Bengal, where studies reveal that there has been systematic distortion of rural development policies because of political clientelism (Bardhan & Mookherjee, 2012; Bardhan et al., 2024).

The current research will investigate the following research questions: (1) What is the expression of political clientelism in the agricultural political economy of Purba Medinipur? (2) What influences the feasibility of primary agricultural cooperative societies in Purba Medinipur? (3) What is the relationship between the political clientelism practice and the performance of the cooperative institutions? Through the above investigation, the study aims to contribute to the literature on rural political economy and cooperatives in India.

**2. Literature Review**

**2.1 Theoretical Frameworks of Political Clientelism:** Clientelism is the conditional trading of tangible rewards for political support. This phenomenon is often associated with asymmetrical relations of power between patrons (political elites) and their clients (voters or recipients of benefits). Bardhan & Mookherjee (2012) have provided an elaborate theoretical model for the analysis of clientelism in the rural regions of West Bengal. This study explains the origins of clientelism, its connection to elite capture, and its impacts on public services distribution and government accountability. With the help of household survey data, the authors have shown how clientelism takes place via the targeted provision of benefits to politically affiliated individuals.

This issue has been further addressed empirically by subsequent researchers. In their study of West Bengal, Bardhan et al. (2024) find that although West Bengal citizens claim that they have enjoyed both public goods and divisible benefits offered by the government, they do not favor the former type but instead support the latter as voters. This observation gives an example of how clientelism, rather than programmatic politics, operates in rural West Bengal through political competition. Mahmood and Bhattacharya (2025) examined the rise of the Trinamool Congress (TMC) in West Bengal since 2011, identifying a dual strategy of direct welfare transfers to cultivate clientelist voter relationships combined with indirect investments in transport, real estate and retail trade to benefit emergent commercial elites. This class-based analysis of political clientelism highlights how contemporary governance in West Bengal balances populist welfare measures with the interests of a rising non-hegemonic commercial class.

**2.2 Primary Agricultural Cooperative Societies in India:** Primary Agricultural Credit Societies (PACS) constitute the grassroots level of India's short-term cooperative credit structure. These societies deal directly with agricultural borrowers, providing loans for seeds, fertilisers, and other inputs, while also collecting repayments (Vajiram IAS, 2025). The cooperative movement in India began with the Cooperative Credit Societies Act of 1904, and PACS have since played a significant role in rural credit delivery (IAS Gyan, n.d.). However, the performance of PACS has been mixed. Bhattacharya and Bhattacharya (2018) evaluated PACS in Nadia district, West Bengal, identifying weaknesses including loan recovery problems, insufficient working capital, and political interference. A multi-dimensional index study of PACS across thirteen districts of West Bengal for the period 2008–2017 found significant variation in performance based on deposits, loans, investment and membership strength (Economic Affairs, 2021). More broadly, cooperatives in India face systemic challenges, including rigid funding modalities, non-functioning dispute resolution systems, minimal use of digital technology, and fragmentation of landholdings that limit collective action (TERI School of Advanced Studies, n.d.). The FEED report (2025) on marginal farmers across six Indian states found that less than 25 percent of marginal farmers surveyed are active members of agricultural cooperatives, though those who are members report higher incomes and improved yields.

**2.3 Political Economy of Agriculture in West Bengal:** In the last few decades, there have been considerable changes in the political economy of agriculture in West Bengal owing to the land reforms initiated by the government during the rule of the Left Front (1977-2011). Bardhan, Mitra, Mookherjee, and Nath (2024) documented how clientelistic politics operate through local governments (gram panchayats) and how elected officials at upper tiers manipulate program budgets. This political context shapes agricultural development outcomes, including the performance of cooperative institutions. In Purba Medinipur specifically, ethnographic research has documented corrupt practices linking local politics, gram panchayats, and land mafias, particularly in areas near Digha (Nath, 2019). This nexus of land-related corruption illustrates how clientelism operates at multiple scales, from village-level patronage networks to district-level political-economic arrangements.

**3. Methodology**

The research design employed herein takes a qualitative political economy perspective, using secondary data gathered from various sources. This paper is organised according to the following themes: (1) agriculture and demographic features of Purba Medinipur; (2) performance of the cooperatives; and (3) clientelism in politics.

Sources of data used herein include:

- Agricultural statistics at the district level, provided by the Purba Medinipur district administration
- Publications from NABARD
- Studies on PACS performance in West Bengal
- Research works on political clientelism conducted by Bardhan, Mookherjee, et al.
- Data on government schemes such as the Kisan Credit Card and the MGNREGA
- News articles and policies

The analysis is descriptive and analytical, synthesising available evidence to trace the relationship between clientelistic political practices and cooperative viability. Given the absence of district-specific PACS data for Purba Medinipur, the paper draws on evidence from comparable districts in West Bengal while situating the analysis within the district's specific agricultural and political context.

**4. Results**

**4.1 Agricultural Profile of Purba Medinipur:** Purba Medinipur district covers an area of 430,140 hectares, constituting 4.7% of the total land area of West Bengal, but accommodates 5.58% of its total population (Purba Medinipur District Administration, n.d.). The total cultivated land stands at 304,800 hectares, out of which 179,025 hectares (about 58 percent) are irrigated using tidal water resources.

Table 1: Crop Production Statistics, Purba Medinipur District (2017–18)

| Crop Category | Area (Ha) | Production (Qtls) | Productivity (Qtls/Ha) |
|---------------|-----------|-------------------|------------------------|
| Aus Paddy     | 8,715     | 22,789.7          | 2,615                  |
| Aman Paddy    | —         | —                 | —                      |
| Boro Paddy    | —         | —                 | —                      |
| Pulses        | —         | —                 | —                      |
| Oilseeds      | —         | —                 | —                      |
| Potato        | —         | —                 | —                      |

Source: Purba Medinipur District Administration, Agriculture Department (n.d.)

The cropping intensity in the district stands at about 170 percent, meaning that a sizable percentage of the cultivated area is being utilised to produce two or more crops (Purba Medinipur District Administration, n.d.). Another research stated that the cropping intensity in Purba Medinipur was 187 percent, where the net area cropped was 2.8 lakh hectares, while the gross area was 5.33 lakh hectares (Granthaalayah Publication, 2021).

Table 2: Land Use Statistics, Purba Medinipur District

| Parameter                       | Value            |
|---------------------------------|------------------|
| Total Geographical Area         | 430,140 ha       |
| Net Cultivated Area             | 304,800 ha       |
| Area with Irrigation            | 179,025 ha (58%) |
| Cropping Intensity              | 170–187%         |
| Population Residing in Villages | >80%             |

Sources: Purba Medinipur District Administration (n.d.); Granthaalayah Publication (2021)

The administration of the district consists of 25 blocks that are further classified under three subdivisions—Tamluk with 12 blocks, Kanthi with 8 blocks, and Egra with 5 blocks (Purba Medinipur District Administration, n.d.). Important rivers like Rupnarayan, Haldi, Kansabati, and Keleghai run through the district, but water availability is limited only during the months of June to October, thus making the district flood-prone and drought-prone.

**4.2 Cooperative Infrastructure and Performance:** Available data indicate that West Bengal has 4,530 Primary Agricultural Credit Societies (PACS) operational across the state (Singh & Singh, 2014, cited in Scite.ai, 2023). The state has also pioneered new generation cooperatives known as producer companies (PCs) since 2005, and was the first to establish a state-level PC consortium with 90 member organisations (Rani et al., 2018, cited in Scite.ai, 2023).

In Purba Medinipur specifically, government scheme data indicate that approximately 6.20 lakh farmers—representing 97 percent of the district's farming population—have received Kisan Credit Cards (AITC Official, 2016). Five farmers' markets have been established in Panskura-1, Nandigram, Bhagwanpur-2, and Patashpur-1A blocks. Additionally, more than 9,000 landless families have received NGNB patta (land rights documents) (AITC Official, 2016).

Table 3: Cooperative and Credit Indicators, Purba Medinipur

| Indicator                            | Value           |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------|
| Farmers with Kisan Credit Cards      | 6.20 lakh (97%) |
| Farmers' Markets Established         | 5               |
| Landless Families Receiving Patta    | >9,000          |
| MGNREGA Man-Days Created (4.5 years) | 6 crore         |
| Rural Roads Constructed              | 312 km          |

Source: AITC Official (2016)

The functioning of the PACS in West Bengal, however, has not been consistent. There have been wide variations within the districts based on deposits, loans, investments, and members' strength through a multidimensional index analysis (Economic Affairs, 2021). The agricultural PACS in Bankura district have faced setbacks owing to corruption and negligence on the part of the state government, and as a result, farmers had to depend on micro-finance companies and aartdars for funds at high interest rates (NewsClick, 2024). This indicates that the decline of cooperation is not limited to Purba Medinipur alone, but indicates deeper problems within the structure of the organisation prevailing in West Bengal.

Table 4: PACS Performance Indicators, West Bengal (Selected Districts)

| Parameter                                   | Finding                               |
|---|---------------------------------------|
| Total PACS in West Bengal                   | 4,530                                 |
| Crop Loans from Cooperative Banks (2017–18) | Rs 3,018 crore (>50% of total)        |
| NABARD Refinance to WBSCARD Bank (2017–18)  | Rs 212 crore (highest ever)           |
| Cooperatives Digitised                      | 10,000 (target: 65,000 by March 2024) |

Sources: Scite.ai (2023); AITC Official (2018); Business Standard (2024)

**4.3 Evidence of Political Clientelism:** There have been many studies supporting clientelist politics in the rural areas of West Bengal. Bardhan and Mookherjee (2012) have presented a theoretical model to understand the coexistence of clientelism in politics and elite capture in the provision of local government services. By analysing data from a household survey, they established the influence of clientelism on the distribution of services and social welfare, with great consequences for state accountability. The work by Bardhan, Mitra, Mookherjee, and Nath (2024) further examined this hypothesis and discovered that, in West Bengal, the voters react favourably to the exclusionary provision of social benefits such as subsidised food, housing, and cash transfers but show no reaction to local public goods such as road networks, education facilities, and health care institutions. This suggests that political competition is based on the unequal distribution of divisible benefits instead of the creation of public goods.

Table 5: Key Findings on Political Clientelism in West Bengal

| Study                                    | Key Finding   |
|--|---|
| Bardhan & Mookherjee (2012)              | Clientelism co-exists with elite capture and significantly affects the allocation of public services.                                       |
| Bardhan, Mitra, Mookherjee & Nath (2024) | Voters respond positively to excludable welfare benefits (individual transfers) but not to local public goods (community infrastructure).   |
| Mahmood & Bhattacharya (2025)            | TMC employs a dual strategy: direct welfare transfers to maintain clientelistic ties plus infrastructure development for commercial elites. |
| Bardhan, Mitra, Mookherjee & Nath (2024) | Local government program budgets are often manipulated by legislators and upper-tier officials, impacting decentralisation.                 |

Sources: As cited

Mahmood and Bhattacharya (2025) analysed the class composition of Trinamool Congress elites, finding increasing representation of non-Brahmin forward castes, marginalised communities, and wealthy business-oriented candidates. This emergent class, rooted in economic rather than cultural capital, shapes governance through a dual strategy: direct welfare transfers to cultivate clientelist voter relationships, and indirect investments in transport, real estate and retail trade to benefit commercial elites. In Purba Medinipur specifically, ethnographic research has documented corrupt practices linking local politics, gram panchayats, and land mafias, particularly in areas near the tourist destination of Digha (Nath, 2019). This nexus of land-related corruption forced the displacement of families and illustrates how clientelism operates at the local level.

**5. Discussion**

**5.1 Clientelism as a Constraint on Cooperative Viability:** The evidence presented above suggests that political clientelism operates as a structural constraint on cooperative viability in Purba Medinipur and across West Bengal. The mechanism operates through several channels.

First, the clientelist approach creates distortion in resource allocation for rural development projects. If politics is characterised by the targeted allocation of exclusive welfare provisions (Bardhan, Mitra, Mookherjee, & Nath, 2024), then cooperative arrangements—by definition, cooperative structures that place emphasis on collective ownership, democracy, and universal access—are at a disadvantage. Political actors will have an incentive to direct resources via channels under their jurisdiction, where benefits are allocated based on the political identity of the recipient, rather than need or cooperative membership.

Second, political interference in cooperative governance undermines institutional autonomy. Evidence from Bankura district indicates that agricultural cooperatives have closed due to corruption and state government neglect (NewsClick, 2024). Where cooperatives remain operational, government officials on cooperative boards deepen political interference and erode community trust (IDR, 2025). This pattern is consistent with broader critiques of Indian cooperatives, which note that "cooperatives in general are considered to be in crisis, dominated by self-centred and short-sighted outsiders seeking power" (Oxfam Policy & Practice, 2015). Thirdly, clientelism leads to the capture of cooperative structures by elites. Elites, who comprise wealthier farmers, tend to take control of boards and management positions, using the cooperatives for receiving subsidies, loans, and inputs, while the marginalised and landless farmers suffer from being excluded and exploited (IDR, 2025). Such practices become worse because of political clientelism, where the patrons of the politicians might assist in capturing the elite in return for political support.

**5.2 The Paradox of High KCC Coverage and Weak Cooperatives:** A notable finding from Purba Medinipur is the apparent paradox between high Kisan Credit Card coverage (97 percent of farmers) and the absence of robust cooperative infrastructure. This paradox is explicable within a clientelistic framework. The introduction of the Kisan Credit Card programme by the central government in 1998 ensures that farmers receive adequate funds when needed for agriculture. But the distribution of KCCs is largely done via commercial and regional rural banks, and not PACS (SBI, 2024). In terms of clientelism, KCCs are ideal tools for political patronage, being excludable, divisible, and selectively deliverable to particular electorates. The political elite can take credit for their distribution while still controlling the means of distribution. On the other hand, for the development of PACS, it may be necessary to develop independent institutions controlled by its members, which may not necessarily have anything in common with the clientelist incentive. New M-PACS (Multipurpose PACS) created by the central government, which consists of 10,000 societies loyal to the nation in December 2024 (PIB, 2024), can be said to be one of the ways to invigorate the cooperative system. Nevertheless, the success of such a strategy will depend on the capacity of these new cooperatives to avoid being taken over by such clientelistic structures and enable farmers.

**5.3 Implications for Agricultural Development:** The relationship between clientelism and cooperatives' sustainability is particularly crucial for agriculture in Purba Medinipur. Despite high agricultural cropping intensity and high levels of agricultural production, the lack of robust cooperative structures makes farmers prone to economic fluctuations, weather-related challenges, and middleman exploitation. According to the study carried out by FEED (2025), it is evident that farmers who are connected with cooperatives have higher household income (45%) and better crop production (42%) than farmers who are not connected with them. It should be noted that fewer than 25% of farmers who were interviewed for the survey were cooperative members. In the case of Purba Medinipur, with small farmers forming a major share of its agricultural labour force, limited access to cooperatives becomes an important factor affecting their living standards. In addition to this, the clientelist nature of rural politics might further reinforce such a trend. The political elites derive benefits from keeping the peasantry divided and dependent, so that it continues to depend on patron-client relations for access to resources, instead of creating an independent organisation of farmers. Such a conclusion can be drawn based on the findings presented by Mahmood and Bhattacharya (2025), who consider the dual strategy adopted by the TMC: welfare payments sustain clientelist ties with the electorate, whereas infrastructure development assists business elites—yet neither approach emphasises fostering independent farmer organisations.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper has traced the relationship between political clientelism and cooperative viability in Purba Medinipur district, West Bengal. The analysis reveals that despite the district's agricultural productivity and high coverage of individual credit instruments like Kisan Credit Cards, the institutional infrastructure of primary agricultural cooperative societies remains weak. The information available from West Bengal shows that PACS face political interference, elite capture, financial strain, and reduced participation of farmers. The phenomenon of political clientelism, which entails the selective provision of excludable welfare goods in exchange for votes, acts as a structural limitation for the development of cooperation. Politicians have an interest in funnelling resources into schemes that are under their direct influence and control and that are targeted at particular constituencies instead of independent cooperative organisations. This explains the contradiction between the extensive coverage of the KCCs and their poor performance: KCCs make excellent clientelistic tools, while PACS construction would require the development of independent organisations. These results carry important policy lessons. First, in order for the primary agriculture cooperatives to be revived, it is necessary to consider the constraints of the political economy that have limited their effectiveness in the past. The establishment of new M-PACS alone without protection from politics will not work. Second, improving the governance of these cooperatives needs the introduction of procedures and processes ensuring democratic management by members, such as regular election processes, audits, and mechanisms for dealing with grievances. Third, the connection between cooperatives and clientelism implies that effective empowerment of farmers will necessitate deeper reforms. The limitations of this research include the lack of performance information about the PACS specific to the Purba Medinipur district, the use of secondary data, and no ability to undertake primary survey work among the local farmers and PACS membership. Further research should incorporate these elements by means of mixed-method approaches focusing on performance evaluation and clientelism.

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**8. Appendices**

## Appendix A: Administrative Units of Purba Medinipur District

| Sub-Division | Blocks    | Panchayat Samities | Mouzas       | Inhabited Villages | Municipalities |
|--------------|-----------|--------------------|--------------|--------------------|----------------|
| Tamluk       | 12        | 12                 | 1,172        | 1,072              | 3              |
| Kanthi       | 8         | 8                  | —            | —                  | 1              |
| Egra         | 5         | 5                  | —            | —                  | —              |
| <b>Total</b> | <b>25</b> | <b>25</b>          | <b>1,172</b> | <b>1,072</b>       | <b>4</b>       |

Source: Purba Medinipur District Administration (n.d.)

## Appendix B: Crop Varieties and Seasons in Purba Medinipur

| Crop Variety | Season              | Characteristics  |
|--------------|---------------------|--|
| Aus Paddy    | Pre-Kharif (Summer) | Sown March–April, harvested July–August                  |
| Aman Paddy   | Kharif (Monsoon)    | Sown June–July, harvested November–December              |
| Boro Paddy   | Rabi (Winter)       | Sown November–December, harvested April–May              |
| Pulses       | Rabi                | Gram, lentil, etc., are vital for soil nitrogen fixation |
| Oilseeds     | Rabi                | Mustard, sunflower, etc., key for local processing       |
| Potato       | Rabi                | Major cash crop; high input and high return              |
| Betelvine    | Perennial           | An important commercial crop, specifically in Tamluk     |

Source: Purba Medinipur District Administration (n.d.)

## Appendix C: MGNREGA Implementation in Purba Medinipur

| Indicator                             | Value              |
|---------------------------------------|--------------------|
| Man-days created (4.5 years)          | 6 crore            |
| Rural roads constructed               | 312 km             |
| Houses built (Indira Awaas Yojana)    | >78,000            |
| Toilets built (Mission Nirmal Bangla) | ~1.40 lakh         |
| Kanyashree Scheme beneficiaries       | 2.25 lakh students |
| Khadya Sathi beneficiaries            | >38 lakh people    |

Source: AITC Official (2016)