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CONTENTS

Sr. No.	TITLE & NAME OF THE AUTHOR (S)	Page No.
1.	SMART SKILLS: BRIDGING THE SKILL GAP FOR YOUTH EMPLOYMENT <i>DR. MANJARI AGARWAL & K. K. PANDE</i>	1
2.	THE NEED TO FOCUS ON HRD CLIMATE IN HIGHER EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS: AN EMPIRICAL ASSESSMENT <i>DR. PRAVEEN CHOUGALE & DR. GURUNATH J. FAGARE</i>	8
3.	PERFORMANCE OF INDO-RUSSIAN TRADE DYNAMICS: AN APPRAISAL FOR THE YEAR 2003-2006 <i>MANMOHAN SINGH & S. P. KAUSHIK</i>	13
4.	KNOWLEDGE AND PRACTICE OF GENERAL PRACTITIONERS REGARDING PSYCHIATRIC DISORDERS IN VADODARA CITY <i>GAURAV JD & NIRAJ P</i>	16
5.	EDUCATIONAL STATUS OF SCHEDULED TRIBES IN COIMBATORE DISTRICT <i>DR. R. ANNAPOORANI & M. SHANTHI</i>	19
6.	REVEALED COMPARATIVE ADVANTAGE AND TRADE FLOWS AMONG SAARC COUNTRIES: AN ANALYSIS <i>DR. B. P. SARATH CHANDRAN</i>	24
7.	FINANCIAL INSTITUTIONS AND WOMEN ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN KERALA AND TAMIL NADU <i>DR. SANTHA S.</i>	31
8.	CORPORATE GOVERNANCE AND BUSINESS ETHICS IN IT SECTOR: SOME REFLECTIONS <i>DR. BADIUDDIN AHMED, SYED HAMID MOHIUDDIN QUADRI & MOHAMMED ABDUL LATEEF</i>	38
9.	WORK-LIFE BALANCE (WLB): A CAUSE OF CONCERN IN BANKING SECTOR <i>RITU ATHEYA & DR. RENU ARORA</i>	42
10.	PRIVATIZATION – IS IT A SOLUTION TO PRIORITIZATION? <i>DR. JEEMON JOSEPH & SHIBU ITTY MATHEW</i>	46
11.	A STUDY OF STRESS AMONG FACULTY MEMBERS IN COLLEGES OF JALANDHAR <i>MEGHA JAIN & DR. INDERPAL SINGH</i>	49
12.	HRM PRACTICES IN THE NEW ECONOMY <i>THOTA AMRUTHA VALLI & DR. P. ARUNKUMAR</i>	55
13.	THE IMPACT OF TOURISM DEVELOPMENT ON THE ECONOMIC, CULTURAL, ENVIRONMENTAL AND SOCIAL DIMENSIONS: PERCEPTION OF RESIDENTS' OF GONDER AND ITS NEARBY RURAL COMMUNITIES IN ETHIOPIA <i>DR. GETIE ANDUALEM IMIRU</i>	57
14.	THE NATIONAL CHALLENGES AND POLICY OPTIONS OF ETHIOPIAN EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM TOWARDS THE ACHIEVEMENT OF EFA GOALS: A FOCUS ON PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOL <i>DR. BIRHANU MOGES ALEMU</i>	63
15.	ROLE AND CHARACTERISTICS OF THE URBAN INFORMAL SECTOR IN ETHIOPIA: A STUDY BASED ON NATIONAL HOUSEHOLD SURVEY <i>CHALACHEW GETAHUN DESTA</i>	73
16.	GROWTH AND PERFORMANCE OF AREA, PRODUCTION AND PRODUCTIVITY OF NATURAL RUBBER IN INDIA <i>M. KANNAN</i>	80
17.	EMPLOYMENT GENERATION AND COMMON PROPERTY RESOURCES IN EAST SIANG DISTRICT OF ARUNACHAL PRADESH, INDIA <i>TOKU CHOKIO</i>	85
18.	LOVE, COMPASSION AND SPIRITUALITY: A TRULY RELEVANT ETHOS IN MANAGEMENT AND BUSINESS ORGANISATIONS <i>GEETU SHARMA</i>	90
19.	CLAUSE 49: AN ATTEMPT TO DISCIPLINE CORPORATE <i>SUVIT DAS</i>	92
20.	SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS OF STUDENTS STUDYING IN GOVERNMENT EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS - WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO BELLARY DISTRICT <i>KOKILA H S & PRASHANTHA RAMACHANDRA HEGDE</i>	98
21.	THE CLIMATE OF COOPERATION IN SWEDEN <i>VINCENT DODOO</i>	101
22.	GREEN FINANCE IS ESSENTIAL FOR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND SUSTAINABILITY <i>TASNIM UDDIN CHOWDHURY, RAJIB DATTA & HARADHAN KUMAR MOHAJAN</i>	104
23.	INSTITUTIONAL CREDIT AND AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT <i>DR. R. GOVINDASAMY</i>	109
24.	A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF PRIMARY HEALTH CENTRES IN INDIA AND HARYANA <i>ANNU</i>	112
25.	IMPACT OF MICRO FINANCE IN POVERTY ALLEVIATION AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT OF SHGS <i>M. ANNAM</i>	115
26.	FACTORS INFLUENCING THE PROGRESSIVE USE OF PUBLIC LIBRARIES BY ITS PATRONS <i>BIMAL CHANDRA NAIR</i>	120
27.	QUALITY EDUCATION: ISSUES, CONCERNS AND CHALLENGES <i>BHAVNA JOSHI</i>	123
28.	THE INTERNATIONALIZATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND ITS EFFECT ON STUDENT MOBILITY <i>MUNEEB HUSSAIN GATTOO & MUJEEB HUSSAIN GATTOO</i>	126
29.	CONTRIBUTION OF COMMERCIAL BANKS IN HOUSING FINANCE IN HARYANA: A COMPARATIVE STUDY <i>HARDEEP & SATISH KUMAR</i>	132
30.	REGULATION OF INDIAN MUTUAL INDUSTRY <i>MONIKA SAINI</i>	135
	REQUEST FOR FEEDBACK	145

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THE CLIMATE OF COOPERATION IN SWEDEN

VINCENT DODOO

SR. LECTURER

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY & POLITICAL STUDIES

FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

COLLEGE OF ART AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

KWAME NKRUMAH UNIVERSITY OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

KUMASI

ABSTRACT

Although scholars argue that Sweden is merely a variant, albeit a highly developed variant of the Western Tradition, it is, nevertheless, the best example of a country in which cooperatives have a clear and official role to play, distinct from state and privately-owned companies. The Swedes are conservatives. They are conservative capitalists and conservative socialists. That kind of satisfaction does not lead to the attainment of new things, therefore, in terms of the graduation from the capitalist state to the cooperative state, it is unlikely that this will happen in Sweden. Nevertheless, it remains the country which currently offers the best mirror of what that state apparatus could be like.

KEYWORDS

Cooperative movement, Scandinavian socialism, State apparatus, Western tradition.

INTRODUCTION

Every modern country has a state apparatus. It is this apparatus which runs the government and manages the economy. But there is a history of the evolution of this state apparatus and some social theorists have traced the stages of its gradual evolution: from primitive communism through plunder, feudalism, mercantilism, capitalism to the final or ultimate society also called the communist state (Karl Marx in Bottomore and Rubel, 1975).

However, events in our time evidently demonstrate that there is a gap in the last two state apparatuses which has not been explored well enough and explained sufficiently. Marx allowed posterity to define the detailed nature of the period prior to the attainment of the ultimate society. Lenin also did mention the intervening period after the collapse of capitalism and the emergence of the socialist state but he thought it would be the continuation of the moribund capitalist state (Lenin, 1943). Ernest Poisson wrote about this cooperative state and Guyana at one point legislated it into existence (Lutchman, 1970) only for it to sink quietly into oblivion because any long-lasting social change cannot be legislated into existence, it has to evolve from the old. The cooperative state belongs to the gap under reference and it is the one last state apparatus which will precede the arrival of the ultimate society. This paper will discuss an aspect of the subject.

THE MULTIPLE POLITICAL SYSTEM

There is no one system (Nicos Poulantzas chooses the term social formations over the ordinary society to demonstrate the complex nature of most systems) in existence in any part of the world (Pluta, 1980:2-3). Instead, a dominant system co-exists with a minor system. Depending on the nature of the dominant system, the minor system is either tolerated or suppressed. By this theory, the capitalist system cannot be reconciled to the notion of an expanded public sector. But the reality in most Western countries, which are capitalist, is the presence of a large public sector in addition to a cooperative sector which may also not be insignificant. The extension of this argument is that in the communist systems, which were a type of public systems, the private sector would have no place. However, Gregory Grossman and others (Karl Eugene Wadekin and K.S. Karol) have argued that a "second economy" existed in the former Soviet Union (Manaster, 1977:12-14). This second economy comprised all production and exchange activity that fulfilled at least one of the following tests – being directly for private gain and being in some significant respect in knowing contravention of the existing law. It included perfectly legal private activity which was possible in the Soviet Union. Such private activity, though alien to the Soviet system was tolerated while illegal private activity was suppressed. This latter activity is a reference to internal corruption: theft from state resources, diversions by truck drivers of freight and black-market operations. But the "private plot" and the "garden plot" within Soviet thinking were regarded as part of the process of the evolution of the cooperative sector (Albert Manaster, 1977: 438; and Cooperation of the Socialist Countries in the year 2000, 1980). Again, agriculture in communist Poland, for instance, was largely based on private property and this was tolerated for pragmatic reasons (Pluta, 1980:2).

Dominant and minor systems are determined by the volume of resources under their control. Thus in a situation where the contending systems have equal parity in terms of resource control, the system is called a mixed economy. Sweden is one of the countries which falls into this category. In Sweden, the public, private and the cooperative sectors have parity in terms of the share of the economy each has under its control.

THE SWEDISH POLITICAL SYSTEM

In 1976, Per Ahlstrom, editor of the Matalarbetaren magazine published an article with the title, "Alternative Society". In this article, Ahlstrom argued that the cooperatives and trade unions in Scandinavia had succeeded in creating an economic and political atmosphere that was alternative to capitalism and that it was possible for an individual to live his entire life within the cooperative and labour movements unaffected by the capitalist society (Ahlstrom in Childs, 1980). This is an introduction to Scandinavian socialism which is sometimes referred to as the "middle way" or "mild capitalism". Sweden illustrates this best.

The Swedes are widely recognized to be very practical and down to earth people. The Swedish word IKEA which means "common sense is therefore an appropriate description of the people and the cooperative organization they built to survive. As a people, the Swedes do not believe in unbridled liberalism. On the contrary, they have this strong conviction that injustice of whatever form is intolerable and that the ills of a free society are curable. While they never pretend to seek perfection, they acknowledge the frail nature of man which requires collective attention. Therefore, as a people, they detest the craving for profit inherent in private capitalism (Childs, 1936). These unique traits are manifested in the Swedish political and economic system. The country has a history of strong political involvement by ordinary people through its numerous popular movements (Folkrorelser), the most notable being the trade unions, the women's movements, the temperance movement and, in recent times, the sports movement (Wikipedia, 2011).

The story is told of the beginning of industrialization in Sweden. These early forms of industrialization pre-dating the industrial revolution of the rest of Europe were timber and iron-ore based industries and, as a result, were located in remote parts of the country. These industries were organized in tightly knit communal groups known as the "bruks", a patriarchal production unit where the headman was the owner as well as the production manager. Conditions in these isolated country communities were really harsh and while wages were low, the patriarchal boss normally accepted the paternal responsibility for the welfare of each member worker and catered for the sick, the old and the widowed so that none would starve (Jones, 1976: 53).

This community instinct and the willingness for Swedes to look after one another is a characteristic which marks Swedish life to this day. It was demonstrated in a rather dramatic manner in 1931 when unemployment in the country reached the disastrous high of 32 per cent. The ruling Conservative Party lost the elections the following year and was not able to get power for a long time. The Social Democratic Party took over the government in 1932 and, but for a short 100 days in 1963, remained in power either as the majority party or as the main party in the coalition government (Jones, 1976: 14). The Swedish political

system, in terms of structure, is not too different from other Western systems. But there are major differences in the manner the Swedish system operates. After 1971, there was one house consisting of members elected for three-year terms. The administrative differences appear in the way the central government functioned. A cabinet minister such as the Minister of Labour determined policy only; he was not directly responsible for the day to day administration of the policy. Implementation was at two levels: the first was at the county level where government policy was carried out through administrative boards headed by government-nominated governors. The second was a centralized body with a board made up of members representing different interests and headed by a Director General who was also a government nominee. Within stated limits, this body was virtually autonomous. This system had advantages in that the uncertainty which usually accompanied frequent changes in ministers did not affect the work in the government department.

Another important aspect of Swedish political and economic system was the role of state planning (in Sweden the productive private sector is regarded as the goose and it is encouraged by the government to produce long-term planning with clearly defined goals) the objective of which was the attainment of a balanced economy (Jones, 1976: 205). In 1932 when the Social Democrats took over the government, it was their major aim to eliminate unemployment. However, they did not want to achieve this at the expense of a reduction in the standard of living of the Swedish people. The way out of this was to increase national output and the credit for this initiative is attributed to the Finance Minister, Ernest Wigforss. He laid down the principles of a planned economy with full employment as an objective, not just for social reasons but to use the private sector as well to create the wealth on which future prosperity depended (Jones, 1976: 16). The planned economy worked so well that all the political parties in Sweden accepted it and it became an effective definition of Swedish socialism.

The Swedes believed that it would be a mistake to tax the profitable and therefore efficient companies just to support the inefficient. There is therefore the tendency to "allow the goose the ability to lay more eggs". Thus while taxes on profits in Sweden were very high at around 54 per cent, there were several tax concessions for the companies to make use of (Jones, 1976).

The Swedish Confederation of Trade Union (LO) was another political and economic force in the country. With close relations to the cooperative movement, the LO supported the Swedish National Labour Board (AMS) philosophy of maintaining full employment at the expense of over manning. By 1966, the LO had accumulated E89 million as reserves. It is said that in any confrontation between the LO and the Employers Association, which was reputed to have similar savings, the Swedish economy could easily be wrecked. For this reason, the two avoid any confrontation in the nation's interest, another example of Swedish common sense and pragmatism. In fact, a chart illustrating the distribution of expenditure by the national unions in 1966, compiled by Bo Carlson, shows expenditure for strike action as virtually zero (Bo Carlson in Jones, 1976).

This then is the nature of the political and economic system which accommodated the cooperative system we are going to look at. We have already made reference to the cooperation between the labour union and the cooperative movement both of which have the aim of '...fighting for a better life for the worker...'. We have also noted that this political structure virtually came into operation in 1932. In looking at the nature of the cooperative system, we shall give attention to how it emerged and the role it played in Swedish society before the creation of the present system.

THE SWEDISH COOPERATIVE MOVEMENT

The cooperative movement in Sweden was an independent body; that was the way it started. In recent times, it has been criticized for having become a wing of the Social Democratic Party, the party in power. In this regard, we should point out that even a conservative party like the Centre Party had sympathy for the politics pursued by the SDP (in 1973 when there was a deadlock in the elections with the socialists and the anti-socialists all receiving 175 seats, the Centre Party which belongs to the latter had 90 of these seats. Therefore its support for the SDP, which had 159 seats in that election, was very significant. After that deadlock the Swedes decided to reduce the number of seats in the Riksdag by one to avoid future deadlocks). The fact of the matter was that the Cooperative Movement (K.P), the Labour Union (LO) and the party in power (SDP) all had the same aim, that is, '...fighting for a better life for the [Swedish] workers...', an objective which intimately all Swedes subscribed to. Hence, the unique political system. Thus while there was no legal union between the K. F and the SDP, there was a moral union between the two. This was not the position before 1932.

Modern cooperation began in Sweden very late in the 19th century long after it had taken root in England and on the continent. It was not surprising, therefore, when the Swedes decided to follow the Rochdale model. However, the organization they created differed in several respects, and very substantially too, from the model developed from Rochdale.

In another paper (Dodoo, 2009), an attempt was made to distinguish the long term objectives from the short term practical measures undertaken by the Pioneers to get their society off the ground. While the latter measures were described merely as the assumption of the garb of Western culture, the former was projected as the real basis of whatever Rochdale stood for.

Interestingly enough, the organization which evolved in Sweden was at variance with both aspects of the Rochdale tradition. First, the founders of the Swedish cooperative movement took every precaution to avoid reference to ambiguous long term objectives. Instead, they wished to concentrate on the present. On the second point, they tried to keep their stores free from the institutionalized character they had assumed on the continent. Consequently, the stores were open for trade to the public and although non-members did not qualify for the annual dividend, they could allow this dividend to accumulate towards the cost of their initial membership share, a clever device which attracted more members in the end (Childs, 1980: 2).

However, the practice which set the Swedish cooperatives apart from existing cooperatives was the decision not to sell at prevailing market prices. Swedish co-operators were interested in lower prices and high quality to be obtained first through distribution and later on, through production for use rather than for profit. Consequently, an early objective of the movement here was to destroy monopoly. As time went by, they dared to fix their own prices at levels they considered reasonable (Childs, 1980). This was not the situation in pre-Rochdale England where attempts to undercut private sellers led to the destruction of the cooperatives involved. They were too weak for competition. Following from this experience, the Pioneers decided to start within the classical economic theory and sell at market prices. But this is also the explanation why the cooperative which emerged from this background continually imitated open market practices. Apart from operational differences, cooperation in Sweden assumed an organizational form which was to be found only in the other Scandinavian countries (in addition to Switzerland). To begin with, individual societies began to establish in the towns and cities especially in the industrial area. Members who enrolled each subscribed a fixed amount of share capital in order to start the retail store. Such societies eventually came together in 1899 to form the Swedish Cooperative Union or the Kooperativa Förbundet (K.F). It combined the functions of both the Cooperative Wholesale Society and the Cooperative Union in England. This was to signify rapid cooperative development in Sweden, for unlike the Cooperative Union, for instance, which embraced many different units carrying on different functions, the K.F started as a wholesaler, manufacturer, educator and propagandist (Childs, 1980). Several years later, in 1923, a virtual subsidiary of K.F, the Swedish Household Society (S.H.F) was established as a rescue department. A salvage squad maintained by the S.H.F was equipped to step in and direct the business of any struggling society until the point when the local group could take charge again.

In 1981, the K.F was remodelled with a management council charged with final responsibility at the top. The 13 districts of the K.F elected 18 members to form the council which itself was divided into subcommittees, each responsible for a specific department. It was the Council which elected paid executives of the K.F and had the added responsibility of deciding on new ventures, purchase and sale of property and the investment of surplus capital.

Swedish cooperation attracted from the very beginning, men of talent and business sense unlike in the West where the profit motivation was more likely to attract the best business minds. These included Anders Orne, Ernest Persson, Axel Gjores and Albin Johansson. The last was to become the president of the K.F and the Swedish movement certainly owed him a lot for his ability and devotion. On a salary of approximately E5000 a year, he was said to be the least paid business executive in the country but at the same time one of the most efficient and capable.

Albin Johansson believed that cooperation was "working capitalism" and that capitalism was basically good. What was evil about it was the tendencies and interferences of the smooth functioning of this system leading to the growth of monopolies. Such tendencies he called "finance capitalism". His solution was to oppose such tendencies showing up in Sweden. Hence, his declaration of war on the monopolies and cartels in Sweden, a move which soon won the support and sympathy of the Swedish people and forced the Government's hand in 1922 to set up a Commission to study the middleman's profit. By this time cooperation had become a significant political and economic force in Sweden.

The K. F first confronted the margarine cartel. This was one of the most powerful cartels operating in Sweden since margarine was a local staple. Unreasonable price raises convinced the K.F to enter the margarine business and it started off by purchasing a small factory for its own production. What followed is described as a bitter and ugly battle but eventually the giant cartel went down in 1911 when prices of margarine fell to levels they could no longer handle. This was a major victory for the new Union and soon the power wielded by the consumer became obvious to all Swedes. Henceforth, they would remain faithful to Johansson and the K.F as he moved ahead with his program of combating monopolies in sugar, soap, chocolate, rubber, flour, galoshes, among others (Childs, 1980).

The success of the K.F's price was not only due to the business sense and determination of people like Johansson but to a large extent also due to the role of the K.F's propaganda machinery. The K.F took this branch of its activities very seriously. It is said that its weekly magazine, *Konsumentenbladet*, started off as one of the largest circulation periodicals in Sweden.

The quality of journalism was so high that cooperative news and propaganda were blended neatly with amusing articles and stories of the eminent writers in the country. Quality reading materials means quality readership as well. As a result, the K.F had no difficulty reaching those who mattered with its arguments. This was demonstrated in the bitter war of the flour milling cartel.

In this particular war, the cartel started first by cutting prices to ridiculous levels so as to beat the K.F at its own game. But it was the propaganda section which managed to convince the members to continue to be faithful. When the cartel was eventually destroyed in 1925, the K.F was in control of 20 percent of the population (Childs, 1980).

One attitude of the K.F which eventually turned out to be a major source of strength was the policy not to court government assistance. As a result, the Organization grew up very confident and could compete on its own strength. One area where cooperatives in other countries have sought government exemptions was in taxation. But in Sweden, it was more lucrative, tax-wise, to register as limited companies rather than as cooperative societies. Like individuals, the latter were taxed proportional to income on a graduated scale which rose sharply. As a result in taking over new business, the K.F usually registered them as independent limited companies. It is said, for instance, that the Stockholm Retail Society organized its production branches as limited companies (Childs, 1980).

After the initial confrontations were over and the K.F had satisfied itself of the reasonableness of the prevailing level of pricing in the country, it entered into another phase of its evolution, that is, whenever it thought it wise to do so, the K.F started collaborating with private business. Concern over this tendency was the subject of a debate at the K.F's 1934 Congress. A subcommittee appointed out of this congress concluded that it should be possible for the K.F to undertake ventures in the interest of the national economy since it had achieved so much power and capital. This was, however, subject to the K.F's continuing to rely solely on its own finances and furthermore that such external activities were never to be so extensive so as to overshadow the primary functions of cooperation which is to provide members with the goods they needed.

This flexibility of the K.F is testimony to how easily it was able to adjust to the new system which came into existence in 1932. Swedish cooperative leaders, however, still continued to believe that in addition to distribution and production for the membership, the chief function of their movement was a check on the excesses of capitalism and to prevent monopoly and the concentration of wealth in few hands. This faith had been kept to this day. And perhaps, this is also the reason why Sweden is both socialist and capitalist. This also explains why Swedish cooperation is different from what we find in the North Atlantic and in the former socialist states: they hate bare-faced capitalism and they do not want any ideal communist society.

CONCLUSION

The strength of the Swedes turns out also to be their weakness. They are conservatives: conservative capitalists and conservative socialists. This kind of satisfaction does not lead to the attainment of new things. This is why the cooperative state will not be attained in Sweden. Nevertheless, this is the one country which currently offers the best mirror of what that state apparatus could be like.

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