

# **Managing Co-operative Farming: A Case of Gambhira Collective Farming Society**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The Gambhira Collective Farming Society formed in 1953 has successfully overcome the problems associated with small holder farming and the tragedy of commons. The 291 members of the Gambhira Collective have been continuously collectively cultivating an area of 526 acres from 1953 by forming 30 groups of eight to 14 members each. The land and other assets belong to the collective society and the members, individually, do not have ownership rights either on assets or cultivation decisions. The Managing Committee of the collective decides the crop plan to be implemented by respective groups under their group leaders who also happen to be members of these groups. The society undertakes primary tillage, purchase of inputs, irrigation and marketing of produce. The proceeds obtained from crop production from the land allotted to groups, after meeting all the expenses and contribution towards reserve and development fund, is passed on to the respective group leaders who, in turn, share it with group members in proportion to their labour contribution. Group members received higher returns by achieving economies of scale, influencing the terms of trade and optimal utilization of resources. Improved incomes have led to members' improved status in society. The collective has overcome free riding, shirking, and opportunism by forming small groups, devising proper mechanisms for sharing work and profits, monitoring and sanctioning of stakeholders at all levels and institutionalizing rules, norms and values. The Gambhira experiment has proved that collectives can overcome problems faced by farmers who cultivate individually. The collective has overcome the problems of resource constraint and escaped the vicious cycle of low investment-low productivity-low return. Gambhira has proved that the co-operative approach can turn farming into a viable and profitable proposition.

**Keywords:** Collective farming, common-pool resources, Gambhira, collective action, co-operative farming.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Agriculture by marginal and small farmers<sup>1</sup> is being rendered increasingly unviable owing to fragmentation of land holdings, inept resource deployment, farmers' low investment capabilities and the adverse effects of terms of trade. The land holdings in India are highly fragmented, scattered and heterogeneous. The average size of land holdings was only 1.23 ha in 2005-06 (GOI n.d).

In an increasingly globalized world farming by individual small farmers is becoming increasingly difficult. According to a study in 2003 about 27 per cent of farmers did not like farming as it was not profitable. Further, given a choice, about 40 per cent farmers were ready to take up other careers (GOI 2005). An average of about 16,000 farmers committed suicide in India between 1995 and 2006 on an annual basis (Nagaraj 2008). This dismal trend continues unabated and the number stood at 13,754 in 2012 (GOI 2013).

Farmers depend on agriculture incomes to meet all their requirements. High dependency levels when the returns were low from agriculture and the pressure of repayment of loans to formal and informal sources lead to frustration. In the absence of alternatives to sustain or escape the situation some farmers commit suicides. Unbelievably, the situation of farmers worsened at a time when India changed its position from net importer to net exporter of food grains. The farmers' distress compounded by suicides and their increasing apathy towards farming due to the fact of high risk and low profitability could well lead to the conclusion that farming by small individual farmers is unviable.

Various initiatives of Union and State governments tried to address the symptoms and hence failed to improve the situation of farmers. For small and marginal farmers to succeed and in order to achieve economies of scale a group approach needs to be encouraged. This may be in the form of collectives or co-operatives for investments in costly inputs, marketing of produce, pooling of land or joint cultivation of land (GOI 2008). However, farming co-operatives have universally failed to generate a positive response from farmers the very community they were intended to benefit. The problems in farming co-operatives are primarily related to work incentives and management (Deshpande 1977). They are unable to retain their autonomous and democratic character due to the co-operatives' inherent weaknesses, the government's overwhelming role, and prescriptive and restrictive legislation (GOI 2009). Other reasons responsible for the decline of farming co-operatives include the inefficiency of office bearers (Gadgil 1956), lack of educated and enlightened leadership, and failure to inspire confidence amongst members on the part of their leaders (Mamoria 1983).

## **OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

Only a handful of farming cooperatives formed by small and marginal farmers have overcome the problem of the tragedy of the commons and working smoothly. It is rare to find such cooperatives in India. Hence, this research was intended to study farming cooperatives which

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<sup>1</sup> Farmers with landholding of less than 1 hectare and from 1-2 hectare were classified as marginal and small farmers, respectively, in India.

have overcome the problem of the tragedy of the commons and the problems of smallholders. The focus was to study such successful farming cooperatives in-depth to understand the factors responsible for their sustenance. The findings would be useful to replicate such initiatives for the benefits of small and marginal farmers and improve their standard of living. Hence, the research questions addressed in the study were

1. How do collective farming initiatives work for long time?
2. Why do some collective farming initiatives sustain over long time?
3. How do collective farming societies overcome the problems associated with smallholder agriculture?
4. How do successful collective farming societies overcome the problem of tragedy of commons?

The objectives of the study were to

- a) Analyze the organizational systems, processes and working of a successful collective farming society.
- b) Determine the factors contributing to the sustenance of collective farming society and
- c) Analyze the impact of a collective on its members and the community.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The focus of the study was to comprehensively analyze the sustenance of collective farming societies. Hence, case study research was adopted. Case study research is used for in-depth understanding of a phenomenon (Bonoma 1985, Easton 2010, Remenyi et al. 2002, Yin 2009) and when the phenomenon under investigation is broad and complex and has to be holistically described and meaningfully explored in its context (Remenyi et al. 2002). It is the most desired research strategy when addressing 'why' and 'how' research questions (Brown 1998, Yin 2009) and when the researcher has little or no control over the events (Yin 2009). Considering all the above explained factors case study research was chosen as an appropriate research strategy.

It was difficult to find the collective farming initiatives working for long time in India. Therefore it was decided to comprehensively study the Gambhira collective farming society working for more than 60 years. It was considered as successful collective farming initiative as it was working smoothly and continuously for more than sixty years.

Data was collected through focus group discussions, in-depth interviews, multiple field visits and referring to records of the organization. Data collection was spread over a period of one year. During first visit to the society focus group discussions were held with members of the society to gain initial understanding of the working of the collective and observed farm operations. During second visit in-depth interviews were held with manager and four group leaders. During third step of data collection farm was visited to understand the division of land and labor and discussion were held with eight members and two managing committee members of the society. During fourth visit interviews were held with one group leader, manager and the relevant records were referred. During fifth visit to the farm and villages discussions were held with three

members and a group leader for cross verification of the data collected and for clarity. All the precautions were taken to maintain the validity and reliability of the study.

## RESULTS

### *Starting of the Collective*

Many small and marginal farmers of the villages of Gambhira, Kothiakhad, Nani-Serdi and Bilpad lost their only source of livelihood with destruction of their fertile land due to flooding of Mahisagar river in 1949. Heavy floods washed the top fertile soil and deposited a near 20-foot deep layer of sand making the land unfit for cultivation. Seeing this disaster, Chhaganbhai Patel requested the government to help the farmers by distributing the land owned by the government near the village. In 1951, based on the request of farmers under the leadership of Chhaganbhai Patel government distributed 201 acres of land on riverbed to 176 farmers, individually. Chhaganbhai Patel of the Gambhira village was a freedom fighter. He was also the *Sarpanch*<sup>2</sup> of the Gambhira village.

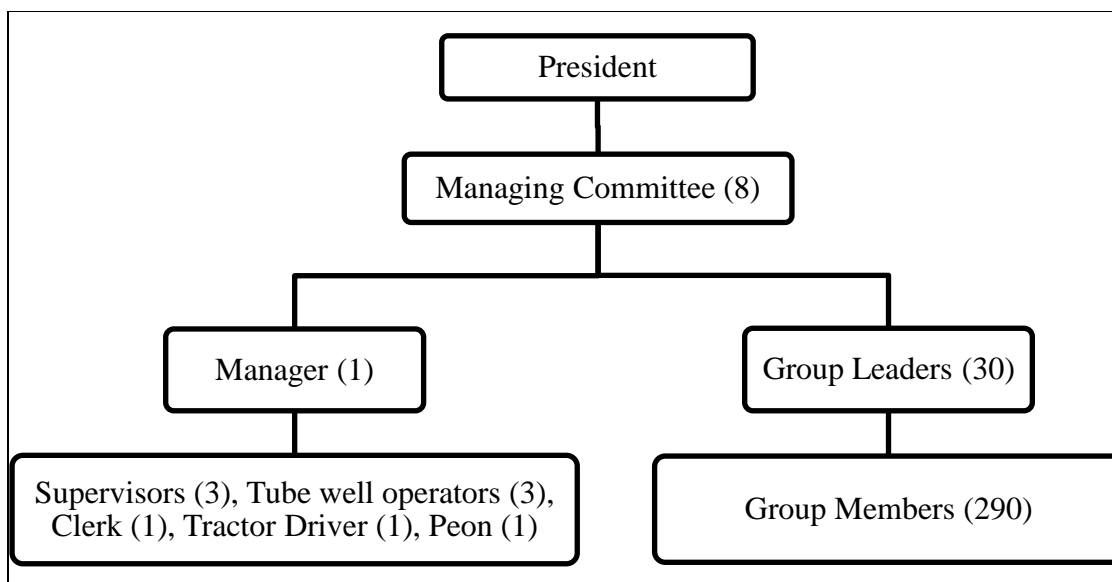
Farmers found that their condition remained unchanged after cultivating the distributed land individually for one year. These poor farmers had to depend on large farmers for implements required for cultivation. Some farmers who burrowed water from neighboring farmers with pump sets paid 50 per cent of their crop production as water rent. The profit from farming was so low that some farmers were unable to pay land tax. Uneconomical holdings and the farmers' poor financial status could not improve their situation significantly. Therefore, based on the suggestion of Chhaganbhai farmers accepted to cultivate the land collectively so as to achieve the economies of scale and solve problems related to resource constraint. All the farmers accepted vesting their individual land ownership rights and cultivation rights with the collective. Thus, the collective was registered as *Mahisagar Bhatha Samudhayik Sahakari Kheti Mandali Limited* on October 14, 1953 with 176 members and 201 acres of land. Over time both the area and society membership swelled to 526 acres and 291 members, respectively, owing to reclamation and purchase of land along with membership growth.

### *Management and Organizational Structure of the Society*

The society consists of the Managing Committee, employees and the general members (farmers). It is managed by the President and Managing Committee with the help of employees and group leaders. The 291 members of the society have been divided into 30 small groups. Each group had eight to 14 members who choose their group leader from amongst themselves. These 30 group leaders choose seven Managing Committee members among themselves who in turn choose the President. Managing Committee had one representative from the government. The organizational structure of Gambhira society is shown in figure 1.

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<sup>2</sup> Sarpanch is the nomenclature for the Chairman of local self-governments (called Gram Panchayats in India)



**Figure No 1: Organizational Structure of Gambhira Collective Farming Society**

### ***Working of the Gambhira Collective Farming Society***

#### ***Group Formation:***

The members of the society have been divided into 30 working groups for operational convenience. Each group had eight to 14 members who choose their group leader from amongst themselves. Each group was allocated a land of 13 to 24 acres. The average land allotted per group was average 17 acres. The land per group was allocated based on the quality and number of members in the group so that income per member remains constant, should all the groups complete the agricultural operations punctually and timely. The society has allotted the land to all groups along the riverbed so that all the groups loose or gain the land more or less equally due to floods or change in the river course. Groups are responsible for all farming operations in the land allocated to them under the guidance of their group leader.

#### ***Crop Production:***

The Managing Committee in their meetings decides the crops to be grown during a particular year. Supervisors and group leaders also attend meetings to decide on the crops to be cultivated. Crops cultivated during the *kharij*<sup>3</sup> season were usually paddy, bajra and tobacco and during the *rabi*<sup>4</sup> season they were wheat, jowar and tobacco. The society was cultivating tobacco on about 400 acres since its inception and other crops in the remaining area.

<sup>3</sup> Cultivation season starting from June-July and ending in September-October is referred as kharif.

<sup>4</sup> Season starting in November-December and ending in March-April is referred as rabi season.

The society undertakes the ploughing of land before taking up of cultivation (primary tillage), purchase of inputs, irrigation and marketing of produce. Seeds and pesticides were purchased in bulk by the society based on the decision of Managing Committee. All other crop production operations (sowing, weeding, harvesting, monitoring, threshing, cleaning, and storing) were carried out by groups in the land allocated to them under the supervision of their respective group leaders who were also the members of these groups.

#### *Marketing of the Produce:*

Gambhira had adopted an innovative system for marketing of tobacco. Managing Committee decides the time and minimum price of tobacco and communicates to traders through letters or advertisements. Auction was conducted near the farm where they have *godowns*<sup>5</sup>. On the day of the auction, the society displays the produce in five lots. Each lot is formed by combining tobacco from six groups based on quality. The agents and traders check the quality of tobacco displayed in heaps while interested traders quote their price for the lots they are interested in and submit the details in sealed covers. The lots were sold to traders with the highest bid price. The minimum quantity that a trader can buy in auction was one lot. The society does not sell tobacco if the price quoted by traders was less than the minimum price fixed by the Managing Committee. Auction stops when that happens. The society repeats the auction process a few days later, based on the decision of the Managing Committee.

Traders take possession of the tobacco within 15 days of auction by paying 65 per cent of the amount. The remaining 35 per cent of the amount was paid out within three months of the auction, the deadline issued by the society. Traders pay a higher price for the society's tobacco and they pay up entire amount within three months. Farmers selling individually get a lower price and it also takes a longer duration, sometimes over a year, to receive the entire amount. Society influences the terms of trade in their favour due to the power achieved through economics of integration.

The society dictates the terms of trade in tobacco sales due to the bargaining power achieved through the quantity and quality of tobacco produced. The society produces a large quantity of tobacco (over 400 acres) of superior and uniform quality as required by traders. Society members believe that the superior quality tobacco is owed to factors such as cultivation on the riverbed without irrigation, the use of farm yard manure, and the eschewal of artificial fertilizers. According to employees of the society, many traders use the society's tobacco price as a benchmark. Traders also mix the society's tobacco with other tobacco to fetch higher profits.

#### *Sharing of Profits:*

The society or group leaders do not pay labour charges to members for their work. Instead, the produce and profit from cultivation was shared group-wise at the end. The fodder from paddy crop was shared equally amongst members of the group that produced it. Previously, the society would retain 50 per cent of the crop production (in case of paddy, wheat, jowar, and bajra) of each group and return the remaining 50 per cent to the respective groups. This ratio has changed lately. In 2009-10 it stood at 30:70 for the society and groups, respectively. In the case of

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<sup>5</sup> Godown is a warehouse or a storage room.

tobacco, the society retained 50 per cent of the revenue from the sale of produce and paid the remaining 50 per cent to the groups. This ratio was also changed gradually and in 2009-10 it stood at 35:65 for the society and groups respectively.

The society paid 1.5 per cent of the revenue from crop production to respective group leaders and the remaining was shared amongst the society and groups. The society, after having met all its expenditures covering land tax, cost of seeds, fertilizers, pesticides, electricity, use of tractors and administrative expenses retains a reserve fund from the revenue share and pays towards the education fund and village development fund with the rest. The amount that remains after having met the aforementioned expenses and overheads is distributed amongst employees and groups as bonus. The bonus paid out to groups is in proportion to their revenue contribution. The bonus share, varying from group to group, is distributed amongst group members equitably by group leaders.

In 2009-10, the society paid out 1.5 per cent of the produce for paddy and wheat and 1.5 per cent of revenue from the sale of tobacco to respective group leaders for their contribution. The remaining produce and amount were shared out amongst the society and groups. With respect to paddy and wheat, the society retained 30 per cent of each group's produce and returned the remaining 70 per cent to the respective groups.

The society paid the same price (the average price of five lots) for the tobacco produce of all the groups even though the tobacco of 30 groups is sold in five lots at different prices. With respect to tobacco in 2009-10, the society retained 35 per cent of revenue from the sale of tobacco of each group while the remaining 65 per cent was given over to respective groups. The group leaders, in turn, shared the revenue equitably amongst the members of the group. Deductions were made in the total amount payable to group members who hadn't contributed to the work on any given day (by being absent). The amount deducted was equal to the number of days of absence multiplied by the prevailing wage rate in that area at the time. Thus, the revenue from crop production was distributed to members in proportion to their labour contribution. The total production of Gambhira collective during 2009-10 was Rs.32,630.54 thousand (\$665,929 USD). The revenue from the sale of tobacco shared by the society in 2009-10 is shown below. The total value of production of the society since inception and the amount paid to members is shown in Annexure 1.

$$\text{Total Revenue} = 1.5\% \text{ to group leader} + \alpha$$

$$\alpha = 35\% \text{ to society} + 65\% \text{ to group}$$

$$35\% \text{ to society} = \text{Expenditure (for inputs, administration expenses)} + \beta$$

$$\beta = \text{Society's reserve fund (20\%)} + \gamma$$

$$\gamma = \text{Education fund (1.5\%)} + \delta$$

$$\delta = \text{Bonus to groups (70\%)} + \text{Village development fund (20\%)} + \text{House fund (10\%)}$$



Similarly, in the case of paddy and wheat, after having paid 1.5 per cent of produce as incentive to group leaders, 30 per cent of the remaining produce was retained by the society while the rest was paid out to groups. Once again, after having met all the expenses, the society divided the balance under various heads as shown above.

### **Working of Groups: Decentralization of Work, Responsibility and Conflict Resolution**

The society has divided the members and the land into 30 groups and plots respectively, for operational convenience. The society has delegated its responsibilities to group leaders in the context of managing its groups. It is the responsibility of group leaders to complete all the farming operations in the land allocated to their group with the help of group members. Each group has its own informal norms and rules with regard to work. The operational rules of the groups, formed by the group members themselves, may be changed by them at any given time. The society does not have a role in the rule formation of any group.

Group leaders, who also happen to be group members, contribute to the work equally. Group leaders allocate work uniformly amongst group members and monitor the progress. With respect to operations like weeding or harvesting, a group leader allocates an equal number of rows or the same width of area to each member and it is the responsibility of that member to complete the work allotted to him or her. A group leader might assign any other work to its members by ensuring that the contribution of all the members remains more or less equal.

With each member having to compulsorily fulfil all the work conditions laid down by the groups there was no scope for free riding within the groups. Group leaders, while working with their groups, continuously monitor the work of members who, in turn, are able to observe the work of one another. The fact of small group units (with 8 to 14 members) and limited land area per group renders monitoring easy on the part of group leaders.

Violation of rules on the part of group members results in a fine which was collected by group leaders. The group members were required to report to work at predetermined time, decided upon and accepted by member consensus. Any delay in reporting to work attracts a fine that was duly collected by the group leader.

Group leaders maintained records with regard to the labour contribution of each group member. The society paid the share from sale of produce to the groups and the group leaders, in turn, shared the amount amongst their group members in proportion to their labour contribution. Bonus received by group leaders was paid out to the members in a similar fashion.

As recognition to group leaders' contribution an incentive of about 1.5 per cent from the sale of group's produce has been in place since 1953. This incentive acts as a motivator for improving the group's work and monitoring process.

Conflicts within groups were to be resolved by their group leaders; any unresolved problems are sought to be resolved by the President and the Managing Committee. The easy accessibility of group leaders, the Managing Committee members, and President leads to immediate conflict resolution.

### ***Impact of the Society on Members and the Community***

The income from the society has helped its members in multiple ways. The income obtained by each member whose labor contribution amounted to only about 150 days per year was significantly higher compared to what they would have achieved by cultivating individually. On average, each member received about Rs.90,000 (\$1,839USD) in 2009-10. They have constructed houses, upgraded their previous ones, and some members have brought lands outside the society from the income received from the society. Since its inception, the society has emphasized the importance of child education and contributed to the cause by providing assistance to students and funds for construction of school buildings in all the four villages under it. As a result the children of most families belonging to the collective were educated and employed in various government departments and private firms. Over 90 per cent of the society's members belong to socially and economically backward castes and due to income from the society now they perceive that their social status has improved with improvement in the standard of living.

The society has been contributing constantly to various developmental projects in all the four villages since its inception. It has provided funds for drinking water schemes, construction of temples, repair of roads and other public welfare works in the villages. The society has also donated funds to *Panchayats* for developmental works in villages. The society contributed Rs.1,319,210 (\$21,987) to village development fund in 2009-10.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

When farming by small and marginal farmers has become increasingly unviable and collective efforts in the country have rarely succeeded, 291 marginal farmers of four villages have formed a collective by pooling their land and successfully cultivated it from 1953. The Gambhira experiment has proved that collectives can overcome problems faced by individual small farmers. The collective has, rather admirably, overcome the problems of resource constraint and escaped the vicious cycle of low investment-low productivity-low return. Gambhira has proved that the co-operative approach can turn farming into a viable and profitable proposition.

Factors responsible for sustenance of the Gambhira collective farming cooperative for the last six decades include its unique group formation approach, marketing of produce, sharing of work and profits, institutionalization of rules, norms and values by the founding leaders and members, proper utilization of resources, efficient mechanisms for monitoring and sanctioning and, finally, superior economic returns. Members of the collective receive higher returns by achieving economies of scale, influencing the terms of trade and optimal utilization of resources.

The collective has overcome free riding, shirking, and opportunism by forming small groups, devising proper mechanisms for sharing work and profits, monitoring and sanctioning of stakeholders at all levels and institutionalizing rules, norms and values. They have succeeded in controlling the tragedy of the commons.

The findings from the study will be useful to improve the performance and sustenance of various types of collectives. Union and State governments can consider distributing land to landless by

forming collectives rather than distributing one or two acres to individuals so as to achieve the goal of reducing poverty.

Note: This paper is the updated version of the working paper of the author published by the Institute of Rural Management Anand.

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**Annexure 1: Total Value of Production of the Farming Society and Amount Paid to Members from Inception (1953-54 to 2009-10)**

Sl. No.	Year	Total Production (in Rs. Thousand)	Members share in Farm Produce (in Rs. Thousand)	Bonus to Members (in Rs. Thousand)	Total amount paid to members (in Rs. Thousand)
1	1953-54	90.66	45.32	9.12	54.44
2	1954-55	93.11	46.56	7.13	53.68
3	1955-56	167.07	83.54	24.54	108.08
4	1956-57	203.76	101.88	26.98	128.85
5	1957-58	165.98	82.99	21.08	104.07
6	1958-59	159.99	80.00	18.12	98.12
7	1959-60	148.62	74.31	12.34	86.65
8	1960-61	134.32	67.16	5.80	72.96
9	1961-62	116.20	58.10	9.80	67.91
10	1962-63	107.22	53.61	1.75	55.36
11	1963-64	155.79	77.90	18.73	96.63
12	1964-65	270.51	135.25	42.55	177.81
13	1965-66	240.28	120.14	27.34	147.48
14	1966-67	451.54	225.77	77.29	303.06
15	1967-68	398.26	199.13	62.94	262.07
16	1968-69	602.82	301.41	73.44	374.85
17	1969-70	399.57	199.79	16.14	215.93
18	1970-71	537.37	268.69	46.71	315.40
19	1971-72	793.00	396.50	127.06	523.56
20	1972-73	574.34	287.17	57.97	345.14
21	1973-74	469.24	234.62	52.42	287.04
22	1974-75	673.53	336.77	55.59	392.36
23	1975-76	1144.73	572.37	179.23	751.60
24	1976-77	978.54	489.27	128.66	617.93
25	1977-78	1082.82	541.41	167.52	708.93
26	1978-79	1427.03	713.52	209.87	923.38
27	1979-80	1095.13	660.34	91.42	751.75
28	1980-81	1506.85	901.80	149.58	1051.38
29	1981-82	901.12	531.20	NA	531.20
30	1982-83	1796.83	1073.36	135.14	1208.50
31	1983-84	1980.74	1131.97	183.15	1315.12
32	1984-85	1993.58	1194.76	163.68	1358.44
33	1985-86	5415.52	1446.86	306.15	1753.02
34	1986-87	2870.74	1715.92	347.99	2063.90
35	1987-88	2233.24	1339.94	148.78	1488.72
36	1988-89	4164.08	2677.28	425.42	3102.70

37	1989-90	4321.83	2597.61	590.70	3188.31
38	1990-91	2871.83	1721.43	179.89	1901.32
39	1991-92	4220.19	2572.92	526.13	3099.05
40	1992-93	3323.31	1993.60	278.11	2271.71
41	1993-94	7436.68	4491.58	887.54	5379.12
42	1994-95	6056.50	3599.21	0.00	3599.21
43	1995-96	10578.34	6383.60	956.90	7340.50
44	1996-97	8735.31	5240.06	1224.06	6464.13
45	1997-98	5112.48	3067.36	443.58	3510.94
46	1998-99	9925.97	5984.65	1397.21	7381.86
47	1999-00	9925.96	5984.65	1397.21	7381.86
48	2000-01	6772.60	3918.87	557.18	4476.06
49	2001-02	198.88	137.21	0.00	137.21
50	2002-03	6420.34	3868.16	495.75	4363.91
51	2003-04	13206.02	7020.61	1910.92	8931.53
52	2004-05	7408.20	4444.00	572.69	5016.68
53	2005-06	7138.12	4300.29	552.39	4852.68
54	2006-07	6302.02	3788.98	207.28	3996.27
55	2007-08	11190.71	6770.40	1465.14	8235.54
56	2008-09	22324.11	13434.07	3528.04	16962.11
57	2009-10	32630.54	21213.66	4617.59	25831.25