



Uzhavar Sandhai in Tamil Nadu: Is empowering rural farmers?

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I. Introduction

In the field of agriculture, marketing determines the value of the agricultural product in terms of money and delivers them to the final customer. Most of the farmers sell their produce through village level markets, fairs, Mandies, Co-operative Societies etc. In the above process of agricultural marketing, the middlemen exploit farmers as well as consumers. In order to eliminate the middlemen between farmers and consumers, the Government of Tamilnadu introduced the new concept, namely Uzhavar Santhai in 1999.

Generally, the middlemen and wholesale businessmen purchase the Agricultural products from the farmers at a lower price. They also get the commission from the farmers for the transactions made. In turn, fresh vegetables and fruits purchased at the lower price from the farmers are sold out to retail businessmen at higher price and the retail businessmen sell those Agricultural Products further at higher price to the consumers. As a result, the farmers get only the lower price for their produce whereas the consumers have to pay higher price for the same produce. Hence, the Government of Tamilnadu has introduced an alternate scheme of marketing, which is known as Uzhavar Santhai in order to derive more benefits to the farmers as well as consumers.

The Uzhavar Sandhai is mainly organised to enhance the farmer's income by preventing intermediaries and distress selling. As the sale at the Uzhavar Sandhai is only for cash, the farmers are getting money immediately. This is absent when they sell their produce to the middlemen because most of the traders make delayed payment. The farmer is motivated to bring his produce to the Uzhavar Sandhai as he can directly market it to the consumers. Day in and out, they come to the market and the market has become their life breath and in turn, the farmer sellers have become the life breath of the market. Hence an attempt has been made to analyse the farmer sellers in selected Uzhavar Sandhai in Coimbatore, Selam and Erode cities in Tamil Nadu.

Origin of Uzhavar Sandhai

Uzhavar Sandhai had its birth in the concept of Kal Ghoj in Russia. The former Union agriculture secretary, MS Gill on his visit to this country was impressed by this concept of farmers' market and he replicated this concept by initiating Apna Mandis in Punjab and Haryana in early 1987. Andhra Pradesh followed suit and started the Rythu Bazar on similar lines. In order to eliminate the involvement of intermediaries the state government introduced Uzhavar Sandhai where the farmers and consumers can have direct dealings. The idea of setting the Uzhavar Sandhai exclusively for selling vegetables grown by the local growers was conceived in the early 1990s by former Union Agricultural Secretary, M.S. Gill. It is reported that 'Kal ghoj', a farmers market, was started way back in 1975 exclusively to sell vegetables and spinach in the former Soviet Union. During a visit to United Kingdom, Mr. M.S. Gill noticed that some of the farmers were selling vegetables and fruits at the roadside on a collective basis at a high profit. The market was very busy. After a detailed investigation, he found that the farmers directly sold their produce to the consumers without the help of intermediaries. Immediately on his return to India, he successfully set 'Apna Mandi' or 'Kisan Mandi' in Punjab. The first 'Apna Mandi' was started in Punjab at Chandigarh in 1987, in Haryana at Karnal in 1988. Noticing their success, the Union Ministry of agriculture suggested the idea for starting Uzhavar Saridhis in other states also. Andhra Pradesh took immediate steps to start 'Rythu Bazaar'.

The ruling DMK Government in Tamilnadu subsequently replicated this concept and Uzhavar Sandhai was first established in 1999 in Tamil Nadu, to bridge the gap between the farmers in particular

vegetable growers and the consumers. It was envisioned to protect small-level farmers from the fleecing of traders and allow them sell directly to people. Uzhavar Santhais were established in all the district headquarters as the scheme gained support and patronage from consumers and the farming community. Farmers also got exemption from luggage fare from and to the market.

Now, Uzhavar Santhais are back in the limelight again, Tamil Nadu after the DMK government come back to power after prolonged ten years. The government has given a facelift to Uzhavar Santhai and announced that 10 small-scale Uzhavar Santhais will be established in Cuddalore, Dindigul, Erode, Karur, Pudukkottai, Tirunelveli, Tiruchirappalli, Thanjavur, Vellore and Kallakurichi districts. The government has also announced that would modernize 50 Uzhavar Sandhais and by incorporating facilities like computer and information technology equipment, electronic price display board and public address system.

At the end of April 2011, under DMK government, a total of 179 Uzhavar Santhais were functioning. Not it has been enhanced as more than 200 Uzhavar santhai are working successfully across state.

The researcher attempts to find out whether Ulavar sandhai would empowerment rural farmers of Tamilnadu very particular in three important burgeoning cities in Kongu region. The study highlights the personal profile of farmers with respect to their age, income, type of produced, traded, income and source of information towards Ulavar Sandhai.

Objectives of the study

The main objectives of the study are:

1. To find out the awareness of Ulavar Sandhai among farmers of Kongu region.
2. To explore the empowerment of farmers in Kongu region in Tamil Nadu
3. To find out the impact of Ulavar Sandhai among farmers in study area.
4. To assess the strength and weakness of Ulavar Sandhai scheme
5. To make suggestions to the government to strengthening the farmers market and to uplift the poor farmers.

II. Methodology

The study covers both the primary and secondary data. Descriptive research is most suitable. The data was collected by interview method by using structured questionnaire. For the purpose of study, the data has been collected at an uzhavar sandhai in the above mentioned sandhais in the cities of Coimbatore, Salem and Erode. The data have been collected from a cross section of farmers, consumers and other stakeholders.

Sources of data collection

The data was collected from the published records, journals, magazines, web portals, news paper and general discussions with academicians and experts. Primary data was collected with administering questionnaire and informal oral discussion with farmers cum sellers in two Uzhavar santhai in each city in Kongu region.

Sampling Technique

Universe: Farmers of Tamilnadu trading in Uzhavar Sandhai

Sampling Unit: The sampling limit was limited to Uzhavar Sandhais in cities Kongu region of Tamilnadu such as Coimbatore, Salem, and Erode.

Sample size: 120 farmers

Sampling design: Convenience sampling method adopted.

The collected data was analyzed by using the percentage analysis, central tendency, and Garrett's ranking method.

Table 1
Number of Farmer Sellers Growing Selected Vegetables in Uzhavar Sandhais

VegetablesFruits	Number of small farmers	Number of mediumfarmers	Number of large farmers	Number	Total number of farmers Percentage
Tomato	42	26	25	93	77.5
Brinjal	39	28	23	90	75.0
Lady's finger	25	24	13	62	51.7
Onion	20	10	15	45	37.5
Potato	18	9	4	31	25.8
Carrot	16	7	6	29	24.2
Banana	6	5	4	15	12.5
Guava	4	6	3	13	10.8
Chillies/Greens	5	4	7	16	13.3

Source: Primary data

Table 2

Percentage of Profit of Farmer Sellers

Sl. No.	Percentage of Profit	Number of Farmers	Percentage
1.	Below 10	10	8.3
2.	11-20	14	11.7
3.	21-30	26	21.7
4.	Above 30	70	58.3
	Total	120	100.0

Source: Primary Data

Limitations of the study

Farmers do not follow what they have stated in their responses. Thus the degree of reliability cannot be taken to be always correct. There are certain constraints.

1. The study is limited to the Uzhavar Sandhais situated at cities Kongu region of Tamilnadu such as Coimbatore, Salem, and Erode.
2. The period of the study is limited.
3. One more limitation would be that the sample size is too small to come to any conclusion and there may be discrepancies in data due to this.

At this juncture, an objective study of the performance of the farmers' market becomes imperative for judicious policy making. For this purpose an empirical study has been conducted. Based on the field work a SWOT analysis has been made in the following section.

SWOT analysis consists of systematic evaluation of an organization's strengths and weaknesses and the opportunities and threats which it faces; it provides a general framework for understanding and managing the environment under which an organization operates.

Strengths of Uzhavar Sandhai

Fair price is determined by the officers of the Agriculture Marketing Committee and representatives of farmers for the vegetables and fruits every day. Generally the price fixed is 20% higher than the wholesale price and 15% less than the retail price. Fresh vegetables are weighed correctly and are available at lower price (15% less than retail shops) for the consumers. The price fixed is uniform in all farmers' markets in these markets. About 4000 to 5000 consumers visit the farmers' market every day.

About 20 to 25 tons of vegetables of the value of about 1.5 lakhs to 2 lakhs are sold every day. About 125 farmers sell their produce in week days and 175 farmers sell their produce during the weekend in the farmers market. Administrative officers and three assistants under the authority of Commissioner of Agriculture Marketing regulate the functioning of the farmers' market. Facilities for disposal of garbage to the tune of five to six tons per day has been provided by Exonora, an environment conscious NGO.

Government of Tamilnadu recently announced to upgrade the uzhavar santhai by earmarking sum huge financial package to incorporating facilities like computer and information technology equipment, electronic price display board and public address system.

Weaknesses

Lack of cold storage facilities to preserve unsold vegetables of the previous day affects the quality of the vegetables. The normal functioning of the farmers' market has been much affected due to the termination of the services of welfare workers who used to issue tokens to the farmers at the time of arrival, issue weighing machines and enquire the price in the wholesale market. Shortage of manpower affects its operational efficiency.

Inadequate roofing facilities adversely affect trade during rainy season. It is widely alleged that traders enter the farmers' market with fake identity cards. The farmers' markets face stiff competition from wholesale market. The bulk buyers prefer to buy from the wholesale market as the price fixed is 20% higher than that of the wholesale market.

Opportunities

The farmers are educated on modern methods of farming by the Agriculture and Horticulture departments in the farmers' market itself. High yielding seeds, bio-fertilizers and the like are sold for the benefit of farmers. Such supports are likely to bring more hectares of land under vegetable cultivation. At present nine percent of the total cultivated land is under vegetable cultivation. It is expected to grow with active government support.

The farmers have learnt the nuances of salesmanship such as courteous and polite manners and have succeeded in getting patronage of large number of consumers. The spirit of co-operation and togetherness has

emerged among the growers resulting in collective responsibility. It is observed that the vegetable growers are willing to contribute in the form of entry fee to sustain and improve the present marketing system.

Threats

The above SWOT analysis shows that the strengths are highly significant and the opportunities offer tremendous scope for growth. Majority of the findings relating to strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats can be generalized to all markets functioning in Tamilnadu.

III. Results and Recommendations

1. Irrespective of the age, sex, educational qualifications, occupation, level of income and family size, there is no significant difference in the satisfaction level of consumers towards the price, variety of produces, quality, and relationship with traders etc which prevail in the uzhavar sandhais.
2. As many as 60% of the respondents were satisfied about the prices, quality and variety of the produces marketed in these sandhais.
3. The farmers here expect the Government to support them with additional facilities such as extension of working hours and providing special bus services at odd hours as well as to bring the produces to the sandhais.
4. The farmers feel that there needs to be a need for an orientation programme on modern methods of farming and selling methods for them to keep themselves aware of the latest trends in the field rather than sticking on to the traditional methods.
5. The study also revealed that the setting up of the sandhais in various parts of the State had paved way for the eradication of poverty to a good extent as the farmers are able to sell off their produces at the earliest within a short span of time rather than keeping them as dead stock or selling it a low price when the vegetables and fruits start to decay.
6. Farmers are expecting Tiffin centre and drinking water facilities.
7. Farmers are expecting small go down facilities to store their products like onions, coconuts etc.
8. Concerned authority of the uzhavar Sandhai should take necessary steps to implement Aavin milk stall in uzhavar Sandhai for milk, butter, ghee etc.
9. Suggestion boxes may be kept in uzhavar Sandhai at right place and necessary action should be initiated upon those suggestions.
10. Municipal Corporation Commissioner must create awareness about Uzhavar Sandhai through local advertisements media (like announcement, hoardings, scrolling).
11. Avoidance of middlemen domination in Uzhavar Sandhai.
12. Extending the working hours of sandhai in the evening time for office goers.
13. Regular maintenance should be carried out.
14. Concerned Officers should make surprise visits at the Uzhavar Sandhai to inspect and regulate the activities.

Several measures are recommended for improving the marketing of fruits and vegetables in the market. The following major recommendations emerge from the study reported here on improving the marketing efficiency of fruits and vegetables. First, it is important to bring more markets under regulation and put them under the supervision of a well represented market committee.

Second it is important to promote, and perhaps even enforce through rules or laws, the practice of open auction in the markets. Third, it is important to bring more numbers of buyers and sellers to the wholesale markets so as to encourage healthy competition close to perfect market conditions and better price realisation to the producer farmers.

Besides above measures, improvements in market infrastructure such as storage (godown) facilities, cold storage, better loading and weighing facilities, proper stalls, better road links etc. would also be helpful in improving the marketing efficiency. Improvement in cold chain facilities, marketing of fruits and vegetables are obviously important and do not need any special mention. Efforts to improve the transparency in the market operations through better supervision by the market committee would be another important factor in improving the marketing efficiency. Finally there is substantial scope for improving the marketing efficiency by improving the market information system by making available latest and extensive market information to all market participants through the use of internet facilities and other means of communication.

IV. Conclusion

The farmers, who brave the vagaries of monsoon to produce vegetables and fruits, find it difficult to sell the produce at a profitable price. Establishment of U.S. has helped them to overcome the hardships posed by the middlemen. The direct contact with the consumers has enhanced their income. Like any other industry, diversification of products i.e. selling more than two products has resulted in high average sales per day. The Uzhavar Sandhais in general, has done a laudable job in making the marketing easy for the farmers. Farmers

may be encouraged to sell the value added products in Uzhavar Santhai because the Kongu region is an important agro based industrial region, which supports to uplift the farmers and alleviate poverty and ensure the real empowerment of them.

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