



Economy, Livelihood And Empowerment Of Women Through Uzhavar Santhai: A Case Study In Coimbatore City

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Abstract

Women from indigenous and grassroots communities are often also custodians of traditional knowledge, which is key for their communities' livelihoods, resilience and culture. Yet, women in rural areas face constraints in engaging in economic activities because of gender-based discrimination and social norms, disproportionate involvement in unpaid work, and unequal access to education, healthcare, property, and financial and other services. Agriculture, which is considered the backbone of economy of state, has taken a back seat due to the apathy of government policies in the last three decades. The percentage of cultivable land has come down. Meanwhile, nearly 70 percent of the population depending upon agriculture for their daily livelihood directly or indirectly is currently undergoing a transformation. The main purpose of the study is to explore the impact of Uzhavar Sandhai on farmers' standard of living. If their lifestyle has improved, then the contribution of Uzhavar Sandhai towards the same has to be revealed. Thus, the core objectives of the study are: estimation of the return or profit earned by the farmers in relation to size of farms, irrigation facilities, cost of cultivation, distance travelled, place and time of operation of US. However, we would also like to understand the inner-dynamics of the Uzhavar Sandhai. The study is confined to Coimbatore city of Tamil Nadu, covered two Uzhavar Sandhais.

Key words: Livelihood, Empowerment, Rural market

Introduction

Women play important roles in the rural economy as farmers, wage earners and entrepreneurs. They also take responsibility for the well-being of the members of their families, including food provision and care for children and the elderly. Rural women's unpaid work, particularly in poor households, often includes collecting wood and water. Women from indigenous and grassroots communities are often also custodians of traditional knowledge, which is key for their communities' livelihoods, resilience and culture. Yet, women in rural areas face constraints in engaging in economic activities because of gender-based discrimination and social norms, disproportionate involvement in unpaid work, and unequal access to education, healthcare, property, and financial and other services. They are also disproportionately vulnerable to the impacts of environmental disasters and climate change. Promoting and ensuring gender equality, and empowering rural women through decent work and productive employment, not only contributes to inclusive and sustainable economic growth, but also enhances the effectiveness of poverty reduction and food security initiatives, as well as climate change mitigation and adaptation efforts.

In India, Agriculture, which is considered the backbone of economy of state, has taken a back seat due to the apathy of government policies in the last three decades. The percentage of cultivable land has come down. Meanwhile, nearly 70 percent of the population depending upon agriculture for their daily livelihood directly or indirectly is currently undergoing a transformation. With dwindling surpluses from agricultural activities, most of the labourers have now shifted to service sector activities like real estate, working as construction workers, and others (especially the second generation from farming families) who are semiskilled have found solace in the periphery, working for courier companies and the like. Thus, semi and unskilled workers are forced to take up work in manufacturing (mostly contractual in nature) and service sectors – where wages are minimal and hardly any social security is provided by the company. et approximately some 20 percent of the villagers now depend solely upon agricultural income for their livelihood directly.

Farmers' welfare directly depends upon the income generated from agricultural produce. This income would be high or low depending upon the nature of the price discovered in the market for the produce. The farmers often do not participate in determining the price and instead the middlemen and agents (and in the case of certain crops, the government) do it. These third parties make profit out of the loss imposed upon poor farmers by manipulating the demand-supply conditions. When this threatens the daily livelihoods of the villagers, they search for better sources of income outside agriculture. This leads to sale of land, which ultimately drives the agricultural labour-force out of employment. The other side of the story is that due to the low prices received for their produce, farmers are sometimes compelled to give very low wages to the labourers, which is far less than what they might receive in comparison to the manufacturing sector. This forces the labourers to migrate out of agriculture. This indeed is not bad for an economy, which is in the second stage of reforms and globalisation. Reforms would be meaningful in the macro context, only if they provide greater employment opportunities with better wages and working environment. It is an irony that it is not so in the agricultural sector in a nation, which calls "Gandhi" the father of the nation, who always stressed upon "self sufficient villages" as the building blocks for making India a strong nation. Today we have a situation where large-scale migration of productive labour force (in the age group of 16 to 58) from villages to metros is creating unmanageable shanty townships. This has come about due to a combination of misplaced trade and other policies.

Purpose of the study

The main purpose of the study is to explore the impact of Uzhavar Sandhai on farmers' standard of living. If their lifestyle has improved, then the contribution of Uzhavar Sandhai towards the same has to be revealed. In addition, the adaptable nature of the market is studied in depth to understand how it could suit the different situations of various regions where this system could be put in practice. Also, the study tries to understand the reasons behind the setting up of Uzhavar Sandhai (US). Almost seven years have passed since the first such Sandhai was started. Thus, the core objectives of the study are: estimation of the return or profit earned by the farmers in relation to size of farms, irrigation facilities, cost of cultivation, distance travelled, place and time of operation of US. However, we would also like to understand the inner-dynamics of the Uzhavar Sandhai.

Scope of the Study

The benefits of Uzhavar Sandhai can be better realized by other farming communities in the country and outside, if the relevant facts are proved empirically. Further, any systemic faults can be corrected with the backing of public and private partnerships and appropriate government policies.

Limitations of the Study

What needs to be highlighted is that this survey gives a static picture of an otherwise dynamic market. This is actually one of the most prominent of all the limitations of the study, which needs to be considered while interpreting the results. Time was the main constraint faced by the authors for going back to the same Sandhai, and may be the same farmer, in order to compare their earlier responses and obtain a dynamic analysis. Also, the study is confined to Coimbatore city of Tamil Nadu, covered two Uzhavar Sandhais.

Methods

Random sampling technique was used to choose the markets to be surveyed. Once the market was identified, nearly the complete population on a particular day was surveyed for the sample. This case study is structured on the functioning and problems of Uzhavar Sandhai. Therefore, to bring out the significance of the Sandhai, it was imperative to adopt a simple analysis.

1. R.S. Puram Uzhavar Sandhai – Coimbatore Town
2. Singanallur Uzhavar Sandhai – Singanallur

Profile of Uzhavar Sandhai

Uzhavar Sandhai of Tamil Nadu has taken the cue from ‘Apna Mandi’ of Punjab and Haryana. The former agriculture secretary to the Government of India, M.S. Gill, during his trip to the former U.S.S.R. happened to visit ‘Kal Ghaj’, a farmers’ market where farmers were selling fresh and green vegetables on the roadside on a collective basis, at a high premium directly to the consumers. Impressed by this, he mooted the idea of farmers’ market in the early 1990s and initiated ‘Apna Mandis’ in Punjab and Haryana, which proved to be a phenomenal success. Andhra Pradesh followed suit and started the ‘Ryothu Bazaar’ on lines similar to that of Punjab and Haryana. The concept of farmers’ market was initiated in Tamil Nadu by the DMK government in October 1999. The main reasons behind starting this market system were to facilitate farmers to sell fresh fruits and vegetables directly to the consumer at remunerative prices without the intervention of middlemen and traders. Also, the Sandhai holds the price level of vegetables steady, giving no room for manipulation by middlemen and traders. It also acts as an information centre for marketing vegetables and most importantly as a check on the level of exploitation. In addition, adequate training is given to all farmers to access information like prices prevailing in similar markets, which in better days, were interconnected under a single network. The market place is located in important centres to help both the customers and farmers living in and around that centre. Each market has 60 to 100 small shops or sheds. Each farmer is allotted a shop or shed to sell his/her produce. The government appoints a marketing committee to identify the farmers and give them a permit card or identity card. They do not have to pay any rent or commission for selling their goods for this. The Marketing Committee will fix a price and the same price will be applicable for the particular commodity for the whole day. The prices are fixed for a commodity on the basis of the previous day’s price of that commodity in the wholesale market. Moreover, the prices are also prominently displayed in front of every shop. The consumers are also assured of correct weighment, as the farmers who sell their goods at the market should use only the balance and weights supplied by the marketing committee.

Problems Encountered in the Uzhavar Sandhai

When farmers were questioned about the problems they encountered, it came to light that they were facing certain basic problems. The most important factor, which they see as a hindrance was the starting time of the Sandhai. Some 36 percent of the farmers said that there should be a change in the timings.

In Coimbatore the Sandhai opens at 4 a.m., and works well and people do not complain. On the other hand, the same timings did put stress on the farmers. Such markets are unique, and they are also faced with certain unique problems like the density of population surrounding the Sandhai, visibility of the Sandhai, convenience of customers to board town bus, etc.

The next difficulty they face is the distance to be covered. Of the total 100 respondents, 22 percent found it tough to cover the distance, as the Sandhai is located far away from their place. This problem is a recent one, since in the initial stage there were many Sandhais located nearer to the farmers’ places, but several of which have since been closed. Hence, they have to travel long distances to reach the Sandhai to sell their produce. It is because of this distance factor that the farmers feel that by starting the Sandhai early in the morning, they can complete their sales and go back early. To facilitate this, they insist that the authorities should ply the free town bus early in the morning. Since there is no such service as of now, farmers reach the Sandhai very late, and by then prime shop allotment is finished. Another way to sort out this problem is by opening the closed Sandhais.

In Coimbatore, the survey was made on two Sandhais: one at a place called Singanallur and the other at Cowly Brown Road, R.S. Puram. These two Sandhais had farmers from places more than 100 kilometres away. Farmers from Ooty thronged the market, which is 90 km away from Coimbatore. Due to this distance, the respondents take a rented house near the Sandhai and for transportation of their produce may use telephonic instructions with their farmland. Very few complained about the time factor and distance in Coimbatore. That is because at both these places, the Sandhai starts operating by 4 a.m. in the morning and the entire business gets completed by 7 a.m. Proper shop allotment is another issue in the present setup. About 20 percent of the farmers are of the view that they do not get shop allotment according to their presence in the Sandhai. Some say that even if they are among the few early ones to enter the Sandhai, they are not allotted the prime shops because of some corrupt officials.

The Uzhavar Sandhai has done effectively is to create a better market for the products of poor, small and marginal farmers with fixed prices and informed consumers, which induces the former to stay in farming. The latter will act as a guiding parameter in initiating small farmers towards deciding market movements and will in turn enthuse the succeeding generation to take up agriculture as an occupation. Correcting the distortions in domestic markets would assume prime significance. Unless we put in place stronger institutionalized systems with democratic characteristics, we would be subjected to external dominance in our so-called “self sufficient” agricultural sector.

The following are thus the policy recommendations from the present study:

1. As the survey-based study of the Uzhavar Sandhai has established, this “City-Centric Market Model” is beneficial both for farmers and consumers alike and thus the foremost recommendation, which emerges is that these farmers’ markets should be strengthened as well as emulated elsewhere to empower the small farming community in our country. The farmers’ markets provide farmers with instant cash and fair prices and also provide a place to the consumers wherein they can buy vegetables and fruits cheaper than the retailer market. These can also enable farmers to withstand the forces of globalisation that have already crept in the forms of contract farming and corporate farming, which is fast gaining ground in India.
2. The success of farmers’ markets depends crucially on their marketing committees, which take decisions regarding prices, infrastructure development and support services. Thus, the second recommendation is that these markets should have permanent structures, which are also dynamic at the same time. It should be a truly representative committee with all the stakeholders – i.e. farmers, consumers, and government – actively participating in decisions such as fixation of prices, weightment of produce, etc.
3. Each city is ‘different’ by way of its culture, practices and socio-economic fabric. So we have to redesign the farmers’ market concept to suit the conditions prevailing in each town/ city. Thus, the third recommendation towards a successful operation of this agricultural market model is that these markets should be established keeping in mind the socioeconomic characteristics and cultural practices of the local population.
4. Women’s economic empowerment in the rural economy is inseparably linked to strengthening laws, policies, governance and institutions, which reduce the risks of exposure to, and enhance protection from, unacceptable forms of work.
5. The successful operation of farmers’ markets also requires visibility and convenience of farmers and consumers to transport to the market place. One way of ensuring the latter is to locate the market in the middle of a densely populated area. If customer convenience is not taken into consideration while setting up the market, it is bound to fail. Thus, more townships should be identified so that farmers will need to travel only less distances. This would also yield better gender representation. Thus, a 20-km radius is recommended as the most ideal distance between different farmers’ markets. So, what has been done effectively in Tamil Nadu should be practiced by other state governments in their own innovative ways. This will surely improve farmers’ and agricultural labourers’ lives, and will ultimately help the agriculture sector growth in the economy.
6. Gender-based inequalities in the labour market, women’s unequal share of unpaid care and household work, and bias in the way in which social protection systems are structured in the formal economy have resulted in unequal access, coverage and provision of social security for women. Moreover, gender inequalities and the lack of consideration given to women’s specific social protection needs often put women at greater risk throughout their life.
7. The vegetables can be allowed delivered to the SHGs at the same prices procured from the Farmers’ Producer Companies. It was aimed at supporting farmers, women and SHGs.

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