

'Even after 33 years, the idea of Apni Mandi has survived'



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Former Union Minister

IN 1985, on return from the World Bank, I became Development Commissioner, Punjab, responsible for the agriculture and rural sector. This unified authority, now split, was created by Kairon. I had spent the year 1967 in Cambridge and gone again on invitation in 1974-75 to write my book "An Indian Success Story - Agriculture and Cooperatives in the Punjab".

In Cambridge, I saw their Saturday markets, an institution, common to all English towns. People from villages around Cambridge would come to the market square and sell their produce, vegetables, flowers, honey, home-made jams, anything and everything that they could think of, direct to city consumers and also academics who lived in the villages. As Cambridge professors died, their valuable book collections also came to the Saturday market to be picked up for a song. On Saturday, the city was packed with people shopping for the week. This idea stayed with me.

As Development Commissioner, I saw that the major problem for farmers was marketing for a reasonable profit. Farmers around Chandigarh, grew vegetables, which were taken away by middlemen for a pittance



and sold at huge profits to unhappy city consumers. Under Punjab's never-ending Governor's rule, I was also head of the Mandi Board and all other corporations in the rural sector.

The thought struck me that I could organise direct marketing for small farmers' produce, keeping the middlemen out. The producer would get better prices and consumers cheaper fresh vegetables.

I instructed the staff to visit villages on UT's periphery within a radius of 10-15 miles, identify small farmers with 5-7 acres of land, give them badges to keep out rehri vendors and organise direct sale experiment in one of Chandigarh's open spaces. The Mandi Board officers were to supervise this Apni Mandi, guiding farmers in pricing. On the appointed day, plenty of farmers arrived, so did the city ladies. I stood there to watch, and to ensure that the staff helped enthusiastically. The experiment went well. I wrote a pamphlet to explain why did I had named it Apni Mandi.

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middlemen and the vendors were not pleased but Governor SS Ray put his faith in me and ignored all belly-ache. In November 1988, I went to Delhi as Secretary, Petro-Chemicals, Chemicals and Pharmaceuticals. Sadly, once I left vendors and middlemen filtered in.

The worth of an idea is in its life after the man is gone. I was surprised that the idea continued with whatever imperfections owing to the indifference of the authorities. It

spread to other Punjab towns. It even went to Haryana and elsewhere under the Apni Mandi name. It is 33 years now, and the idea refuses to die out. On my recent visit to Chandigarh last month, I was both surprised and pleased to read the Apni Mandi schedules in city pullouts.

But I am disappointed with the bureaucracy and the higher masters, who have never thought of visiting small farmers, tightening the system and uprooting those masquerading as small farmers. My idea was and is to help them. Punjab's average land-holding is less than two acres. Apni Mandi is for them, not the big farmers.

I believe the Apni Mandi concept should be taken to all urban centres. The abuses should be removed and governments everywhere must extend a helping hand to small farmers.

I was delighted to learn that village womenfolk bring cooked saag, makai ki roti, pickles and other home-made products to Apni Mandi to enhance their income. If only I was in Chandigarh and not in Delhi.