

FARMERS' FAIRS: CAN WE MAKE THEM IMPACTFUL?



The Kisan Melas or Farmers Fairs are considered as important mechanism to popularize agricultural technologies among farmers. But in recent times, the organizers of such agro fairs are finding it difficult to attract the farming communities. In this blog, Dr Tanusha and Dr Mahesh Chander suggest ways to make these fairs more effective and meaningful to farmers.

CONTEXT

Farmers' fairs or *Kisan melas* are in existence for a long time. The main purpose of organising such fairs or melas is to create awareness among farmers about new technologies developed by researchers -- primarily from the public sector agricultural research centres and agricultural universities. Also, these fairs help farmers enhance their knowledge on new schemes or programs. Such fairs often attract an umpteen number of farmers, scientists, students, and extension personnel from the KVKs and the agriculture and allied departments. Private sector, especially the input companies are also participating in these fairs. Organizing such events demand a lot of investments. Scientists and development professionals need to spend several weeks to organize such events. But are farmers deriving real benefits from these? Can such events be made more impactful?



KISAN MELAS: A WORTHY INVESTMENT?

Kisan Melas are largely funded events with the financial support from State/Central government agencies. For instance, nearly Rs. 15-20 crore were spent on *Krishi Vasant* (2014) and the recently held *Krishi Unnati Mela* (2016). The central government has enhanced financial support to Regional Agriculture Fairs from Rs 6 Lakhs to Rs 15 Lakhs per fair. Investing such large amounts is important to make these events grand and successful. But on the flip side, these investments do not yield adequate returns if farmers fail to attend these events. Increasingly, farmers are abstaining from these events, whereas, many urban dwellers seen frequenting these casually.

The farmers find these fairs not attractive enough to foot the bill on travelling charges and other expenses. Moreover, the growing use of social media and other ICT tools in the current era of digital media (<http://www.agriculture.com/news/technology/farmers-making-use-of-social-media-6-ar50861>) has opened the doors to avail any information at just one click instead of travelling to these events. However, the organizers of these events are often under pressure to ensure presence of a large turnout of farmers. Ambitious targets are set for different organisations to bring scores of farmers for the event. Even incentives are paid to farmers to ensure their presence. This may increase the presence of farmers but in turn diminishes the importance of these fairs. The people either are not actively involved or just come to have a good time. It is



high time that we reflect on the current status of *Kisan Melas* and take measures to upgrade these events to maximise returns on these huge investments.

Box 1: Kisan Melas in India

These days, *Kisan Melas* are organized every year by almost all of the agricultural universities. Most of the ICAR institutions organize such fairs at least once in two years. Govind Ballabh Pant University of Agriculture and Technology (GBPUAT), Pantnagar, organizes the event biannually -- one for *Rabi* crop season (October) and *Kharif* crops (March). Other ICAR institutes, like IARI, IVRI, NDRI, etc, and some SAUs hold them on annual pattern.

The objectives for the following mega events are similar:

- *Krishi Vasant* (2014) at Nagpur (<http://www.icar.org.in/en/node/7374>)
- *Krishi Unnati Mela*-National Agriculture Fair (2016) at New Delhi (<http://www.icar.org.in/en/node/10264>)
- The Agricultural Fairs organized by State Agricultural Universities (<http://www.krishijagran.com/General-News/2015/10/GB-Pant-Universitys-Farmers-Fair-a-Teerth-Yatra>) State Veterinary Universities (<http://www.icar.org.in/en/node/10486>) or ICAR institutes like the Indian Institute of Vegetable Research (<http://www.icar.org.in/en/node/10141>).

The Directorate of Extension, Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare, Government of India, has a scheme of sponsoring Regional Agricultural Fairs in different agro-climatic zones of the country (http://vistar.nic.in/organisation/Farm-Information/kisan_mela/Guidelines.asp). Under this scheme, several SAUs and ICAR institutes organize Regional Agricultural Fairs every year, like the one organized by the Indian Veterinary Research Institute in 2015 (<http://www.icar.org.in/en/node/8690>).

Not only the public institutions, but also the private sector (<http://pune.kisan.in/>) and NGOs (<http://www.agrotech-india.com/home.aspx>) are taking interest in organizing agricultural fairs. The corporate sector's support to organizing farmers' fair is found to relieve the overburdened public institutions that often have financial crunch too, in organizing such fairs effectively.

ENHANCING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF FAIRS:

Some of the suggestions to make these fairs more beneficial to farmers are given here:

Advance publicity: Often farmers are not aware of the fairs being organized even in their vicinity. It is therefore important that farmers are informed well in advance through newspapers, radio, TV, personal contacts, mobile publicity vans etc. The extension agencies like KVK and ATMA have important role in bringing information to the notice of the farmers. The services of these agencies could be utilized to ensure larger participation in farmers' fairs. For instance, in Krishi Vasant and Krishi Unnati Mela, the KVKs and ATMA played huge role in ensuring the participation of farmers. The ATARIs were given targets to bring farmers with financial support to meet the cost of farmer participation. In the digitalized era with growing number of mobile and smart phones, awareness can be further raised among farmers through mobile text and voice messaging including Social Media channels like Facebook and Whatsapp.



Seeds and seedlings stalls: Seed stalls have always been one of the major attractions for farmers in such events. The agricultural universities, the National Seeds Corporation and private seed companies display and put on sale new varieties, plants and vegetable seeds and seedlings. The good quality seeds for the coming season should be made available at these stalls at reasonable prices. Farmers may also be given required information regarding sowing/planting of these varieties through leaflets and folders on these seeds and planting materials. Many social media platforms like Facebook and Whatsapp groups are now spreading information about promising new varieties. However, when they look for such varieties, they don't get the seeds in required quantities. If the farmers' fairs are able to cater to this need, the farmers would find visiting these fairs valuable.

Technology display stalls: Common in all the farmers' fairs, these stalls display the new kind of technologies that have entered into the market. These include everything from milking machines, growth promoters, chaff cutters, sprayers, drip irrigation systems to tractors. These stalls could be more meaningful, if opportunity of hands-on experience is provided to the farmers through method/process demonstrations on the site.

Kisan Goshti: This is one very important part of Farmers' Fairs, which offers a platform for farmers to interact with scientists who can facilitate solutions to the farmers' problems. The queries of farmers may be documented for the experts to deliberate and share solutions. The experts speaking on the occasion should base their talks on the problems of farmers rather than merely speaking about the government schemes (Mahesh Chander's Notes, In: Vijayan and Laxmipriya Upadhyaya, 2016). The visiting farmers should be able to find solutions or answers to their problems they face in their farming operations. Often they meet disappointments on this count demotivating them to attend these fairs.

Crop-livestock demonstrations/Animal shows: This is another fascinating event for the farmers. Organising crop yield competitions in different zones prior to the mela and bringing such award winning farmers to the farmers' fair may help draw more farmers to the event. The best animal selected based on the pre-determined criteria and prizes distributed to the owners in different categories may inculcate the good habit and interest among farmers for raising good quality animals. Also, different breeds of animals and highly prolific animals at these fairs inspire visiting farmers.

The National Livestock Show and Championship organized every year in February at Muktsar by Punjab State Department of Animal Husbandry is one good example of such show (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tDr4EDu0XDQ>, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KG2hwCtfg0U>). Live crop, flower and animal shows during *Krishi Unnati Mela* (2016) at Delhi in March was an appreciable effort which should be followed by SAUs and ICAR institutions with region specific attractions.



The extension principle "seeing is believing" works well in such fairs when farmers witness live demonstration of the technologies or systems in action rather than descriptions and narrations. Although it is a bit tough task to handle large number of live method demonstrations, it could add to the efforts fruitfully. Management of animals, water harvesting, drip irrigation, integrated farming, handling of new technology tools, new varieties, seeds, etc. can be demonstrated. The didactic approach should give more of experience to farmers and motivate them to adopt such techniques.

Portals and Knowledge models: Instalment of a few Internet kiosks during *Kisan Melas* would help to serve farmers at large. Farmers could be taught the use and handling of the ICT tools which would help in enhancing their knowledge at a fast pace. The agropedia (<http://agropedia.iitk.ac.in/>) stall at the *Kisan Mela* (Pantnagar) was a huge hit. The organisers explained about the portal and knowledge models to the visitors who were enthusiastic about learning how to draw knowledge models, how to upload content in library as well as in agrowiki and agroblog (Agropedia, 2010). The LCD presentations on improved practices, information kiosks placed at vantage points in the Mela ground may add to the attractions for the farmers.



Involving Progressive farmers: Farmers would learn more effectively, if they see any success stories. The progressive farmers could be used as a source of practical information worth sharing to attract other farmers, since they would find the results more applicable to themselves. Such progressive farmers are seen as role models by the farmers (Mahesh Chander, 2016), thus, the extension services may consider involving them in activities like Farmers' Fairs (<https://blog.gfar.net/2016/05/03/agripreneurs-the-emerging-role-models/>).

Free check-up stalls: A benevolent provision for the check-up of the animals, soil health analysis, faecal sample testing of animals etc. should be made free of cost for the visiting farmers. They would know about the current health status of soil as also the health status of their animals. Remedies provided to them on the spot may encourage farmers to visit these fairs. The vaccination camps for the livestock can also be set up where animals would be vaccinated depending upon the seasonal requirement.

Customer care centres: The farmers should be able to contact the authorities as and when required through fully operational customer care centres. Often participants encounter chaotic situations where no information is available from any quarters, especially when VVIPs are visiting these fairs.



Make melas more thematic: *Kisan Melas* could also be organised on

a more theme based pattern so the public is cognizant what there is in store for them. This would also help in organising the different sessions and stalls more focussed.

Something for Everyone: These fairs should be made more inclusive to cater to the needs of young, adult and old, women, men or youth. There should be something for every category of visitors from rural areas. Special efforts should be made to target groups like farm women, rural youth, students etc. The students of the agricultural universities should actively participate in these fairs. Interactive sessions among students and farmers should help both in understanding the conditions on the field and test the applicability of the book knowledge. Also, *Kisan Melas* could be used as a platform by these students to showcase any innovative idea. Students should come up with the development of working models applicable to village conditions which a farmer can apply. To encourage such groups, events or competitions linked with participation of farmers need to be planned. Various kinds of competitions like fodder cutting or fodder chaffing, milking the cattle, etc. help sustain a high interest for the farmers and farm women.

Boarding/Lodging and other civic amenities: Often this is the most neglected segment of any Farmers' fair. Farmers get demotivated when they are not assured of proper staying arrangements. Appreciably during recent *Krishi Unnati Mela*, there was comparably better arrangement for drinking water, clean toilets, food and stay arrangements. Here again, chaotic situation was witnessed in the matter of farmer registrations, which caused lot of annoyance among farmers.



CONCLUSION

When people thought radio is no longer appealing or dead, it bounced back in the form of FM channels and community radio, making it even more popular among masses due to interactive and participatory formats. The same holds true for *Kisan Melas*, which need to be made more interactive, participatory and farmer friendly.

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