

# Chandigarh's first organic market has grown and spread

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[The organic movement is small in scale but big on initiatives. It is being driven mainly by farmers, aided by volunteers and consumers.](#)

Residents purchase vegetables and other items from Organic Mandi near the horse riding club at Sukhna Lake in Chandigarh. (Express Photo by Sahil Walia) What began three years ago as a dream for chemical-free natural food has now gained pace and support. Chandigarh's first organic market has grown and spread, with the model now an inspiration for other such initiatives, small in scale, but big on intent and effectiveness. It all began in 2015, with informal discussions to market the produce and products of organic farmers by developing a support network and by creating an interface between farmers and consumers. There were many challenges along the way, recalls Raman Mann, a farmer and activist, and Dr Upendra Nath Roy, professor and head, Department of Rural Development, NITTR, who along with a handful of farmers, began this initiative. The premise is simple — time to give back to the soil what it has fed us and pave the way for change, one that is sustainable for us and our earth. The shift from conventional farming method to a biotic mechanism involves re-structuring of soil profile, giving time for the nutrients to permeate nutrients. The process requires continuous supervision. The investment is whopping, and the returns small. But with the focus on the health of the consumer and the soil, organic farmers are willing to put commerce and strategic business planning on the backseat for the sake of 'service before self'. The Chandigarh Organic Farmers Market comprises people of the farming community, researchers, professors, poets, and young, educated local volunteers. The group organises organic mandis on Saturday of each week near Sukhna Lake to provide a better exchange between producers and consumers without intermediaries. "With vegetables, fruits, honey, mustard oil, I take back the passion, warmth and effort with which these farmers grow food for us," says Rajpal, one of the many customers, happy with the manner in which these mandis are regulated. "We know the farmers well enough to have faith in their produce and other allied processed products," she adds.

Actor Gul Panag during an exhibition at Alliance Francaise in Sector 36, Chandigarh. The event marked the 3rd anniversary of organic farmers' market in Chandigarh. (Express archive)

Seema Jolly, a facilitator of the forum, emphasises how the entire process of buying and selling organic farm produce weaves a fabric of social interaction. "Consumers brim with satisfaction, when they know who their farmer is, where he comes from, what he cultivates, which manure he uses, and there is a constant review of products and practices," she says. "Igniting trust between farmers and their customers for pursuing the common goal of association with the soil is the edifice for the weekly organic mandis." Jaswinder Singh from Fatehgarh Sahib has been practising organic farming for more than seven years, producing fresh yield and then processing the same for products like pickles, amla-tulsi juice, dalia, turmeric et al. The organic method is profitable for farmers' large tracts of land. Instead of chemical fertilisers, pesticides and weedicides, organic farmers employ natural nutrients like cow dung, crop residue, food scrap, vegetable and fruit peel, thereby generating 'soil conditioners' with better humus content, in turn enriching the soil. Neem, herbs, local jaggery, khatti lassi, gaumutra, etc, says Nek Ram, an organic farmer who is a regular at the mandi, are used to keep the insects away and cow dung, vegetable peels, etc. used as natural manure. "We prefer natural ways of farming and are content with whatever is left for us, rather than using chemicals and pesticides." Ashok Kumar from Shatabgarh, Zirakpur, owns five acres of land, where he started growing seasonal vegetables and fruits like bottle-gourd, snake-gourd, spinach, mint, ladyfinger and mangoes two years ago. "Despite many roadblocks such as losses incurred, less manpower, low yield and high fixed costs, I feel the transformation to organic cultivation is imperative to feed and sustain the upcoming generation and it is being true to the earth." His customer base comprises mainly the affluent class, who are now becoming aware of eating healthy.

Organic farming in the region has received a push from those in the diaspora who have returned to India with degrees in new farming, first-hand exposure to advanced organic growing techniques in the west and a passion to replicate these on their ancestral land. In another weekly organic mandi/market in Sector 18, farmers from Punjab and Haryana come with fresh vegetables, fruits, oil, pulses every week. According to farmers, there are two major problems. One is that the demand keeps fluctuating and second, they don't have a permanent market set-up. As awareness of organic farming is increasing, more and more customers are approaching farmers and markets and government support and cooperatives can take the movement forward, believe the farmers. "We want our children and family to eat and drink healthy. When people realise the importance of eating healthy, they will start shifting towards organic foods. The problem is that there are not enough places and enough markets for buying organic food." Many of the farmers are not only passionate about organic farming, but are also spreading awareness for the need for organic produce and inspiring other farmers to join the growing movement. Not only humans, but pesticides and insecticides also affect the soil, bringing down its fertility and subsequently the produce with every passing year. "I have been doing organic farming for last two years and work under a landowner in Ambala. We get the produce here according to the demand and if something is left, I take it back to Ambala since we have an organic store there," says Kuldeep Kumar, who uses manure for enriching the soil. Another organic farmer, Sarabjit Singh, who has an organic store, says he does organic farming because it is more connected to nature. "Customers are discerning, they know the difference in quality and taste of organic products and keep coming back. These small markets and mandis are a platform for us to not just sell, but connect with consumers and expand the circle of friends, with dialogues and discussions creating awareness. The future is organic," he adds. As for the eye-wateringly high cost of organic products, according to many farmers over the last couple of years, customer profile is changing, with people from various walks of life visiting and also buying products, as awareness is on the rise, with organic stores in the city and also in the Sector 26 mandi giving them a platform to showcase and sell. Farmers agree there is usually a hike of 30 per cent in the rates of organic foods, as production is less and marketing is difficult. As more and more farmers join the movement, many farms in New Chandigarh, Landran, Zirakpur have come up, with farmers from Ambala, Rajpura, many places in Himachal Pradesh like Rohru, travelling to Chandigarh to be part of the forums. Agrees Satinder Brar, another organic farmer, who has farms in New Chandigarh and says he has seen a steady increase in the number of customers, for people are becoming aware of the health benefits of natural, organic and chemical-free food. Catering to demands of consumers for seasonal fruits, common vegetables, pulses, condiments, oil, the weekly mandis also see talks on new techniques of farming, water harvesting, healthy cooking demonstrations, using the produce of farmers here. "Chemicals act as poison not only for insects, but also for the soil and for the person who consumes the products growing in that soil. We are five farmers and we grow various vegetables as well as pulses on the six acres of land. I have been coming to this market for the last three years and have seen it expand," explains Joga Singh, a farmer from Naya Gaon, adding that what is left, is used at home, but never wasted. Many measures are also taken to ensure quality of all the produce. A new farmer can join the association only after a screening, which includes a visit to his farm by the organisers and soil tests. Further, a regular check is also kept, with regulars testing the produce being sold. Vishavjeet Jyani of Jyani Natural Farm, from Fazilka district, was among the first to join the initiative, working on his father's 100-acre farm, which has been totally organic since 2005. Despite the challenges and lesser income than farming with chemicals for a better yield, there are no regrets. Food should not lead to disease, says Jyani, who feels the need of the hour is to make people aware of the importance of natural food, and also give meaning to the effort of farmers. First published by

