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A Study on the APMC & Its Policies: Finding Challenges & Possible Solutions to Overcome

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Paper Code : JCT-O20-ST-LKT
DOI : https://doi.org/10.26703/JCT.v15i2-3
Web Address : http://www.jctindia.org/october2020/v15i2-3
Archive : https://ideas.repec.org/o/jct/journl/v15y2020i2p21-29.html
http://EconPapers.repec.org/RePEc:jct:journl:v:15:y:2020:i:2:p:21-29.
Similarity : 09 percent

How to Cite: Tiwari, Swati and Tripathi, L. K. (2020). A Study on the APMC & Its Policies: Finding Challenges & Possible Solutions to Overcome. *Journal of Commerce and Trade* (H. Agarwal, Ed.) *15* (2), 21-29. https://doi.org/10.26703/ JCT.v15i2-3.

Abstract

Agriculture is important for the economic growth of the country. Agriculture is completely different from industry and markets. It consists of several processes and activities to move raw material and nutriment from farm lands to end consumers. Hence, the marketing system must be effectively designed to provide farmers with the right rewards for their efforts that they deserve. Sadly, the middlemen get all the benefits in this process due to lack of awareness and mobility of poor farmers. Hence, the government has passed three important farm bills to improve the availability of farm produce to the buyers by enabling farmers to sell their produce without any stock limit or license. This way, farmers can get better prices with a rise in competition. De-regulation may not be efficient alone to get more buyers. It is important to ensure easy accessibility, transparency, and robust market for the farmers and buyers to ensure fair trade practices, according to the Standing Committee (2018-19). Most farmers cannot reach APMC markets and government facilities. This way, adequate infrastructure can be a great alternative for small markets to trade their agro-produce. This paper focuses on both farmers' problems and the benefits that new ordinances can bring. In addition, some valid suggestions will also be discussed to overcome the current issues of farmers in India when it comes to trade their produce.

Keywords: Agricultural Marketing; APMC Markets; APMC Act; Farmers; Middlemen.
Classification-JEL : Q13, O13, E25

1. INTRODUCTION

State governments in India have established a marketing committee named “Agricultural Produce Market Committee (APMC)” to protect farmers' interest against exploitation from leading retail chains. The States adopted an APMC Act to regulate all their APMC yards. Agriculture produce was initially sold for the first time only at the APMC mandis (market yards) until 2020. The government has passed the Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act in September 2020 to enable farmers to sell their produce across various states of the country and outside APMC yards.

Controlling the prices for agro-raw materials and food for the consumers had always been a major challenge for the governments since independence. It was very important to protect farmers' interest and to provide incentive prices to boost the agricultural production after independence. The extortion of local money lenders for highly valued food grains from the farmers in the form of interest was a major issue across the country. Considering the losses of farmers in terms of higher marketing costs, unnecessarily low pieces, and major physical losses to the agricultural produce, the Government of India has passed various important laws to set a mechanism to keep track on the market. Construction of proper mandis and development and regulation of agricultural produce markets were considered as the primary requirement to control the wholesale market practices.

The Agriculture Produce Market Regulation program has been conceptualized since the British Raj. The British rulers were aggressive to supply pure cotton at best prices to the Manchester-based textile mills. Hence, raw cotton was the first produce that government had focused on. In 1886, the Hyderabad Residency Order passed the first regulated market in India, Karanja. In 1887, the Berar Cotton and Grain Market Act was the first law that enabled British residents to announce any place in the given district an agro-produce market for sale and purchase and formed a committee to control the regulated mandis. It became an APMC model to be enacted in other regions of the nation.

In 1928, the Royal Commission on Agriculture was recommended to establish regulated markets and market practices and it became a milestone in agricultural marketing in India. Establishing market yards in the villages and controlling the trade practices were some of the most important measures. In 1938, an APMC Model Bill was prepared and circulated to all states in India. The Agricultural Produce Markets Regulation (APMR) Acts were passed and enforced in most of the Indian states from the 1960s to 1970s. An APMC was enacted to enforce the rules and organized agricultural market came through government-regulated markets. A Union National Agriculture Market was proposed in the Union Budget 2015 through Niti Ayog and state governments. There are two APMC principles – (1) to avoid exploitation of farmers from money lenders (intermediaries) who force farmers to sell their agro-produce at a very cheap price at the farm gate, and (2) All produce must be sold in the market yard for the first time and then sold to retailers over auction. Each state has their APMC markets in various places in their geographical borders. Farmers had to go to the mandis to sell their produce through auction. Traders cannot operate in the mandis without license [1].

In 2003, a model APMC Act was designed by the Indian Government for the first time to bring reformations to the agro markets. This act had the provisions of direct purchase, private wholesale markets, new markets along with APMCs, and contract selling for farmers. As per the APMC model, the market committees were held liable to maintain transparency in the market pricing and transactions, provide market-oriented extension services, promote agricultural processing to improve the produce's value, ensure complete payment to the farmers on the same day for the produce sold, setting the dates when farmers can bring their agricultural produce to the market, and to form and promote Public-Private Partnerships to such markets [2].

On September 14, 2020, three agriculture reform bills were introduced in the Parliament, namely “The Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement of Price Assurance and Farm Services Bill, 2020,” “The Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Bill, 2020,” and “The Essential Commodities (Amendment) Bill, 2020” as alternatives to the ordinances passed during Coronavirus lockdown. On September 27, 2020, the President signed those bills. The Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Bill, 2020 was aimed to allow interstate and intrastate produce trade outside the APMC yards and other markets which fall under APMC Acts. The Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement of Price Assurance and Farm Services Bill, 2020 was aimed to provide a nation-wide framework on farming contracts between farmers and agri-business companies, exporters, processors, or leading retailers for farm produces. It protects farmers' interest to get a mutually-signed price in a transparent and fair way. Essential Commodities (Amendment) Bill, 2020 enables regulation of some produce by the central government only under extreme incidents like famine and war. If there is steep rise in price, agriculture produce may be subject to stock limits . [3]

a) Agriculture Bill Reforms: The government has reformed agriculture bill considering the following benefits for the farmers and to protect their rights and interest [3] –

- To prohibit lease, sale or mortgage of farming land and agreements will be made only for crops.
- To ensure the benefits for the farmers. For example, farmers are now able to sell their crops to large companies directly and earn more profits anywhere and from anyone.
- APMC markets to continue their operations as earlier.
- The bill is not intended to make any change to the Minimum Support Price (MSP) and it will remain the same.
- Small farmers can also have great benefits with guaranteed profits with the use of latest equipment and technologies.
- The farmers are assured to have a fixed price and they are also free to withdraw from the agreement without bearing any penalty anytime.

b) Protests Against Agriculture Bill: The Agricultural Produce Market Committee (APMC) market is an area where marketing of the recognized livestock and agricultural produce is managed in electronic, physical, or other mode. The place consists of open space, enclosure, structure, grading, processing and packaging unit, and street with silos/warehouse/cleaning/pack house, etc. pre-defined in the given marketplace. The MSP or Minimum Support Price is the predefined agricultural produce price which is government-regulated for the farmers for direct selling. This rate is defined to ensure minimum profit to the farmer for the harvest. Farmers have many reasons to protest against the reform bill which they think is true [4] –

- The contract and agreement will not be in their favor as their land will be owned by capitalists.
- They will not have any protection from these anti-farmer bills.
- Since government is allowing farmers to sell anywhere and to anyone, mandis will be finished and small farmers will be clueless as where to go and sell their produce.
- Bills are a cover-up to remove the safety of MSP.
- Small farmers will suffer all the losses and big corporates will enjoy all the profits.
- Farmers will be exploited in the form of contracts with leading retail chains.

Irrespective of all the above myths, the three farm bills are intended to increase the options for farmers to sell their produce [4]. These laws enable them to trade without any stock limit or license with freedom. It will bring better results to the farmers due to increasing competition among the buyers. It is aimed to increase the selling options for the farmers and liberalize trade. The provisions may override all the APMCs owned by the states without any loss for the farmers.

There were many problems with the traditional APMC system which government is trying to resolve. With some exceptions, monopoly of any business is not good for the customers, be it by government, MNCs, or by APMC. Consumers cannot reach original sellers and farmers cannot reach genuine buyers due to these mandis. Farmers cannot operate in most of these markets due to license fees and entry barriers. Rent and license fees are very high and only urban elites or group of villages operate in these yards. APMCs also have agents that form a cartel to control higher bidding. They have control over the price to buy the produce and sell it at a higher price. Farmers need to pay marketing fee, commission, and APMC cess which further increase the cost. VAT is also imposed by some states. Agents may also stop releasing a part of the payment due to unknown reasons and farmers also don't get acknowledgement receipt for payment or sale, which is required to apply for a loan [2].

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Jaiprakash Bisen and Ranjit Kumar (2018) study major marketing reforms in a systematic manner and various studies on the challenges and benefits of e-auctioning/e-tendering in farming and come up with the right solutions to boost e-NAM to provide its benefits efficiently. Efficient markets provide all the performers with efficient field and price discovery. This study focuses on agricultural marketing in India and addresses the challenges in implementing e-NAM in order to boost farmer's income. A lot of challenges in implementing e-NAM are studied when it comes to Institution, Infrastructure, and Information in this paper. It advocates boosting the backdrop of supply chain with amendments in APMC Acts in states and public-private partnerships to promote e-tendering and aware farmers about e-NAM.

Abhishek Beriya (2021) attempts to put light on the issues related to two new laws related to agriculture in India in 2020 and reviews both aspects of the dispute. The Government of India believes that these reforms are ideal for Indian farmers and their future. These laws are known to remove intrastate and interstate trade barrier for farmers, so that they can sell their agricultural produce to the wholesalers, processors, aggregators, exporters, and large retailers as part of contract farming. The government has amended a previous law and introduced two new laws in 2020. The Essential Commodities Act has been amended to relieve the farmers from the regulations related to stock-holding limits. These changes would bring better private investment, modernize agriculture, and boost agriculture value chains. These reforms were left pending for a long time and the government believes that they will provide great benefits to farmers in India.

Subash S.P. et. al (2018) discuss various aspects of e-NAM and how it helps in offering farmers with remunerative prices. This chapter discusses e-NAM, ReMS Model in Karnataka, the process and objectives of e-NAM, how it estimates remunerative prices, challenges, present scenario, and future. The e-National Agricultural Market (eNAM) is an Indian portal launched in 2016 to connect the agricultural markets for e-trading. A pilot project was introduced in the state of Karnataka which made way to this concept. The government of India brought Agricultural Produce and Livestock Marketing model in 2017 for establishing e-markets. In India, agricultural markets still need development as they have a lot of imperfections, such as lack of competitive price research, lack of standards, grading and infrastructure, high price spread by market intermediaries, and malpractices and insufficiency in agricultural produces.

Shashidhara kk et. al (2020) studied farmer's perception on APMC markets in Karnataka's Raichur district. They marked four talukas in the district. From the APMC markets of each taluka, thirty farmers were randomly picked, adding up to 120 farmers for the survey. The study employed the “Ex-post facto” design. In this study, over 52.5% of farmers were middle aged, 27.5% farmers were old and only 20% of farmers were young. In addition, there was high marketable surplus of 41.67% farmers along with medium and low marketable surplus belonged to 33.33 and 25 percent respondents respectively. It was found that the government has to make systematic efforts to conduct awareness on part of APMC among the farmers about how the reforms will work in regulated markets and what roles APMC Act will play.

Neha Tomar (2013) has submitted a study with an aim to help policymakers to come out with effective APMC model in India by suggesting various measures to deal with food inflation in the country. Inflation is going beyond the threshold limit with economic slowdown. It's time for Indian policymakers to rethink several measures that can achieve lower inflation and higher growth in the existing macro-economical scenario. Increasing food prices have become the bottleneck for the RBI and the government. The study suggests the reasons to amend APMC act immediately to relieve food inflation. It is very vital to improve food supply chain with elimination of middlemen and proper infrastructure. Some of the major steps to relieve food inflation is promoting efficiency and improving competition in retailing.

Prabhpreet Dhanoa (2011) analyzes the APMC Act in Maharashtra with several Model APMC Act provisions and explores various problems in APMC Act triggered by several stakeholders. This study is aimed to understand the views of stakeholders like experts from State Agricultural Marketing Board and Punjab Agricultural University, and entities marketing vegetables and fruits, such as commission agents, farmers, processing units etc. The researcher collected primary data through non-disguised and structured questionnaire. According to the study, the commission agents, farmers, processing units, and experts strongly recommend the idea of promotion and construction of infrastructural units, which promote open auction sales and help farmers to get payment on the same day. When it comes to direct marketing and contract farming, the farmers had a mixed response. The commission agents may not like direct marketing, public-private partnership, direct marketing, or any such provisions.

Dr. Siba Sankar Mohanty and Atul Singh (2014) review the status of APMC Act and how it influences agri-business in the state of Uttarakhand. This study revealed how this act couldn't improve the opportunities for agricultural marketing and how it shrunk the market with inordinate postponements of institutionalizing the APMC Act. It also focuses on the lack of proper marketing options in agricultural industry. These were some of the most common issues in the well-being of farmers who mostly depend on agriculture in Uttarakhand. As per the guidelines of model APMC Act, 2003, the state also adopted the Act hoping to improve the marketing options in 2011.

Ankur Saxena et. al (2017) analyzed the perception and awareness level of apple farmers in Himachal Pradesh about the amendment of APMC Act. They selected Kullu and Shimla, the highest apple producers in the state. They split apple growers into two groups – Group 1 (which consists of growers following the usual supply chain) and Group 2 (which consists of growers following both modern and old supply chains). The study addresses various issues in agricultural marketing system in India, such as poor warehousing, improper transportation, lack of packaging and grading, traders' malpractices, heavy influence of middlemen, insufficient funds, and lack of proper market information.

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

a) What are the Challenges of APMC?

b) What are the possible solutions to deal with APMC Challenges?

4. METHODOLOGY

This study uses secondary data gathered from authentic sources, journals, studies, government reports, and other information databases. This study is aimed to help researchers with easy access to important information about the recent farm bill and existing problems in APMC Act. In this research, we used secondary data to know the existing challenges in APMC Act and possible solutions that government authorities can implement. This data can help in further researches about the recent farm bills and enable policymakers and government bodies to make informed decisions about making reforms in future for the betterment of farmers and agriculture markets.

5. SURVEY

It is observed that farmers cannot access the right price for their agro-produce because of middlemen like brokers and commission agents who deal with them for lower prices. Farmers also bear losses when it comes to late payment and weighing their produce. Agriculture is the only source of income for the farmers and they end up selling their produce at lower price. So, it is also important to provide the right arrangements and facilities along with improving produce, such as transportation, storage, good price, and grading. Agro-produce is the regulated market in India through APMC Acts. All APMC mandis have been authorized to charge market fees from traders or buyers in the pre-defined way on selling agro-produce. This study collects secondary data to find out the answers of following questions –

Q1. What are the challenges of APMC?

Agricultural marketing consists of a lot of processes and marketing to move raw agro produce from farmlands to end consumers. The APMC system must be designed so tightly that it can deliver the right benefits to the farmers they deserve. Sadly, the middlemen enjoy all the cream in our country out of lack of awareness and disability of poor farmers in India. Middlemen enjoy lion's share in the process of buying and selling and only a small part goes to the farmers. Farmers suffer the most in securing the deserving price for the agro-produce. Here are some of the major challenges that exist in the current agricultural markets that need immediate government attention to resolve (13)

- Low margin in agricultural goods – There are so many marginal and small farmers in India. They do all the hard work for their produce. However, big farmers are the huge source of cash flow for the market. These big farmers have to reach their output to various markets. As a result, the volume of agricultural produce will be insufficient for demand.
- Storage problems – Agro-produce are perishable and they are produced as per the season but they have a huge demand all the year round. Hence, proper storage is needed in warehouses for agricultural goods to provide them when needed. There is a lack of storage for agro-producers or farmers. Due to this reason, farmers have to sell them as early as possible. Due to this reason, they end up with a low price margin in a hurry.
- Farmers are not sure about the price – Producers of industrial and consumer goods already consider their margin before determining the basic price of their items. On the other side, producers of agricultural items are not sure about the price to sell their produce to the end consumer. Farmers don't decide the price of their produce. There are intermediaries who decide the final price of agro-produce.
- Transportation issues – There is still lack of proper road networks in most of the villages. Hence, farmers mostly rely on conventional transport mediums like bullock carts to sell

their agricultural produce. It causes delays in getting produce in the market. Though trucks can transport perishables, the farmers have to bear high transportation cost. In return, they get a very low return.

- Malpractices – The middlemen are indulged in several illicit practices in the market to make money quickly for the cost of consumer and producer. Some of these practices are hoarding and black-marketing, adulteration, and use of false measurements and weights. These malpractices make it more difficult to sell agricultural produce at a good price.
- Intermediaries everywhere – There is an organized network of middlemen in the market like brokers, wholesalers, retailers, and commission agents. The agro-produce passes through them before reaching the end consumer. The price significantly increases as these produces go through each one of them. Ultimately, the burden of high price goes to the consumer. The consumer pays high prices for the produce but it doesn't reaches to the original producer, i.e. farmer. Instead, all the money goes to the pockets of middlemen.
- Poor Grading – Producers of industrial or consumer goods always get the right price for their production due to standardization. But it has nothing to do with agro-produce. But grading is possible as per their shape, size, etc. There is no or little importance in agricultural market about the produce grading. Hence, farmers get the same price, no matter what they have to offer.
- Lack of Awareness – There is different source of information for the producers of industrial and consumer goods from both outside and inside the business. Every industrialist can easily access any data as internet is available to everyone. But illiterate and poor farmers have no such information about the agricultural market.
- Other issues – Agricultural goods are bulky and they need proper packaging. In addition, it is not easy to carry them at various markets. Farmers have to do it manually and it takes labor. In addition, agricultural goods do not get the same demand always. The price is decided as per the rise or fall of produce. Hence, the producer suffers a lot due to fall of price in bumper harvest.

Q2. What are the possible solutions to deal with APMC Challenges?

Around 60% of population in India depends upon agriculture, directly or indirectly. Hence, it is very vital to remove the barriers of agricultural marketing and make agriculture a flourishing sector. Proper functioning is required in the agriculture industry to drive employment, growth and economic prosperity in rural villages in India. Here are some of the suggestions –

- The government should provide access to agro-produce market and make a regulated market available to the farmers in their villages.
- Licensing process must be made easier to allow new entrepreneurs to enter in the market.
- Mandi charges must be within 2% of the overall value of the produce in agricultural market.
- Market infrastructure must be stronger in agriculture market.
- The government should make efforts to control losses after harvesting of agro-commodities.
- Viability gap subsidy/funding are strongly needed with smooth availability of finance to improve investment opportunities and concessional funding must be made available to have more investments.
- It is important to cut down on intermediaries by providing alternatives like contract

farming, direct marketing, etc. This way, agricultural reforms are much needed.

An individual national level market is needed to provide agricultural commodities with all the existing regulations on storage and licensing movement.

6. RESULTS

The state governments regulate the agricultural markets in India under Agriculture Produce Marketing Committee (APMC) Act. The APMC mandis were established with an aim to ensure fair trade practices between the sellers and buyers to ensure proper price discovery of agricultural produce. APMCs are established to control the agro-produce trade by licensing commission agents, buyers, and private players, charge market fees or other charges on this type of trade, and to provide important infrastructure to promote the trade in their markets. It was found by the Standing Committee (2018-19) that there is a need to reform the APMC laws urgently as they are not followed well. The Committee found the issues like – (1) Limited number of traders in most APMCs which cause monopoly and cartelization, and (2) unnecessary deductions as market fees and commission. Commission agents, traders, and other players are organized into associations which restrict the entry of new buyers in markets. The Acts are too restrictive to promote several marketing channels, such as private markets, direct sale to retail customers and businesses, more buyers, and online transactions.

The model APMC and contract farming acts were announced during 2017-18 to enable restriction-free trade of agro-produce, improve competition with several marketing channels, and boost farming as per pre-defined contracts. But most of the reforms that the Model Acts suggested were still not implemented according to the Standing Committee (2018-19). The central government must come up with a Committee of Agriculture Ministers from all states to come up with a legal framework and consensus for agricultural marketing. On June 2020, three ordinances were passed by the government – Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Ordinance, Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Ordinance, 2020, and the Essential Commodities (Amendment) Ordinance, 2020.

These ordinances ensure borderless trade between the markets of farmers' produce notified as per several APMC laws, define a contract farming framework, and put stock limits on produce only when retail prices have a steep rise. These ordinances will work together to help farmers and increase their opportunities for long-term contracts and allow buyers to opt for bulk farm produce. But farmer unions have different opinions. According to them, the recognized APMC Mandis will be closed when marketing and sale of agricultural products will be opened to public. In addition, the acts will encourage e-trading hike of agro produce and inter-state trade. These new laws will keep the state governments from collecting cess, market fee, or tax for outside trade. There is a belief among the farmers that the laws will eventually end the mandi system and leave them depending upon corporate players. In addition, they believe that their existing bond with small-scale agricultural businessmen (who are commission agents or middlemen promising the right prices for their produce, providing timely procurement, and financial loans) will be ended by the laws.

7. CONCLUSION

Since independence, agricultural marketing has come a long way in India but there are still some challenges ahead of the government. There is still need of a vibrant and dynamic market system to streamline the whole supply chain infrastructure to stay ahead with changing scenarios and rising market surplus. In addition, law and policy makers should make all the efforts to streamline the progress in rural economy and generate more employment opportunities in rural areas. It will definitely boost productivity and production to ensure food security.

It is found that there is a strong need for farmers and government to work together to resolve the issues in agricultural marketing as soon as possible. It is important for both state and central governments to frame robust policies to safeguard farmers' interest as farmers are considered to be the backbone of country's economy. Proper motivation and special incentives must be given to the farmers from the government to promote agro-based production and marketing in their respective areas.

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