

## Book Review

Sukhpal Singh, *Regulating Agricultural Markets in India: A Smallholder Perspective*, Orient BlackSwan, Hyderabad, 2023, pp.208 Price ₹580/- only.

Sukhpal Singh's latest offering, 'Regulating Agricultural Markets in India: A Smallholder Perspective,' stands as a significant addition to the contemporary discourse surrounding the agricultural sector, offering a nuanced exploration of pertinent issues, particularly through the lens of small-scale farmers. Comprising seven meticulously crafted chapters, the book draws extensively from the author's recent papers, articles, and lectures, showcasing the comprehensive expertise of Sukhpal Singh, a distinguished agro-economist. The focal points of Singh's scholarly endeavour encompass the intricacies of Agricultural Produce Market Committee (APMC) Acts, contract farming legislations at Union and state levels, the now-repealed farm laws of 2020, and the contentious matter of providing legal status to the Minimum Support Price (MSP). The book not only delves into detailed discussions but also offers a thorough and insightful critique of the prevailing agricultural landscape. Singh's contention, supported by his own research and insights from fellow scholars, underscores the inadequacy of the existing marketing system and agricultural laws in India in safeguarding the interests of small farmers. The book critically examines the exclusion of small farmers from the MSP regime, asserting that the current framework does not adequately cater to their needs. While acknowledging the overdue nature of reforms in the Indian agricultural sector, particularly in marketing, Singh refrains from dismissing the strategic importance of APMCs, despite acknowledging their imperfect functioning. He argues that the enactment of APMC Acts by states, in alignment with the Union government's Model APMC Act of 2003, had already presented viable alternatives such as direct purchase, private wholesale markets, e-NAM, and contract farming. Therefore, the author questions the necessity of the 2020 agricultural laws, asserting that they were largely redundant. Singh advocates for the promotion of contract farming but acknowledges the challenges faced by small farmers in reaping its benefits. Proposing land pooling by smallholders as a potential solution, the book critiques the presence of commission agents (arhtiyas) in APMCs and highlights the internal contradictions within the Model Agricultural Produce and Livestock Marketing (Promotion and Facilitation) Act, 2017. The chapter dedicated to the 2020 agricultural laws critically dissects the contradictions between their stated and inherent objectives, the farmers' perspectives, and the on-the-ground reality. It unequivocally points out the indefensibility of these laws, despite government assertions of their benefits.

While the book offers a comprehensive analysis, it allocates minimal attention to issues of state autonomy and federalism concerning constitutional rights in agriculture. The author questions the need for new laws when states had already implemented various reforms, highlighting concerns about the route through which the new laws were promulgated. Singh advocates for a profound reassessment of the MSP-APMC-based public procurement regime, arguing that it has been unfair to certain farmers and states, benefiting only a few crops in specific regions. The book posits that effective MSP implementation for all 23 covered crops could strengthen the APMC regime, promoting crop diversification and generating revenue for states. In discussing contract farming, Singh's argument appears grounded in technical and legal flaws within existing laws, potentially overlooking farmers' perceptions and inherent implications. Additionally, the book questions studies opposing legal status for MSP. A compelling argument emerges from the book, suggesting that the implementation of the two new laws could lead to the dominance of private mandis over APMCs, potentially diluting or eliminating MSP. Emphasizing the critical role of MSP as a reference or floor price, the book underscores its importance for the broader interests of farmers and national food security. *Regulating Agricultural Markets in India: A Smallholder Perspective* is an invaluable resource for researchers, policymakers, farmers' leadership, and the media. Its nuanced exploration of complex agricultural issues makes it essential reading and a substantial reference for those engaged in shaping the future of India's agricultural landscape.

Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics

Rajesh D. Danane

Pune 411004