

Farming in Delhi - 3

Farming Activities on the Yamuna Floodplains

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 All wrongs reversed

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Yamuna cuts across Delhi, dividing it into two parts. Towards the western floodplains, the northern, southern, and western parts of Delhi are covered by Haryana. The eastern part of Delhi is a lot smaller and is covered by Uttar Pradesh on three sides- north, south, and east. The Yamuna is shared by U.P. and Delhi. From Palla onwards till Jaitpur, there are a few areas where the Yamuna falls under the jurisdiction of Delhi and sometimes U.P. While with Haryana, the demarcations are clearer and no overlap of jurisdiction takes place.

In Delhi, there are three barrages in Yamuna- Wazirabad, I.T.O., and Okhla. During monsoons, Yamuna's water level goes above and beyond, flooding not only the flood plains but the nearby

areas as well. While during summers, the water level decreases and the river becomes shallow in certain areas. The width of the river also varies across its entire stretch. Apart from this, several drains also flow into the Yamuna, the most significant being the Najafgarh Naalah or drain.

The farming on Yamuna floodplains fulfils some of the food demands of Delhi, mainly vegetables which are mostly produced on the floodplains. Thus, contributing to part of the 10% of the local production (to read more refer to the first booklet of this series titled "Diversity in Urban Farming of Delhi: Who, What and Where"). It is also a source of subsistence for hundreds of migrant families residing there.



Palla gaon

Photo : Avikal Parashari

Most of the people involved in this are not native to Delhi and hail from regions like Badaun in UP, Jharkhand, Bihar, West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh and have been living in Delhi for years. One can find them farming at scale all year long in the Yamuna floodplains or other areas, growing rabi or kharif crops, or both. They are majorly responsible for the vegetation on these floodplains. The farmers are not the owners of these lands but take them on lease every year. With every subsequent year, even the rent of these lands is going up. However, this still doesn't stop thousands of families from migrating to Delhi and continuing the practice of farming. Not all of these can lease land, some simply work as farm labourers.

Multiple studies have proved that the water between Palla and Wazirabad barrage is a lot cleaner and fit for the

growth of aquatic life. Most of the fishing takes place between this stretch, in a very unorganized and scattered manner. One can also find communities of fishers in various villages and colonies of Wazirabad like Jagatpur village, Sonia Vihar, Gokulpuri, etc. all on or close to the banks of Yamuna. These people have migrated here from places like Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, West Bengal, and for many, fishing is not their caste-based occupation. Even among them, for many, fishing is not their primary source of income and is a side job. They are involved in other petty jobs like masonry, tailoring, playing in wedding bands, and when there is no work or a holiday, they indulge in fishing. Most of the fish found in the Yamuna is of the Pothiya class. One can also find Tangra, Baam, Kakai, Chingra (Jheenga), Pothi, Nirankar, Singhani, Rohu, etc. and



Jagatpur gaon
Photo : Joe Athialy

sometimes a few crabs as well. The weight of the fish ranges from 50 grams to 200 grams.

The Government of NCT's Development Department also issues fishing licenses on a daily or yearly basis. Apart from the Yamuna, people also fish in lakes. One such lake is near Jublee Park. As per the website of the Government of NCT's Development Department, licenses are available at Rs 3/day in the Delhi area with a rod and line and Rs 20/day in the Okhla area with a rod and line. While the license for a year costs Rs 300 with a net and Rs 150 with a rod and line in the Delhi area and Rs 300/year with a rod and line in the Okhla area.

The ownership of the land near Jublee Park is contested. In the past, a few cooperatives together had ownership rights on this land

but now, the Delhi Development Association (DDA) has challenged this. One farmer who uses the Bela state land for agricultural purposes shared his experiences. He said, "Once we had planted rice in this field, but due to floods, the entire produce got rotten. We had taken shelter near the road. We did not get any flood relief from the government or any compensation for our loss. Whenever the Yamuna floods, we are forced to move towards the roads. However, flooding was still a temporary thing, now we will not even be allowed to stay on the roads. We are about to become homeless and landless permanently."

Time and again the farmers are uprooted from their lands and homes, either due to the government or the floods. A farmer who stays in the village in Nangli khadar told, "Now, flooding is no longer



Palla gaon

Photo: Avikal Parashari

an annual affair. Whenever it does flood, we move towards the road near Mayur Vihar.” Badarpur Khadar is a Muslim majority region where most of the people are landless. They either work as herders (बैलदारी) or work in factories in Loni. Transportation facilities are not easily available here but lack of connectivity brings serenity to the area as well. The village is surrounded by barriers (चेरा) which have reduced the likelihood of flooding.

In Mandpur Khadar, most of the farming takes place on 2-3 beeghas of land. There are very few who farm on 10-20

beeghas of land. In some places, the “farmhouse” type of farming also takes place. As one proceeds further towards Jaitpur Khadar, one can find colonies on both sides of Pushta Road. Only 50% of the lands on Jaipur Khadar are used as farmlands. In Chilla Khadar, a non-government organization has set up a hand pump that fulfils the water needs of the community. Apart from this, the Delhi government has built two shelters and provided two water storage tanks which are filled up regularly by water tankers. Two public washrooms have also been built but no provision has been made for its regular cleaning.



Chilla Khadar

Photo : Avikal Parashari

Despite having built structures for residing in Chilla Khadar, the farmers of this place are still categorized as “homeless” in official papers. A resident of this place told that they have not been provided with any facilities by the government. Everything from borewells to irrigate their lands to pumping set to extract groundwater has been built at their expense. Those who cannot afford to build these things, rely on buying/renting/taking water on credit? water for irrigation. Other facilities available on hire include cultivation, plowing, tilling, etc. Those who can afford to, use tractors to plough their land. Most of the farmers sell their produce in mandis which are set up close to their farmland. They don’t have to pay taxes here and can directly sell their produce to either customers or vegetable vendors.

As per common conception, the farming activity near the Yamuna is “contaminated”, “unfit for consumption”, etc. Even the National Green Tribunal’s (NGT) order of 2015 labels these produce as “contaminated” as the irrigation is done using the water from the Yamuna directly. This order works under the assumption that farmers use Yamuna waters for irrigation. However, no farmer does so. Groundwater is the main source of water for irrigation. The order further calls for an immediate stop of the agricultural activity labeling it as “environmentally improper and is completely injurious to human health” (National Green Tribunal, 2015, p. 51-52).

As per NGT’s order in 2018 in the case of Manoj Misra and Others, a Yamuna



Chilla gaon

Photo : Avikal Parashari, Srijan Chawla

Monitoring Committee (YMC) was set up to pursue and report on the implementation of the Tribunal's judgments and orders on the abatement of pollution in the River Yamuna at Delhi and also to monitor the implementation of projects under various government departments aimed at the rejuvenation of the river. The YMC further ordered the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) to test the groundwater, vegetable, and Yamuna water and check it for traces of metal and other pollutants. Subsequently, a report was published and released online in September 2019 and no exceedance was observed in vegetable and fodder samples for metals and pesticides concerning FSSAI notifications, 2011 (metals) and 2018 (pesticides) as no significant level of metals were observed in groundwater which is the main source of irrigation for

the farmers. The report further states that the contamination of soil may be due to excessive use of fertilizer and can be mitigated by promoting the use of manure and natural fertilizers. Despite these findings, the YMC still recommended the removal of agricultural activities, and even the NGT has taken up these recommendations and ordered DDA for the eviction of the farmers to put a stop to farming.

The NGT order (2015) is quite dismissive of the pending disputes regarding the legal rights of the land. The order makes mention of the 9700 hectares River Front Development ('O' Zone) planned under Master Plan Delhi. Of this, only 1452 hectare is presently available with the DDA for development and the remaining area has been partly leased out where





Palla gaon
Photo: Joe Athialy

farming takes place on a huge scale. However, the DDA considers these as being occupied in an “unauthorized” manner and claims ownership of these lands.

Only 2% of the entire stretch of the Yamuna falls in Delhi but contributes to over 75 percent of the total pollution load in the river. The Final report of YMC published in June 2020 states that there are 954 hectares of land under agricultural “encroachment” in 4 villages of Yamuna. The report also makes mention of 154 “unauthorized” colonies and jhuggis where 30-40% of the population of Delhi resides which fall in the ‘O’ zone and are a

major contributor to the pollution in the Yamuna. The reason cited is that due to a lack of proper sewage facilities, the waste is directly dumped into the river through drains (pp. 83). This “encroachment” consists of even the facilities that the farmers have built by themselves for irrigation, drinking, structures for living, and day to day survival. The same facilities that the government failed to provide them when they decided to lease out the land to them. However, it is surprising to note that structures like Akshardham Temple and Common Wealth Games village which are constructed on the floodplains are exempted and not seen as “encroachments”.



Palla gaon
Photo : Avikal Parashari

Another important thing to focus on is that the YMC took the help and recommendations of the RWA's in the study apart from experts and government agencies. Nowhere were the farmers involved or consulted during the entire course of the study. Even the NGT failed to provide space for the farmers to put their arguments.

Furthermore, the YMC report while paying cognizance to the groundwater levels discourages the shift from traditional Rabi crops (wheat) to paddy/sugarcane cultivation during Rabi season for better monetary returns by the farmers and puts the onus on the

people to maintain groundwater level (pp 296).

A farmer in Chilla Khadar explained the role of zamindars in this entire ordeal. He said, "It is not wise to get attached to the land. If not today, tomorrow farming on these lands will come to an end. The DDA has already taken away these lands and given compensation to the zamindars. From time to time, the DDA tries to evict the farmers but then things die down. We get the title deed to this land from the zamindars. They take money from us but no documents are provided for it. Everything is verbal."

An individual farming on the Bela state lands told, “80% of the farmers here are from Mallah jati. The remaining 20% are from various other castes. Had we been upper caste farmers then maybe we would have been heard. This would have become an issue and either compensation would have been provided or some land for rehabilitation.”

Despite all the studies which disprove that the produce from the Yamuna floodplains is contaminated, the findings of the YMC report make no mention of this and continue to press for the eviction of the land under agricultural use. Even the latest NGT order (2020) pays cognizance only to the recommendations of the YMC.

When Master Plan Delhi- 2021 was being prepared, the government had called for

the recommendations of the public and consulted local bodies at the pre-planning stage but it's unclear if farmer cooperatives were involved or not. As of now, the planning of a new Master Plan Delhi – 2041 is underway and even in this the farmers, who are responsible for maintaining a significant green cover in Delhi, have not been involved. Now, the farmers remain at the mercy of the DDA. It is only a matter of time that the agricultural land will be taken away from them in the name of restoration and rejuvenation of Yamuna.

(This booklet is the result of the research and documentation done in the original work titled “Report on Urban Farming in Delhi”)

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Peoples Resource centre aims to build new infrastructures of solidarity with the valuable fragments of learning derived from collective actions everywhere and the possible alternatives imagined by all people. The initiative seeks to explore the possibilities of bringing the resources back into the people's powerful control, and to understand whether and how that can eradicate the most persistent problems such as hunger, homelessness, ambient pollution, and social injustices based on caste, gender and religion. PRC engages with movement groups and communities in the places with the ongoing or potential struggle over resources, and regularly undertakes policy monitoring, research and documentation, and grassroots networking to generate resources for collective resistance and creative action.