


**Role of Farm Labourers in
Urban Farming**

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 All wrongs reversed

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November, 2020

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Publisher

People's Resource Centre (PRC) [www.prcindia.in]

Supoort

Institute for Democracy and Sustainability (IDS) &

India Institute for Critical Action : Centre in Movement (CACIM) www.cacim.net

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Any kind of agricultural work depends on the collective efforts of many people. Despite the indiscriminate use of machinery, labourers continue to be involved in various agricultural activities such as planting and cultivating paddy, mushrooms and vegetables, removing weeds from vegetable fields, and plucking flowers. Some labourers also work as cooks to feed other labourers. Each of these workers have their own tales of agony, their experiences, dreams and aspirations.

Over the years, India has witnessed rapid urbanisation and massive migration of people from villages to cities in search of better employment opportunities and education etc. Rapid urbanization and large scale migration from rural to urban and urban to rural has posed several

challenges for India's urban and rural landscape. Due to lack of provision for housing, water, sanitation, health, education and social security, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) has called India's rapid urbanization 'the urbanization of poverty' (UNDP 2009). Different studies have speculated that there is a widespread movement of labourers from rural to urban areas in India due to various reasons like employment (which is usually confined to a few industries in the construction sector), declining returns in agriculture, and climate change. There has been a widespread movement of labourers over the years (Sharma and Bhaduri, 2006; Martin, 2010) and this rapid flow of rural population to urban centres has put considerable pressure on food, housing, water and other basic needs in urban areas.



Chilla Khadar, Delhi
Photo : Avikal Parashari

Farming has been the primary source of employment for the workers migrating from villages to the cities searching for livelihood. Workers skilled in agricultural work migrate from rural areas to the city with the hope of better wages, housing and a better life. Farming in urban and periurban areas provides a good source of employment to the migrant workers and plays a vital role in making the city relatively self-sufficient. A recent study 'Urban and peri-urban agricultural migration: an overview from Mumbai Metropolitan Region (MMR), India' (Vazhacharikal, 2014) provides some useful insights on seasonal migration to

the different places in Mumbai Metropolitan Region in search of employment and how they get involved in agricultural activities. The findings suggest that these areas see the highest influx of migrant labourers for agricultural work in the planting and harvesting seasons. In this study, it was also found that the wages also vary across areas within the MMR. Moreover, it was seen that the daily wages of men workers were relatively higher than those of women workers, and also that men were provided with separate expenses for food, pan-masala and, in some cases, liquor.



Palla Gaon
Photo : Joe Athialy

Delhi is one such region in India where mechanisation in agriculture started very early. Despite this, there has always been a considerable demand for agricultural labourers. The workers who used to work in Delhi as agricultural labourers before independence were mostly locals, their wages were usually paid in grain, and cash payment was not common. After independence, people started migrating to Delhi. Some started working in the factories, some in shops, and some also started working at construction sites, which has been employing more labourers over the years. Over the years, unemployment has become so widespread that labourers working in different sectors

do not usually have regular work. Some labourers prioritise working in fields because they generally have experience of having done farming in their villages and know a good deal of it. Their agricultural skills help them to find decent livelihood in a megacity like Delhi. But, for most workers, farming provides only a partial livelihood and labourers try to find other employment opportunities to ensure a sufficient income around the year.

According to the Economic Survey of Delhi (2018-19), only 0.71% of workers in Delhi are engaged in agricultural work (Economic Survey of Delhi, 2018-19).



Jagatpur Gaon
Photo : Joe Athialy

But, if we consider the data from the latest Census of India, 1% of workers in Delhi are engaged in farming for more than 6 months and about 3% of workers for less than 6 months. According to the census data, these farmers are involved in animal husbandry, fisheries, and other activities related to farming. This difference may seem minor, but the gap is significant if we consider the respective population figures. Over the years, we have witnessed rapid urbanisation, which has led to the decline in farming activities in major cities in India. This is one of the reasons why we are seeing a declining trend of farming in Delhi. The idea of what a city

can be has changed and the Census and other government agencies have come to define the city where 80 percent of the male working population is engaged in non-farming activities. Moreover, we need to be careful that pro-urbanisation interests of the government also push for registering lesser people as involved in farming activities in Delhi.

Agricultural labourers in Delhi get daily wages ranging from Rs 250 to Rs 300. About 4-5 workers share a room and eat together as well. Whatever money is left, they send it to their families back home.



Jagatpur Goan
Photo: Joe Athialy

In Palla, we interacted with many farm labourers and found out that they all work on a monthly salary. The person who works for a month gets a salary for that month. Based on their skills, some get twelve thousand rupees a month, while some get thirteen thousand rupees. They lived in temporary shelters made of bamboo wood. They do not have to pay any rent, but the food isn't included in this, they have to arrange it by themselves.

Paddy is a prominent crop in villages like Tiggipur, Sungarpur, Palla etc. In Tiggipur, mushrooms, roses and bananas along with paddy are the crops which are cultivated. The labourers working in these villages are not locals and they usually come from Bihar, work in groups and leave in groups.

They work on paddy fields for one or two months. They are seasonal labourers and when the season is over, they go back to their villages. They usually come twice during the paddy season - first for the planting and then later in the year for harvesting. All the workers in a group typically belong to the same district or nearby villages. These workers also have a leader under whose direction they work. After talking to the workers, we realised that the rate of planting paddy in a prepared field is Rs. 3500, and the rate of cutting is Rs. 5-6 thousand. All these workers are in touch with a local contact person in Delhi who informs them at the start of the season, pays for the fare, and provides the accommodation.



Palla Gaon
Photo : Joe Athialy

The labourers also have a cook/caterer with them. In a group of 25 labourers, we found that morning tea is made by this cook and also prepares dinner for the labourers. This cook is given 15 thousand rupees for a month's work.

Increased mechanisation has also impacted the livelihood of labourers. Moreover, as conveyed to us by them, many labourers shared their concern about wastage of cultivated produce, especially paddy, when threshed using a machine. Hence, a lot of the dried stalks of grain or straw proves to be completely useless in the mechanised process. On the other hand, if the same process is done manually, the leftover paddy stalks can be used appropriately. The straw from the paddy can be used to make makeshift structures wherein mushrooms can be cultivated. The stem can be further

chopped and turned into dry fodder for animals. The stalk sells at even higher prices than the straw in the market..

Many labourers work with the same employer for more than ten years. In a conversation with us, one such worker told us that he has been doing this work for almost 35 years. Earlier, they used to work in Punjab, but now they have been working in Delhi for a long time. He further said **that he has been working as a farm labourer** in Delhi for about ten years. The person, on whose behalf these labourers come to Delhi, helps them to get things done smoothly and to also to get the remaining payment.

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



Chilla Khadar

Photo : Avikal Parashari



Chilla Khadar

Photo : Avikal Parashari

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This booklet is the result of the collective efforts of many people but most important contribution has been of the farmers, fishermen, farming in different parts of Delhi. Labourers, livestock farmers, new-age farming businessmen who took time to interact with us and share their opinions and information. The team of the Public Resource Center, who shared the ground research with us, prepared the report "Farming that is invisible from the landscape" and due to which we could prepare the booklet.

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.