

# Urban Farming In Delhi: Case of Agricultural Labourers

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Agricultural laborers hold an important position in urban farming activities, despite the indiscriminate use of machinery, labourers continue to be involved in various agricultural activities such as planting, cultivating and harvesting. They provide essential support and are the backbone of agricultural activities in cities. Farm laborers working in cities have their own tales of agony, experiences, dreams and aspirations.

Over the years, we have been witnessing rapid urbanisation and massive migration of people from villages to cities in search of better employment opportunities and education etc particularly in the global south. In India as well, 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 reasons varying from 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. 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 peri urban areas provides a good source of employment to the migrant workers and plays a vital role in making the city relatively self-sufficient.



PICTURE BY JOE ATHIALY

In Delhi, despite mechanisation of agricultural activities, there has always been considerable demand for agricultural labourers. After independence, people started migrating to Delhi in search of better employment. Labourers migrating to Delhi found employment in factories, construction sites, shops etc, these sectors have been employing migrant labourers from many years now. Over the years, unemployment has also become widespread, labourers working in different sectors do not usually have regular work. Some labourers prioritise working in agricultural farms because they have the essential experience of farming, having done farming in their villages. 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.

A survey of urban agriculture in Delhi, conducted by People's Resource Centre found that agricultural labourers in Delhi get daily wages ranging from Rs 250 to Rs 300 with no bonus or daily meals provided from their employer. Also, there are instances when payments to these

farm labourers are provided late and irregular. Migrant farm labourers either live with their families in temporary shelters on the agricultural land for which they do not have to pay any rent or rent a room in nearby areas while some labourers who live without their families share a common room and eat together. Those who have families in their villages send them whatever money they are able to save.

During a qualitative research conducted by People's Resource centre in 2020 of agricultural activities in Delhi, it was found that in various urban farming clusters some labourers are hired on a monthly salary by the farm owner. Based on their skills, some labourers are paid twelve thousand rupees a month, while some thirteen thousand rupees.

There are also seasonal migrant labourers who usually come to Delhi from surrounding states like U.P and Bihar, these agricultural laborers usually come and leave in groups. They work on paddy fields for one or two months 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. The rate of planting paddy in a prepared field is Rs. 3500, and the rate of cutting is Rs. 5-6 thousand. These labourers are usually in touch with a local contact person in Delhi who informs them at the start of the season, pays for the fare, and provides them with accommodation also.

Women farm labourers play an important role in farming activities in Delhi. In fact, during various field visits People's Resource centre conducted in urban farming clusters of Delhi, there was a much more percentage of women farm labourers working on low wages in the agricultural farms. These women labourers either belong to nearby areas or are part of migrant families who live on the agricultural farms only.

Rapid urbanization and with it increased displacement of farmers from agricultural land in Delhi has also lead to rise in unemployment. Farm laborers who are dependent on agriculture are finding themselves vulnerable due to increased destruction of farm lands in Delhi. There is

need for conspicuous efforts to save urban farming in Delhi in order to save the livelihood of farmers and farm labourers who are associated with it.

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