

EXAMINING THE RIGHTS AND LIVELIHOODS OF FARMERS IN THE YAMUNA FLOOD PLAIN OF DELHI: A COMPREHENSIVE ANALYSIS

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Abstract: *In India, more than half of the population is employed in agriculture sector. With the increasing demand for food in the cities and urban areas the farmers have started practicing agriculture in cities and urban spaces. The primary means of subsistence for farmers residing in the Yamuna floodplains in Delhi consists of vegetable cultivation, livestock husbandry, and unskilled daily wage labour, in addition to agricultural work. They are abused in many ways like the land owners, land mafias, local police and by the administration. When the crops failed due to floods, the owners of the land take compensation in the name of farmers against the crops destroyed and did not give even a small amount of it to the farmers, who should have been the actual beneficiaries of the compensation. Most of the farmers of the Yamuna floodplains have to cover an average of 3-4 kilometers to sell their vegetables with their hand driven rickshaws to markets. Urban agriculture can address many challenges the cities are facing today. But in Delhi, it is only a livelihood strategy for the economically weaker section that lives on the floodplain.*

Keywords: Agriculture, Food, Urban, Floodplains, Cultivation, Compensation

Introduction

India is an agricultural economy, more than 50 per cent of the Indian population is employed in agriculture sector, and its share in total GDP of the country is very less as compared to the manufacturing and service sectors. With the increasing demand for food in the cities and urban areas as a consequence of urbanization and migration towards the cities has led the people and farmers to start practicing agriculture in cities and urban spaces. The implementation of urban farming practices in residential areas, both urban and peri-urban, is proving to be a valuable means of promoting knowledge sharing and sustainability within the community of practitioners (Agarwal & Sinha, 2017). Despite of engaging in farming in urban areas, the situation of farmers is very poor and they are living in very pathetic conditions. In terms of the socio-economic conditions, infrastructure, methods of practicing farming, basic amenities and facilities like sanitation and health infrastructure, the farmers of the urban areas are at the lowest hierarchy with least facilities in all the above discussed aspects. The practice of urban farming in Delhi has served as a means of generating income for numerous migrant families who have moved to the city in pursuit of improved economic opportunities (<https://india.mongabay.com>). They are abused in many ways like the land owners, land mafias, local police and by the administration. This report is compiled on the basis of author's post-doctoral field work conducted in between March and June, 2023 in 3 areas selected along the Yamuna Floodplains in Delhi. During the household data collection, information from 150 farmers has been gathered from all the three areas namely, Madanpur Khadar, Vishwakarma colony and Chilla Khadar. Delhi's geographical coordinates are situated at 28° 38' N latitude and 77° 13' E longitude. The city is situated in proximity to the geographical center of the nation and serves as a pivotal hub for cultural and tourism activities in India. The city boasts a rich and extensive history, and as the capital, it has been instrumental in shaping the course of significant political and social advancements, particularly in relation to the attainment of independence and the city's modernization. The climate of Delhi is characterized by extreme conditions. During the months of April to July, the climate experiences high temperatures, while the months of December to January are characterized by low temperatures. The mean temperature exhibits fluctuations ranging from 25°C to 45°C in the summer season and 22°C to 5°C in the winter season.

Exploitation of Farmers Having Low Socio-Economic Status

After conducting the whole household survey, we concluded that most of the farmers belong to Maurya community, and few of them are mallah, and Dalits. The concentration of Muslim is very less, who are mostly agricultural and daily wage labourer. The average household size is 6-8 members with mostly joint family, the members of which mostly engaged in vegetable cultivation, livestock rearing etc. The majority of farmers engaged in agricultural activities do not possess ownership of the land they cultivate. The lessees commonly referred to as "tenant farmers" utilize the land allocated to them primarily for agricultural pursuits (<https://prcindia.in>). More than 80 percent of the farmers and other adult members of the family are illiterate and few of them have completed their primary and secondary level of schooling. The farmers have become aware and around 70 percent of them send their children to the nearby school for their education and the remaining do not send their children to school either due to lack of resources, less money they have and also due to lack of awareness about the education. The farmers are living in the houses made up of mud & thatch with tin shed roof. One corner of the house has a challah, made of mud and food cooked with woods collected from nearby areas. The percentage of farmers who are using gas cylinders to cook the food is meager. They are cultivating the crops for around 40-50 years on the land captured by the peoples of higher caste who are residing in the nearby residential colonies. The government has given the land for only agricultural purpose to these people, but they have given these lands to poor farmers,

and in return they take yearly rent at a cost ranging from 10,000 ₹/bigha to 30,000 ₹/bigha from these poor farmers.

Exploitation by the Land Owners

The farmers have taken the land on lease from the land owners, the price of which ranges from 10,000 ₹/bigha to 25,000 ₹/bigha depending upon the nature and fertility of the land. The landowners take the rent of their land twice a year i.e., half amount in December and the remaining half in the month of June. They do not give any relaxation either in terms of time or the amount payable as rent. If the crop gets failed or destroyed due to drought or flood, and if the farmers get delayed in payment of their land, the owners threaten them to take back the lands from them and give it to other farmers. Some farmers informed that their owners also take vegetables from their fields free of cost once or twice in a week. When the crops failed due to floods, the owners of the land take compensation in the name of farmers against the crops destroyed and did not give even a small amount of it to the farmers, who should have been the actual beneficiaries of the compensation.

Lack of Serious efforts by the Administration

Many officers of Delhi Development Authority (DDA) are not taking any responsibility for evacuating and shifting the farmers to a safer place at the time of floods. Earlier the officers of the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) used to plan for farmers like shelter homes, food and drinking water to the farmers, but from the last two years, they are not bending down backward. Research has revealed that the DDA team, along with Delhi Police personnel, frequently arrived at the Yamuna floodplain and used JCB machines to destroy a substantial number of crops and plants in nurseries (<https://sandrp.in/2020/08/21>). When rain becomes severe, the police forces only command the people to leave the field and move towards higher regions near the roads, besides and below the flyovers. The administration does not provide any medical and health facility to the farmers and their other family members especially women, children, infants and old aged parents. The farmers have revealed that the government has frequently demolished their houses, citing that the land is exclusively leased for agricultural activities and not intended for human settlement (Cook et al., 2015). The people of the floodplains do not have any source of drinking water. Some of the farmers get bottled water from nearby market, while the others consume the tap water, which is not safe for drinking and may lead to health problems. Delhi Jal Board supplies tanker filled with water only once in a day which is not available to all the farmers.

How Far the Farmers Travel to Sell the Vegetables?

Most of the farmers of the Yamuna floodplains have to cover an average of 3-4 kilometers to sell their vegetables with their hand driven rickshaws to markets. Few farmers who grow vegetables at a large-scale having land size of 10-12 bighas send their vegetables in the large markets which are at a distance of 8-10 kilometers from their field. Due to the large land size and more profit than the small farmers and marginal farmers could get from their field, large farmers managed to take their vegetables with the motor vehicle which can carry quintals of vegetables to the market. Small and marginal farmers have to face lot of challenges to sell the vegetables in the market. When the rainy season starts, the thing which is challenging to farmers is to take their vegetables with hand driven rickshaws on unmetalled roads and sell it in the local market. Sometimes even if they reach the local market, the customers are very few and that leads to disappointments to the farmers. On the contrary, the large farmers, which are few in numbers, can take their vegetables with ease and their crops are easily sell due to the large market, where both the buyers and sellers come to buy and sell their vegetables.

Discussion

With the rising population and depleting resources, Delhi with a population of 30.5 million and cropped area of 347.5 ha is not able to cater to this huge population (<https://ddc.delhi.gov.in>). The only option which is left to provide food especially fresh vegetables to the residents of Delhi and nearby areas is to allow the farmers to practice farming along the Yamuna floodplain in Delhi. Urban agriculture can address many challenges the cities are facing today. But in Delhi, it is only a livelihood strategy for the economically weaker section that lives on the floodplain. The farmers engaged in Yamuna floodplain are invisible and vulnerable. They do not possess the lands and have to pay rent and live in constant fear of eviction from the authorities (<https://www.downtoearth.org.in>). The practice of urban farming in Delhi has served as a means of generating income for numerous migrant families who have moved to the city in pursuit of better financial possibilities (<https://scroll.in/article/1041421>). The issue of land conflict has led to periodic displacement of agricultural workers. Frequently, the officials of the DDA occasionally arrive and demolish the crops. The absence of agricultural benefits such as subsidies on agricultural machinery, seeds, and compensation for crop damage is noticeable. Most of the farmers borrow the money from moneylenders, informal sources and few of them from their relatives and friends. Mostly the farmers get the money at very high interest rates. The reason why the farmers do not go to banks for loans is due to the fact that banks require lot of paperwork and also due to its procedural complexities the farmers do not prefer to get loans from the banks. The floodplain is not primarily concerned with the impact of farming. A significantly more serious issue pertains to the unlawful construction of colonies and residential buildings that are three to four stories high on the river's zone-O (<https://www.timesnownews.com>).

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