



(Front cover photo) photo: Aazim

A Farming city: Farming along the banks of Yamuna

Abstract

This story explores the issues faced by Delhi's invisible and unrecognised urban farmers as they deal with the city's growing concretisation and rapid urbanisation. Urban farmers in Delhi are constantly in danger of being evicted from the very areas where they grow food because open green spaces are rapidly disappearing and land is being taken up by infrastructure projects. The story examines the growing tension between livelihood and development, showing how increasing urbanisation jeopardises ecological balance and local food supply. In light of this, the narrative strongly advocates for localised and decentralised farming as an alternative for ecological deterioration, urban food insecurity, and the weakening of social bonds. It highlights the need for policy reforms to safeguard urban farmers, promote urban agriculture, and restore the city's relationship with nature and biodiversity. It also promotes the preservation of green spaces and the incorporation of small-scale farming into urban

planning. Through these efforts, the story envisions a more resilient, self-sufficient, and ecologically-conscious urban area.

Introduction

When we look at academic and governmental contexts, the concept of urbanisation is typically associated with the neoliberal definition of "association with non-agricultural activities" that damage biodiversity. Urbanisation has been widespread, particularly in the global south, with no proper urban planning or consideration for local conditions and its habitat. The number of grey constructions in Indian cities is expanding at an unprecedented rate. Carbon emissions from cities are on the rise. Green spaces are diminishing, while dark and unattractive spaces are taking up. UNDP (United Nations Development Program) has referred to the rapid urbanization in India as the "urbanization of poverty". Homelessness, poverty, food scarcity, no access to toilets, absence of sanitation and clean water are some of the things that reflect urban India. Under the pretence of "growth" and the "greater common good", people are being evicted, green cover is being lost, wildlife is being displaced, the state continues to intrude on our commons, and privatisation is on the rise.

In recent years, a new trend has emerged in which the government starts a plantation drive to attract visitors rather than address climate change, while giving little or no attention to actions that can really cut carbon emissions in urban areas. They connect green spaces to attract tourists rather than to combat concretization. Urban farming is not a new method, nor is it a new practice that has been occurring in Delhi. Agriculture has been practised in Delhi since decades by the migrants who see farming as an option for their livelihood. When I mention urban farming, I do not mean the terrace or balcony gardening that has become fashionable in our cities. I am referring to large-scale farming. Farming that provides livelihood to the people and guarantees their right to the city. Urban agriculture is not limited to the gardens and terraces of the upper and middle classes. It involves people from various socioeconomic backgrounds, primarily women. What the urban region requires is localized and decentralized farming that provides food to the large masses in their own neighborhood, thereby reducing food miles to a significant degree, which can aid in reducing carbon footprints and eliminating the middleman system in cities. At the same

time, a significant percentage of the food consumed in cities is either imported from the countryside or processed and packaged by large corporations, which is hidden by the complex network of market connections.

Corporations have pushed deeper into food manufacturing and distribution in recent years, creating an entire food processing and packaging business. Food is becoming or rather 'has' become increasingly commodified. *Food: From Commodity to Commons* by Gunnar Rundgren offers a thought-provoking exploration of the complex relationship between food, society, and the economy. Rundgren, a well-known advocate for sustainable agriculture and food systems, takes a critical look at the current state of food production and distribution, emphasizing how food has increasingly become a commodity rather than a fundamental human right or common good. Rundgren begins by examining how the global food system has evolved, shifting from a more localized, communal approach to one dominated by industrial agriculture and global supply chains. He discusses how food, once central to human cultures and local economies, has become commodified, treated like any other product in the market, subject to the forces of supply and demand, speculation, and profit-maximization. This commodification, he argues, has led to environmental degradation, loss of biodiversity, the erosion of food sovereignty, and increased inequality. Rundgren advocates for a radical shift from viewing food as a commodity to treating it as a common good, emphasizing the concept of food sovereignty, the right of people and communities to control their own food systems.



Vegetable market in Bela estate. Photo: Aazim

Farmers are growing alienated from their labor as food is transported to distant locations via a vast network of predatory institutions. Food producers and consumers are at odds in India's farmer movement. While an increasingly significant population in rural India organises resistance to the potential of corporate takeover of farming, the urban Indian population, which consumes the majority of farming's commodified products, has yet to take farmer concerns seriously. With expanding metropolitan demands, more chemical inputs are being used to boost production in rural agriculture. Despite experts' warnings that some pesticides containing chlorpyrifos are harmful to the human body, the government has yet to ban certain chemicals due to extensive lobbying by agricultural corporations. Many farmers in rural India are considering giving up farming for a variety of reasons, including crop loss due to climate change, debt and government policies affecting them. Many migrants in Delhi were once

involved in farming in their native village but had left in pursuit of better livelihood in urban areas.



Madanpur Khadar. Photo: Aazim

The issue of food sovereignty in cities, and how cities may become self-sufficient in terms of food, has long been debated. However, the majority of food production occurs in rural areas. Food production in rural areas is mostly for urban consumption, putting a hardship on rural farmers. Farming in rural areas is unprofitable for farmers due to crop loss, debt, failure, and low crop payments. These events prompt their migration, and when they arrive in a city, they find agriculture appealing because it is the only thing they have ever done in their own land. Instead of fostering urban farming as a viable source of employment in cities and promoting green jobs, the government criminalizes it and evicts farmers from their land, which it argues is a wasteland.

Kanyawati, an urban farmer in Chilla Khadar, claims to own only one bigha of land in their native village. 'It becomes very difficult for us to exist on that small

piece of land since we have an extended family,' explains kanyawati. Their migration is prompted by a paucity of agricultural land in their native place.



Madanpur Khadar. Photo: Aazim

Chilla khadar has long been a land for many families to farm, even before the subcontinent was partitioned. The original landowners later leased their land to the migrants. Since the 1960s, the migrants have lived and farmed in this area. Despite many attempts by the DDA to evict and humiliate them, the farmers continue to farm there because for them it is a matter of survival, not leisure. In Delhi, urban farming has been discouraged in every manner possible. It is widely believed that irrigation water is collected directly from the very contaminated Yamuna River. One of the DDA's reasons for evicting these farmers is that they use Yamuna water to irrigate. Kanyawati flatly denied the claim, stating that "we have never used Yamuna water for irrigation; we exclusively use water from bore wells as our primary source of irrigation." "Just 20 days ago, the DDA ran its bulldozer over someone's farm," kanyawati adds. "It ruined their jhuggi and standing crops. "We have informed the DDA that if

they want the land, we would not stand in their way. However, it is horrible that they are destroying our homes and crops," adds kanyawati.



Madanpur Khadar. Photo: Aazim

Virender, an urban farmer in chilla khadar goes on to detail how they sell their product in the market and how, despite making all the promises, the government does nothing to aid them. They do not go to Mandi or anything like that. "We have a daily market here," he recounts, "and we earn around 250 rupees per day in that daily market." He goes on to say that the same crop sells for far more in the market than they do. They don't generate much money because much of it is spent on irrigation or diesel for tractors. "We rent tractors on an hourly basis and must pay the owner for diesel for irrigation", says virender.

Another issue that urban farmers deal with is an absence of electricity since they are viewed as illegal encroachers by the state, hence there is no electricity connection where they live and farm. Rajnesh, who has lived in chilla khadar his entire life, claims that he has never seen electricity. Rajnesh states, "my parents migrated from Badaun around 1990's for a better livelihood and living

condition and are making good money out of farming." He married about ten years ago and has three children. He continues, "electric poles have been installed, but we don't get any electricity here." Depending on the environment and the price market, we earn roughly 10-15 thousand rupees every month. We usually grow methi and palak here”.



Madanpur Khadar. Photo: Aazim

Another difficulty that farmers are dealing with is the landlord-DDA conflict. The DDA maintains that it is their land, that landlords and farmers have illegally settled, and that they have the right to evict them by any means necessary. The vast majority of the land is owned by persons who have stopped farming and are now involved in other activities. They reside distant from the

farmland and lease it to migrants for farming and horticulture purposes. They visit like once or twice in a month. Morpal, an urban farmer in Chilla Khadar claims that the Chauhan and Gurjar communities possess the large majority of the land in Chilla Khadar. Prempal, an urban farmer, informed me that the landowner provides the diesel for the tractor and bears the cost of repairs and maintenance. "We don't have electricity here", says anjali, an urban farmer; 'the government has built these electric poles, but no electricity gets in. "We installed these solar panels at our own expense," explains Anjali. The family farms on four bigha of land. They are the original descendants of Badaun (UP) who currently live and work in Delhi.



Madanpur Khadar. Photo: Aazim

Morpall Singh revealed in a conversation that he has lived in Chilla Khadar since birth. Morpal went on to say that "DDA officials come and destroy our jhuggis and all of the people's belongings before leaving the site". "Farming is all we

know or are good at," claims prempal. Morpal goes on to say, "I don't understand why the DDA is so concerned about us growing here; we're literally keeping vegetable prices low. 'If we abandon this farming, Delhi residents will have to pay far more than they do today. Prices would soar, forcing them to pay twice as much as they do currently'. Prempal went on to state that "in exchange for providing the city with cheap and affordable food, we are kicked and humiliated by DDA officials" . This is true, as urban farming in Delhi accounts for 10-15% of the city's [food supply](#). Prempal refutes the DDA's allegations of using Yamuna contaminated water, adding that "we only use borewell water, and the DDA officials know this, but they still harass us".



Chilla Khadar. Photo: Aazim

He goes on to say, "The people of the city pollute the Yamuna, and we only cultivate here to make a living." It is so easy to shift blame for contaminating the Yamuna onto us because our response will never reach the public." "We not only sell, but also consume what we produce..."You honestly believe we'd eat dangerous vegetables," anjali adds.

Pooja, an urban farmer, farms in Madanpur Khadar and relocated to Delhi roughly six years ago after marriage. Pooja is the original resident of Badaun. She has three children and struggles to survive amid floods without the government support. “We live in jhuggis without electricity or government assistance”, adds Pooja. “Last year, our entire farm was flooded, and our jhuggis were ruined, but the AAP (Aam Aadmi Party) government did nothing to help”. “We installed our own solar using our own money,” claims Pooja. “We usually grow things like Bhindi, Gobi, Turai, Lauki, Sitafal etc”. Sometimes we go to mandi, sometimes people buy from us here on the farm”, says pooja. She further argues that DDA personnels come along with the police and JCB to harass them. “We don't have power or money to fight cases in courts, we hardly earn for our survival” claims pooja.



Chilla Khadar. Photo: Aazim

Akshay who farms alongside pooja claims that they hardly get 10 or 20 rupees per kg for anything they grow. ‘There is no government support’, claims akshay. Another urban farmer in Madanpur Khadar Jhanvi claims that “only people

from the NGO come during the floods and distribute relief works, but no one comes from the government”.

Sundari, an urban farmer who has been cultivating in Chilla Khadar since 2011, elaborates that they live in jhuggis that lack toilets. “People living in jhuggis do not have access to toilets”, She says, "The government makes all these claims like 'Har Ghar Sauchalay', but we haven't received any funds for the construction of the toilets, and no one has paid attention to our plight." “We erected this portable toilet ourselves”, Sundari says, "Every election, politicians come and make all these false promises, but to no avail." ‘If people are living illegally, why are politicians going to them and asking for votes? Why do they have voter identification and a gas card? " asks sundari.



“Fake Plants” erected by DDA. Photo: Aazim



Chilla Khadar. Photo: Aazim

Yamuna Riverfront and concretization

The Yamuna River runs through the heart of Delhi, India's second-largest metropolis, with a population of over 35 million people. However, few residents or visitors to this city are aware that thousands of urban farmers live along the Yamuna's banks. These farmers are not recent migrants, in fact they have been farming since decades that provide cheap and fresh food to Delhi. But as seen over the decades, the urban farmers are not only unrecognised but also unseen and invisible to the general public. They usually live along the Yamuna floodplains in jhuggis without electricity and basic necessary facilities.

Sheila, an urban farmer in Sarai Kale Khan Khadar, claims that "there is no difference between this city and my village; both do not have electricity or basic facilities." She goes on to explain that "when my family relocated to Delhi, we thought our life would be better, but the government has discouraged our source of income in every way imaginable and has turned us into criminals". Rahul, a farmer who has lived in Chilla Khadar his entire life, claims to have never seen electricity. Rahul asserts that "my parents migrated from Badaun around 1990's for a better livelihood and living condition and were making good money out of farming" . "Depending on the environment and the price market, we now earn roughly 10-15 thousand rupees per month" . He says, "Electric poles have been installed, but we don't have any electricity here." "Yaha do dilli hai, ek hamare liye aur ek ameeron ke liye" (There are two Delhis, one for us and one for the rich), adds Rahul.

Rapid urbanization in Delhi and massive concretisation over the decades has led to the shrinking of green and open spaces in the city, the only ones left are those where the DDA is proposing concrete structures in the form of beautification. The DDA aims to create the [Yamuna Riverfront](#) on the same lines and model as the Sabarmati Riverfront. The DDA's 'Restoration and Rejuvenation of River Yamuna Floodplains Project' aims to expand green cover and create a biodiversity park. However, the NGT's prohibition on concrete construction in 'Zone O' is openly being flouted by the DDA. Several concrete structures, including concrete 'cafes for the elite' have been built by evicting the farmers who used to farm there for a living, several permanent structures have also been built along the Yamuna. According to [The Hindu](#) report, an approximately 40-meter-long pool and many concrete offices have already been built, and the

DDA plans to create a conference center, tent city, and more ghats on the floodplain as well.

Last year, Delhi's LG stated that no concretisation along the Yamuna would be permitted, and that all legal provisions for the 'Zone O', as outlined in the Delhi Master Plan, would be followed; however, the DDA has been openly violating the Delhi Master Plan, and no action has been taken, while those who provide cheap and fresh food to the city are criminalised. Ironically, evicted farmers are already doing what the DDA claims to do by constructing a biodiversity park. In fact, farmers are doing far more to save the environment than the DDA ever can. The DDA just began a campaign to plant trees to address climate change, but removes them when others do it for a living. The goal of evicting farmers is to clear the property and transfer it to a contractor who will construct lavish structures for the privileged along the banks in the guise of environmental conservation.



Qudsia Ghat. Photo: Aazim

On the banks of the Yamuna in Qudsia Ghat, many concrete structures have come up, and the work is still going on. A concrete ghat that the DDA is building goes against the NGT's guidelines that prohibits any constructions along the Yamuna. Last year, during the G20 summit in Delhi, the DDA demolished thousands of homes in Bela Estate. Farming was taking place in the vicinity of Bela Estate until last year; however, when I visited the region lately, the entire land had been cleared of farmers, and no crops could be seen. The only thing visible were trucks, debris and elevation work being done. Interestingly, the entire region is under 'Zone O' and breaches the NGT's 2015 judgement, but no action has been taken by the NGT. According to [The Hindu](#), the NGT Committee hasn't met in over two years. This demonstrates the seriousness and credibility of the NGT, which was founded to monitor environmental violations, now has given up on its responsibilities. The NGT only takes action when it comes to working-class and agricultural livelihoods. Urban farming in Delhi has kept the city green for decades and created green jobs long before governments recognized them.



Qudsia Ghat. Photo: Aazim



Construction at Bela Estate. Photo: Abhishek

The Delhi government has yet to recognize urban farmers in Delhi. This means that there is no policy framework for urban farmers, and farmers cannot be compensated in the event of a natural disaster. The Delhi Government Cabinet approved 'smart urban farming' in 2022. The Delhi government promised to hold 'information seminars' and 'entrepreneurship training courses' throughout the city to encourage people to start rooftop gardening, but no one knows what happened because no work is visible on the ground. The program will have little or no effect on urban farmers who already farm along the Yamuna's banks. There is a need to recognise and incorporate the people who cultivate along the banks of the Yamuna into urban agriculture policy.

In the draft [urban agricultural policy](#) presented by the PRC and the working group in 2022, they recommended establishing a separate ministry for agriculture in Delhi, which would be responsible for both urban farming and peri-urban agriculture. The paper also proposed the formation of an 'urban farming commission' composed of civil society members, scientists, and urban planners who would be entrusted with making recommendations to the government on urban agriculture. Despite being an excellent investigation and

recommendations, the NCT administration has not followed through on the suggestions or taken them seriously.

Aakiz, a Greenpeace India member who has worked on urban agriculture in Delhi, tells me that urban farmers face low irrigation water quality, rising urbanisation that eats into their farming land, and a lack of government policy support. In his work in [Mongabay](#), Aakiz contends that increasing and unregulated urbanisation is reducing the net area sown.

A Fight For Commons

If we look at farming from the ‘bottom to top approach’, the banks of any river do not belong to any particular group, in fact they are the land of commons. We must not forget that the first human civilizations came up near and on the banks of rivers. People used to farm collectively on the banks of rivers before being taken over by the state and private capital. People used river water for cultivation in ancient times, but as civilisations evolved and a new form of bourgeois mode of production emerged, our rivers were contaminated due to industrial garbage placed in them. The consequences of this new way of production had a significant impact on the livelihoods of individuals who used to farm along the banks. Not just the river banks, many common lands are designated as waste lands so as to discourage any form of activity. Take for example the case of [Mumbai](#), where the railway employees or the persons hired by them farm along the railway tracks. It doesn't only add to the green jobs, but also reduces food miles. But the state can anytime convert it for commercial purposes. There are countless examples like these where people farm on vacant lands, but lacks support or recognition from the government. Over time, farming land has been reduced and turned over to commercial use that has led to the concretisation of the urban areas and destruction of the ecosystem. In India around 350 million people depend on commons for their livelihood.

The right to the city, a concept coined by philosopher Henri Lefebvre, is a central theme in the struggle for urban commons. It emphasizes that all urban residents., not just developers, corporations, or elites should have the right to shape and control the spaces in which they live. Urban farming plays a role in

this broader fight by asserting the right of communities to access, use, and steward urban land for collective benefit.

Kamlesh, who has been farming in Chilla Khadar with his family, told me that the DDA has planted useless plants in the area, making it impossible for farmers to grow crops there. Farmers refer to the DDA-planted plants as ‘fake’. Fake plants are largely useless. The DDA just places them so that people do not farm on the land and deprive them of “Right to grow their own food”. Many migrant families that came to Delhi in pursuit of a better life have found employment in urban farming.

A report by [IFPRI](#) says that Indian commons provide \$90.5 billion worth of ecosystem services each year, and that includes farming as well. India, however, will see a downfall of \$68 billion in ecosystems by 2050 as per the IFPRI report.



Urban Farming in Kolkata. Source: [Wikimedia Commons \(CC BY-SA 4.0\)](#)

Delhi can take inspiration from the Argentinian city of Rosario, where municipality began working with UN-Habitat's Urban Management Program and the National University of Rosario and created a precise map of unsuitable

and unoccupied land and began an [urban farming initiative](#) during an Argentinian Great Depression that resulted in enormous job losses and an economic collapse. The urban farming initiative created numerous green jobs and benefited the economy. Rosarios' proposal later expanded to many locations in Argentina under the name 'green belt project'. The program contributed to the creation of green jobs, the reduction of greenhouse gases by reducing food miles, low temperatures as a result of extensive green cover, and the development of a localised market. According to the World Resources Institute (WRI), greenhouse gas emissions in Rosario are estimated to be cut by up to 95%, and over 2,400 families have their own gardens and practise environmentally friendly agriculture. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, [Cuba turned to urban farming](#) to ensure food security. The government encouraged the development of urban farms in cities like Havana, and urban agriculture is now an important part of Cuba's food system. The Cuban experience demonstrates the potential of urban farming to contribute to food sovereignty, particularly in a country where access to imported food was severely constrained. So, despite the fact that urban farming considerably reduces greenhouse gas emissions, and less reliance on imported food, it is frequently disregarded by both urban planners and governments worldwide.

The fight for commons and urban farming is a struggle for access, control, and sustainability in increasingly congested and privatized cities. At its heart, it is a fight for the 'right to the city' to decide how urban space is used and for whose advantage. Urban farming, as part of the larger fight for the commons, is a means of reclaiming space for collective well being, sustainability, and food security. This conflict comprises a complex interplay of economic, social, political, and environmental forces, which frequently collide with urban growth, privatization, gentrification, and social justice.

In cities where land is increasingly seen as a commodity for private investment, green spaces, public lands, and urban farming areas are at risk of being sold or leased to developers, often displacing low income communities or individuals who rely on them for food, leisure, and community building. The fight for the commons in this sense is a struggle to ensure that urban space is not commodified but is instead made available for public use, and social welfare.

Urban farming is a symbol of the commons in cities. It is the practice of growing food in underutilized or vacant urban places such as vacant lots, rooftops, backyards, or community gardens. This grassroots movement is part of a larger push to democratize food production, boost access to nutritious foods, and reconnect urban communities with their food sources. Urban farming also supports environmental justice by fostering sustainable, locally based food systems that are healthier for the environment and less reliant on industrial agriculture's damaging practices. It minimizes the carbon impact of food transportation while also promoting biodiversity, soil health, and sustainable farming methods.

As cities gentrify, vacant lots and unused land which may be converted into community gardens or urban farms are frequently sought for real estate developments. Gentrification drives out low-income communities and, with them, the opportunity for urban farming programs. As property values grow, inexpensive farmland becomes scarce, displacing urban farmers, particularly those from marginalized neighborhoods. This perpetuates a cycle of inequity in which the benefits of urban green space and farming are concentrated in wealthier, more privileged communities.

Finally, urban farming is more than just food production; it is part of a bigger effort to reclaim cities for people rather than business or profit, and to create a more resilient, just, and equitable urban environment.

Conclusion

Cities were and are being developed only for the wealthy and their private luxuries. Today's neoliberal cities direct the majority of our lives to their profit. The neoliberal system has reached its limit and is no longer capable of creating productive forces, which is at the foundation of our cities' current suffering. This system is the primary source of climate change and increased carbon emissions, and it is ruining the planet. Every day, the urban poor and working class experience structural violence from the moment they wake up. Concrete replaces natural landscapes such as parks, gardens, and forests with hard

surfaces that are immune to water. This not only affects biodiversity, but also reduces the aesthetic and psychological advantages of green spaces.

As urbanization grows worldwide, incorporating green spaces and agricultural activities into cities is critical for creating ecologically sound, resilient, and healthy urban ecosystems. Cities that prioritize open green spaces may prevent climate change, promote public health, strengthen social cohesion, and create more egalitarian, habitable and ecological areas for all citizens. Urban agriculture, in particular, presents a transformative potential to reconnect people with nature, lessen the environmental impact of food production, and enhance local food systems.

As Charu Mazumdar famously said, "Let us march forward to usher in that brilliant sunshine of liberation." We must release our cities from the chains of catastrophe and rebuild them as habitable and self-sufficient food-growing communities. It's time to reclaim the urban centre. A farming city is surely possible, maybe not today, but certainly tomorrow.