

More Farmers or Fewer?

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The change in the number of cultivators and agricultural labour as provided by Census 2011 is a major indicator of a state's treatment of farmers. Using Maharashtra as an example, the difficulties in ascertaining trends in economic activity in the districts should not obstruct us from recognising the growing impact on food security caused by relentless urbanisation.

Over ten years between the two census enumerations, 2001 and 2011, the population of Maharashtra grew by 15.5 million to reach 112.3 million; the 5.7 million added to the rural population being far outstripped by the 9.7 million added to the state's urban population. At this rate of growth in both rural and urban populations, Maharashtra's urban population will be larger than its rural population by around 2030-31.

Already the consequences of migration away from the state's rural districts to its urban centres can be seen from the Census 2011 data. In the recently released [primary census abstracts for the states](#) (they are available at the district level), the rate of growth in the category of total workers in urban Maharashtra is far more rapid than the corresponding rate of growth in rural Maharashtra, a rise of 35% compared with 12.4% (while 3.38 million were added to the total workers in rural Maharashtra, the urban addition was 4.86 million). Thus while the 2001 census counted 27.2 million total workers in rural and 13.9 million in urban Maharashtra, the 2011 figures respectively were 30.5 million and 18.7 million.

How much of the addition to the state's working population has been in agriculture? From the Census 2011 evidence, the working population counted as cultivators and agricultural labour has increased from 22.62 million to 26.05 million (this combines the category of 'main' workers, and the two new divisions within the 'marginal' category, which are 0 to 3 months and 3 to 6 months).

Whether main or marginal, the census classifies workers into one of four categories of economic activity: cultivator, agricultural labourer, worker in household industry and other worker. For the census enumerator, if a person has pursued more than one economic activity during the reference period, the economic activity in which that person was engaged during the major part of the period determines the classification assigned.

During the census, enumerators were advised that if a person is engaged in an economic activity but simultaneously attends to household chores or attends a school or college, that person is treated as a worker. But finer distinctions - which have a considerable bearing on our understanding of the number of people actually engaged in agriculture (and allied activities, as the national accounting system calls the sector) - abound. To illustrate, for the census, those who may be cultivating solely for domestic consumption or rearing animals for milk for their own use will be treated as workers.

Moreover, there are several sub-sectors of agriculture that are not included in the definition given to cultivator and agricultural labour. All plantation work (that is, tea, coffee, rubber and areca nut) is not included, nor is 'livestock maintenance and

production' (the rearing of cattle, goats, sheep, poultry farms, bee-keeping, the production of silk, eggs and honey). Fisheries and aquaculture is not included, and nor is forestry and logging (which includes forest produce including fodder).

That is why, without finer grading of the 'other worker' category and the data pertaining to their economic occupations, it is not possible to distinguish between a working population engaged in most forms of activity that contribute to agricultural GDP (or SDP). Indeed, the growth in the number of those classified as 'other worker' has been greater, at 26.8%, than the growth in those classified broadly as farmers (cultivators and agricultural labour taken together) which is 15.1%.

A clue to [the scale of change](#) comes from examining the rural and urban components of these changes. Disregarding the distinction between main and marginal, the largest addition in the number of workers in Maharashtra is in the 'other' 'urban' category, an addition of 4.31 million. Next is 'farmer' (that is, cultivators and agricultural labour taken together) 'rural' with 3.05 million.

How significant are these differences, between duration of work categories (main, marginal 0-3 and marginal 3-6), between location (rural and urban), and between major occupational groups? The census recognises that a large number of farm and non-farm activities are family based. Members of the cultivating households, irrespective of their age, work in the peak season of ploughing, sowing, harvesting and collection of farm produce. Some of them - particularly women, children and the aged - withdraw from the labour force in the slack season or pursue other economic activities (but may be classified as workers after the activity to which they give the most time) and yet not all are enumerated as workers during the census.

The greatest addition of workers in Maharashtra has been in the districts of Thane (1.31 million), Pune (1.09m), Mumbai Suburban (0.58m), Nashik (0.57m) and Aurangabad (0.39m). These five districts account for almost half the number of all workers added in the state. In which districts have there been the greatest addition of the broad 'farmer' (cultivators and agricultural labour taken together) category? Ahmednagar (0.17 million added), Nashik (0.17m), Beed (0.15m), Aurangabad (0.12m) and Jalna (0.1m).

On the other hand, Ratnagiri has lost 0.17 million farmers, Thane 0.17m, Raigad 0.16m, Sangli 0.16m, Satara 0.15m, Kolhapur 0.14m and Sindhudurg 0.14m - among the 14 districts in which the number of cultivators and agricultural labour has dropped. These losses have much to do with the great urbanisation of western Maharashtra, as all these districts have sent rural workers into Mumbai, Thane and Pune. The consequences to the capacities of these districts for sustaining a minimum level of food production for their own consumption are yet to be recognised and understood.