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Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative

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Adil, West Bengal, India

Multidimensional Poverty Index Profile

Adil is a thirty-two-year-old daily wage labourer living in Shahpur Gram Panchayat's Madhaipur Ward with his wife, Farha, their two daughters and son. Their mud hut is located in Dargapada, one of the village's poorer hamlets, where there is no electricity. The hamlet is served by one hand pump for water, shared among many households. Like 80% of Madhaipur's population (and everyone else in Dargapada), they are Muslim.

Adil's family owns no agricultural land. Adil and his neighbours depend on farmers who own more land in the main Madhaipur village and neighbouring Moregram for wage opportunities. Such employment is seasonal and depends on personal and social relations that individuals are able to maintain.



Five years ago Adil left for Mumbai as a contractual labourer with the help of middlemen, called *dalals*, who put labourers in touch with potential employers and take a small fee from both. "Initially, it was tough, as I did not know anybody, and was completely dependent on the *dalal*. I now realize he swindled me of several hundred rupees. There was no one to cook meals, wash clothes, and do the things we take for granted here in the village. Adjusting to the new life was difficult. I wanted to come away."

After he left for Mumbai, tragedy struck the family twice, when within a span of three years, they lost two children. "They were too weak and could not cope with the fever that afflicted them." He suspects they were weak because they rarely had enough to eat those days. As Adil began remitting money home, the family realized that there were enormous economic benefits in him working in Mumbai: "We now have three meals a day, instead of the one or two that we could barely manage before I left." He soon found his way about Mumbai. "I continue to go there twice every year. I no longer depend on a *dalal*, since I have developed my own contacts and can find work on my own."

Adil went to Mumbai as a construction labourer, but over the last five years, he has worked at a variety of jobs—as a mason, restaurant worker, truck driver, and office sweeper, among others. Although he does not have the security that the contractual labour provided, he says "at least I have the freedom to choose the kind of things I would like to work on. Of course, it is also true

that this is no freedom at all. I *have to* leave home. I *have to* do menial, unskilled, low-paying jobs which offer no security, because if I do not work, my family will starve.” Today, Adil earns at least INR 5,000 (USD 568.2) (net after all expenses) for each trip that he makes to Mumbai. By timing his migration according to the two agricultural seasons, Adil and others like him are able to take advantage of whatever employment opportunities the local agricultural season might offer.

In the city, where he spends nearly 100 days in a year, his day begins at 7am. He usually reports to work at 8:30am. It is not uncommon for him to work until 6pm or even 7pm during the summer when days are lengthy. Back in the village, he wakes up even earlier, at 5am, “because that is what everyone does.” He spends the early hours doing minor repairs around the house or finishing odd jobs that would help Farha. On days when there is little or no work, he meets friends to catch up on news and gossip. Farha prepares a light breakfast of puffed rice and *chai* around 8am. After breakfast, Adil goes into the village to find work. Work could be as elementary as fixing a few bolts to more complex tasks, such as plastering a portion of a wall. During agricultural seasons, he may be luckier—he might be asked to operate a power tiller or spray pesticides. He breaks for lunch around noon. Depending on where he is, he either comes home to eat or Farha takes food to him. Lunch is usually a plate of rice with *dal*, a type of lentil soup. On the days that he finds work, Adil’s earnings average INR 50 (USD 5.68). But he returns empty-handed on many days. Indeed, of the nearly 250 days that he stays in Dargapada, Adil finds work on no more than 100 days. He is home usually by 6pm. Dinner is served by 7pm and is determined by what Adil has been able to earn during the previous few days or weeks. Usually, it consists of rice, some *dal* from the afternoon, and vegetables.



Adil’s regrets that he has to spend so many days—nearly a third of each year—away from Farha and the children. He still grieves that he could not be by his wife’s side when two of his children died. But he hopes his struggles will not be in vain. “I really wish my family and I could live together. It need not be this village, because there is nothing here for the children to do. If only we could find some way to live together in Mumbai—but living with a family in a city can be expensive—and insecure, with two adolescent girls....” At the same time, he is grateful that at least he is able to use the opportunity provided by the government to educate his children. With that education, he hopes they will find work and will not face the difficulties he faces daily. “One should be able to work and earn their living. We don’t want free food or anyone’s benevolence. We want employment. They should be able to work hard. I don’t want my children to laze around, nor do I want them to beg or steal. Hard work promotes honesty, and honesty brings honour. I would like them and the future generations to lead honourable lives.”

Adil feels that the key to a ‘good-life’, to well-being (*bhalo thaka*), is *samman* (honour). “I work hard, so I get *samman*. There are many others who are feared, or who can influence events around them. I am neither feared, nor can I influence events around me. But no one can say I am a crook or I have not been honest.” Work is important, because it allows you to lead a life of honour, but it cannot *by itself* ensure that a person will be honoured. “In our village, people who work hard are rarely honoured. People think you are foolish if you work too hard. In the city, on

the other hand, hard work is respected. You work hard, you get paid accordingly. Of course, there are thieves from who you have to be careful, but you find them here too, all the time.” Referring to the Government’s flagship employment program—the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme—he argues, “I applied for work. But I have not got any. It has been over six months (applicants are entitled to receive work within fifteen days of them applying for it). Now, tell me, what does it show? That my own leaders do not want me to work? Are they not disrespecting my wish to lead an honourable life?”

Adil’s household is poor according to the Indian Government’s Below Poverty Line survey instrument used by the State Government of Bihar, a proposed Below Poverty Line instrument recommended for use by the Indian Government’s Planning Commission and the MPI. The shaded boxes of the figure below show the deprivations that his household faces across the MPI.

