



The Hidden Crisis in India's Rice Fields: Why Organic Farmers are Struggling Despite Growing Demand

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INTRODUCTION

A groundbreaking study from Andhra Pradesh reveals the stark reality behind India's organic farming revolution

India's organic food market is booming. Consumers are increasingly willing to pay premium prices for chemical-free produce, and the government actively promotes organic farming through flagship programs. Yet, a comprehensive new study from Andhra Pradesh—one of India's major rice-producing states—paints a troubling picture of the farmers who grow this "clean" food.

The Alarming Reality: Success on Paper, Struggle in Reality

Dr. Mallela Bandhavya's extensive research involving 200 certified organic paddy farmers across three districts reveals a startling paradox. While these farmers excel at ecological and agronomic sustainability—maintaining healthy soil, controlling pests naturally, and preserving biodiversity—they're failing economically and struggling with severe mental health challenges.

The numbers are sobering: **88.5% of organic paddy farmers** in the study reported low annual family incomes, with many earning less than ₹7,000 per month. More alarmingly, over **53% of farmers admitted they're considering quitting agriculture entirely** due to mounting problems.

The Mental Health Crisis No One Talks About

Perhaps the most shocking finding concerns farmer well-being. The research reveals that:

- **98% of farmers** consider agriculture "stressful because it depends on climate"
- **81.5% invest more money** in farming than they earn back, forcing them into debt



- **87% feel the government** provides inadequate support
- **26.5% endorsed** other farmers taking "extreme steps like suicide"

These statistics help explain why farmer suicides remain a persistent crisis in rural India, despite the apparent success of organic farming initiatives.

Why Good Intentions Aren't Enough

The study identified critical gaps between organic farming's promise and reality:

Marketing Mayhem

The biggest constraint facing organic farmers isn't growing crops—it's selling them. Inadequate marketing networks, lack of storage facilities, and the prevalence of fake organic products in the market mean farmers often can't command the premium prices that make organic farming financially viable.

Many farmers in Vishakhapatnam and Vizianagaram districts started organic cultivation with NGO support and Farmer Producer Organizations (FPOs), but when marketing failed, they retreated to growing organic rice solely for family consumption.

The Labor Trap

Organic farming requires significantly more manual labor—for weeding, harvesting, and pest control—but schemes like MGNREGS (rural employment guarantee) have created labor shortages and inflated wages. Farmers report struggling to find workers willing to do the physically demanding work organic methods require.

Technical Knowledge Gaps

Despite their commitment to sustainable practices, many farmers lack crucial technical knowledge. The study found that 54.98% of farmers struggled with "insufficient entrepreneurial skills," while 54.14% had "limited access to technical support for organic farming methods."

The Success Stories: What Works

Not all organic farmers are struggling. The research documented successful cases like Mr. Babu Rao from Nellore, who earns ₹10 lakhs annually through strategic marketing and quality focus.

His success formula includes:



- **Direct consumer relationships:** Assigning specific consumers to individual farmers, creating a "family farmer" concept
- **Transparency without certification:** Inviting customers to visit farms
- **Quality over quantity:** Growing one crop per year using traditional varieties
- **Cost optimization:** Eliminating unnecessary operations while maintaining quality

The Path Forward: Eight-Point Strategy

Based on her findings, Dr. Bandhavya proposes a comprehensive "PEEP SAME" strategy covering eight perspectives:

1. **Policy reforms:** Implement fair premium pricing and link Aadhaar to chemical fertilizer purchases
2. **Enhanced storage and processing facilities**
3. **Educational programs** starting from school level
4. **Psychological support systems** including counseling services
5. **Social unity** among farmers and stronger FPOs
6. **Agronomic improvements** with mechanization for small fields
7. **Marketing infrastructure** with direct government procurement
8. **Environmental protection** through proper straw management

What This Means for India's Food Future

The study's findings have national implications. If organic farmers—who are supposed to represent sustainable agriculture's future—are struggling financially and psychologically, it raises serious questions about current policies and support systems.

The research suggests that without immediate intervention, India risks losing the very farmers it needs to meet growing organic food demand. The younger generation's reluctance to enter agriculture, combined with existing farmers' desire to quit, could significantly impact food security.



The Bottom Line

Organic farming in India isn't just an environmental or health issue—it's fundamentally about farmer welfare. As Dr. Bandhavya's research demonstrates, creating truly sustainable agriculture requires addressing not just ecological concerns, but also the economic realities and mental health needs of the farmers who feed the nation.

The choice is clear: India can either support its organic farmers comprehensively—financially, technically, and psychologically—or watch them abandon the very practices the country desperately needs for a sustainable future.

REFERENCE:

Bandhavya, M. (2023) Sustainability of Organic Paddy Farming and Subjective Well-Being of Farmers in Andhra Pradesh, *Ph.D. (Ag.) thesis*, Acharya N.G. Ranga Agricultural University, Guntur.

