

Research Paper

## Psychological perceptions and socioeconomic determinants of organic farming adoption among smallholder farmers in West Bengal

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### ABSTRACT

The adoption of organic farming among smallholder farmers is influenced by a complex interaction of socioeconomic conditions, institutional support systems, and farmers' psychological perceptions. Understanding the socioeconomic and institutional factors such as farmers' age, psychological framework, educational level, land tenure, access to information and credit facilities are essential in exploring adoption transitions of organic farming in regions dominated by small and marginal landholdings. This study aimed at examining the psychological perceptions and socioeconomic determinants of smallholder farmers regarding organic farming with respect to concept, technology, training, women's participation and certification system in West Bengal. Small and marginal farmers' cognitive and psychological perceptual dimensions in decision-making related to five key aspects of organic farming: conceptual understanding, technological feasibility, access to inputs and training, women's participation, and certification systems have been evaluated by using a structured questionnaire survey complemented by focused group discussions; the analyses from an exploratory rural- sociology outlook on how farmers assess the benefits, risks, and practicality of organic practices within their socioeconomic realities show that positive psychological orientation, higher education, secure land tenure, and better access to information and credit tend to enhance farmers' willingness to adopt organic farming practices. Conversely, several barriers like limited technical training, the perceived complexity and cost of certification procedures, institutional mistrust, and constraints to land tenure security were identified. Women's substantial involvement in agriculture contrasts with their under-recognized role in decision-making. Better institutional support, gender-inclusive training programs, simplified certification mechanisms, and improved access to credit are essential to promote sustainable and widespread adoption

**Keywords:** *Adoption organic farming, psychological perception, smallholder farmers, socioeconomic determinants, West Bengal*

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**Received: January 8, 2026; Revision Received: March 10, 2026; Accepted: March 20, 2026**

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Organic farming has become a foundation of sustainable agriculture, as a sustainable alternative to conventional farming, offering ecological and economic advantages (Reganold & Wachter, 2016). In India, organic agriculture intersects subsistence needs, environmental conservation, and rural development. Despite policy support (National Program for Organic Production), smallholder adoption remains suboptimal compared to conventional methods. Yet adoption among small and marginal farmers in India, particularly in Eastern regions like West Bengal, remains limited. This study explores psychological and socioeconomic determinants that shape organic farming adoption decisions among smallholder farmers in West Bengal. Understanding and analyzing the psychological and socioeconomic determinants behind organic farming adoption is critical for sustainable agricultural development in West Bengal from rural sociological view point and is crucial for designing effective interventions. The socioeconomic variables like land size and income provide the foundation, psychological perceptions regarding risk, health, and environmental safety often dictate the final decision to transition (Brodt and Schug, 2008; Koner & Laha, 2021).

Perspectives are shifting from maximizing 'absolute yield' to ensuring 'yield stability' under climate stress as organic systems may produce lower yields under optimal initial conditions, but often demonstrate greater resilience and yield stability during extreme weather events, such as droughts or floods (Wekeza et al., 2022). Temporal and spatial diversification further contributes to adaptive capacity. Crop rotation and mixed cropping increase system robustness by spreading risk across species with different tolerances to biotic and abiotic stresses (Li et al., 2019). Organic farming systems compared to conventional systems can buffer against climatic stresses and extreme weather events, posing risks to crop productivity and food security (Altieri et al., 2015), often producing comparable average yields with increasing yield stability and resistance in adverse conditions. Naturally, such diversified systems contribute to the delivery of ecosystem services essential for climate adaptation, augmenting functional diversity among plants, soil organisms, and beneficial insects improves pest regulation, pollination, and nutrient availability (Seufert et al., 2012).

### METHODOLOGY

The present investigation was carried out in the Bankura district of West Bengal. The information was gathered using well-designed survey schedules and the personal interview approach during autumn-winter season (End of September to February) of 2023-24. Finally, a sample of 240 farmers, mainly vegetable growers was selected randomly by selecting 40 farmers from each of six randomly selected villages, namely, *Shivdanga*, *Dubrajhati*, *Kamardanga*, *Hamirhati*, *Jashora*, and *Majhirdanga* in Sonamukhi block in the eastern part of Bankura, where small (more than 1 hectare land holding) and marginal farmers (less than 1 hectare land holding) constitute the majority of the agricultural population. These areas were selected due to their increasing exposure to organic farming initiatives, extension programmes, and farmer awareness campaigns related to sustainable agricultural practices with diversified cropping patterns, and varying levels of access to agricultural extension services.

The study employed an exploratory descriptive rural-sociological approach using a structured questionnaire survey complemented by focus group discussions with small and marginal farmers' psychological perceptions and socioeconomic determinants of organic farming adoption. A structured survey gathered perceptual data on five core aspects like conceptual understanding, technological feasibility, access to inputs and training, women's participation,

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and certification systems, while 12 focused group discussions (FGDs) provided in-depth narratives on decision-making, benefits, risks, and institutional influences. These convergent elements of survey research and qualitative inquiry design enabled a broader understanding of farmers' attitudes on how farmers interpret organic practices within their socioeconomic contexts.

Participation in the study was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from the respondents about the purpose of the research. Anonymity and confidentiality of participants' responses was maintained throughout the study. No incentives were offered. Gender sensitivity was given importance in FGDs. Respondents were selected using purposive and snowball sampling methods to ensure representation of farmers with varying experiences and perceptions regarding organic farming. Informal interactions were conducted with agricultural extension personnel, village leaders, and experienced farmers to contextualize the findings. The collected data were analyzed using descriptive and thematic analysis to identify prevailing patterns in farmers' perceptions and decision-making processes. Survey responses (Y= Yes, N=No, and U= Undecided) were summarized using percentages, while qualitative information obtained from focus group discussions in the form of well-thought stimuli was analyzed thematically to identify major patterns and perceptions among farmers.

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Adoption is not purely economic but is a behavioral decision shaped by cognition, culture, risk perception, and socioeconomic context. The scientific perspective on organic agriculture has evolved from viewing it solely as an environmental ethic to recognizing it as a pragmatic climate adaptation strategy.

**Table. 1: Socioeconomic determinants influencing sustainable transitions towards organic farming**

Factors	Impact on organic adoption
Land tenure security, income & size	Reduces perceived risk and resistance to innovation. Small plots make "buffer zones" (required for certification) nearly impossible to maintain without contaminating neighboring chemical-heavy fields. Also affect resource availability and risk tolerance.
Labour intensity	Organic vegetable farming is significantly more labour-intensive. For small and marginal households, it increases "time poverty," especially for women, who manage both domestic and field duties.
Credit access	Marginal farmers often rely on informal credit. Since organic produce lacks a standardized, accessible "premium market" at the local level, lenders perceive organic transitions as high-risk, leading to higher interest rates.
Biodiversity loss, adaptation limits	Social relations, information access due to inadequate extension services
Costs, markets	Sustainability perspectives not understood and policy support qualitatively wanting

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<b>Factors</b>	<b>Impact on organic adoption</b>
Institutional trust  The Synergy:  Trust + Support =  Adoption	Trust is eroded due to bureaucratic reluctance and political patronage of extending government helps. Farmers fear that their investment in organic practices will not be rewarded with the promised market premiums and institutional risk buffers
Education and age	Restricts knowledge about organic practices and weakens the effect of attitudes on adoption.
Gender role	Women are the primary custodian of family food and seeds, and organic farming thrives on local resilience; yet very negligible part in decision making
Inspection/Audit/ Paperwork/Record keeping and Group Certification	Literacy barrier and annual renewal. Certification process as per India's National Programme for Organic Production (NPOP) is seen as cumbersome and certification costs are high for marginal farmers. Administrative fees, cost of travel for inspections, and record-keeping tools are unaffordable; NPOP subsidy cost-sharing covers only 50%. High costs and less market access jeopardize adoption process
Transition support	Yield loss risk

**Findings on people's perception on organic farming:** The response profile and the views.

The stimulus: Organic farming is a new concept altogether. Response level: Y = 35%, N = 54.25%, U = 10.75%

**Revelation:** By default, Indian agriculture is organic. We have been although in the practice, applicant and culture or organic farming even in the face of indiscriminate chemicalization through "Green Revolution" in India in the decades of 70's. Now, it is interesting to note that 35% of the respondents are of the belief that Organic Farming is altogether a new concept.

The stimulus: Organically produced vegetables can fetch more market prices.

Response level: Y = 25%, N = 56.25%, U = 18.75%

**Revelation:** It has been observed that around 56.25 % of the respondents are the non-believers of market efficacy of organic farming market profitability being the driving force of any concept, the new or traditional, is missing here. It is a real motivational constraint for triggering zeal for organic farming adoption, unaware of the reality of the market demand.

The stimulus: Technologies are extremely inadequate for organic farming.

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Response level:  $Y = 31.25\%$ ,  $N = 50\%$ ,  $U = 18.75\%$

**Revelation:** Nevertheless, India has long been rich in Indigenous Technological Knowledge (ITK) related to organic farming, supported by well-adapted traditional farming systems developed through long-standing praxis and customary practices. Despite this substantial knowledge base, many respondents believe that there is still an inadequacy of appropriate techniques to effectively practice organic farming. This perception raises an important question as to whether organic farming technologies are being viewed as excessively exotic or culturally external to the local farming context. The adaptation of organic farming in India has therefore moved beyond purely technical considerations and increasingly involves cultural dimensions that have historically been integral to traditional agricultural practices. In other words, the process of customizing organic farming systems must recognize and incorporate these cultural and traditional elements that are deeply embedded within indigenous agricultural knowledge.

On the other hand, nearly 50 per cent of the villagers still believe that technologies related to organic farming are abundantly available within the functioning Agricultural Knowledge and Information System (AKIS). This divided perception has contributed to a growing contradiction between exotic and indigenous knowledge systems, which currently remain in an oscillating state of coexistence within rural knowledge structures, particularly in the context of the ongoing information technology revolution.

The stimulus: Farmers need more training on organic farming.

Response level:  $Y = 93.75\%$ ,  $N = 5\%$ ,  $U = 1.25\%$

**Revelation:** Almost 94% of the respondents believe that they need training on organic farming despite of the fact that they are the human conveyer of traditional knowledges of organic farming over centuries. The story can generate two important messages –

There is dearth of skills for organic farming amongst the farmers.

Farmers are presently lacking confidence in utilizing their Indigenous Traditional Knowledge (ITK) in organic farming practices. This condition can largely be attributed to the existing knowledge dissemination system, which remains partial, inconsistent, and incongruent in nature. Such a fragmented approach has generated confusion, paradoxical perceptions, and a sense of distrust among farmers, thereby undermining the effective adoption and application of technologies related to organic farming.

The stimulus: Women can participate more in organic farming than conventional farming.

Response level:  $Y = 94.5\%$ ,  $N = 4\%$ ,  $U = 1.5\%$

**Revelation:** It is optimistic to see that the respondents in general do believe that women are the cultural custodians of organic farming. The adoption of organic farming in rural Bengal is not merely an agricultural shift; it is a socio-economic transformation heavily steered by women. The role of women of organic farming is spanning over a spectrum of domestic on-farm and off-farm activities. They are the synergy makers by combining crop, fish, poultry bird and livestock enterprises. It is the same woman who takes care of on-farm organic manure and takes care of the seedlings in seedbed at the same time. It is known that the

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primitive agriculture got off to a start in the hands of women and still today they are the primary mentor of agriculture and the mettle of enterprise covalence as well. One of the most critical roles played by women in Bengal's organic movement is the preservation of indigenous seeds. Unlike conventional farming, which relies on purchased high-yield variety (HYV) seeds, organic farming thrives on local resilience. Women in districts like Purulia and Bankura often maintain "seed banks" within their homes. By selecting and storing seeds from the heartiest crops, they ensure genetic diversity and food sovereignty for their families (Ghosh, 2023). Women integrate cattle waste management and exploiting local botanicals like neem and garlic into their daily domestic routines to create natural pest repellents, which is essential for organic certification and soil health maintenance without synthetic chemicals (Mondal & Ray, 2022).

The stimulus: What do you mean by certified organic farming?

Response level: Y = 2.00% , N = 96.00% , U = 2.00%,

**Revelation:** While most of the farmers are still confused of exotic knowledge of organic farming, it is no wondering that a humongous size of them (96.25%) are quite ignorant of the rhetoric, "certified organic farming" this implies that the farmers need to undergo a rigorous and realistic understanding of organic farming and subsequent to it they can go for technical aspect of organic farming capable of earning a certification from the competent authority.

The stimulus: What are the basic parameters to be considered for defining organic farming?

Response level: Y = 14.75% , N = 84.00% , U = 1.25%

**Revelation:** In corollary with the previous response, they have expressed their confusion and ignorance on parameters of organic farming.

The stimulus: Are you ready to replace your conventional practices with organic rituals?

Response level: Y = 10.50% , N = 82.00% , U = 7.50%

**Revelation:** The very stimulus of this question generated considerable confusion among the respondents and, in many instances, prompted a counter-question: "Why such a question should be asked?" This reaction itself reflects a deeper ambiguity surrounding the perceived benefits and practical relevance of organic farming within the local agricultural context. One discernible explanation for such responses may lie in the relatively uncertain economic returns associated with organic farming. In the absence of a clearly defined, stable, and exclusive market demand for organically produced commodities, farmers often find it difficult to perceive organic farming as a reliably profitable enterprise. Consequently, this lack of market clarity contributes to skepticism and hesitation among farmers regarding the practical viability and economic sustainability of organic farming practices (Mandal, 2018). This response would go in congruence with the response generated by question no. 1. Moreover, the sharecroppers and those with insecure tenure expressed "risk-aversion," fearing that the 2–3-year conversion period often marked by initial yield gaps would lead to eviction or financial ruin before the benefits of organic certification could be realized (Akram et al., 2019).

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Organic farming plays a vital role in conserving natural resources and protecting the environment.

Response level: Y = 92.50% , N = 2.00%, U = 5.50%

The respondents, having experienced the limitations and environmental hazards of conventional, chemical-intensive agriculture, recognize that its returns are diminishing and unsustainable. This has created a sense of urgency and a cautious inclination toward organic farming as a means of ecological sustenance. While their views reflect a mix of confidence and uncertainty, knowledge and ignorance, perception and skepticism, the overall orientation favors organic practices, primarily to protect and restore the ecosystem.

Organic farming is perceived not merely as an alternative production method but as a conservation and eco-restoration initiative. Its success, however, depends heavily on creating mass awareness, educating farmers, and encouraging active participation from the local population. Farmers understand that while ecological benefits are important, practical support such as training, guidance, and access to markets is essential for sustained adoption.

In this context, small and marginal farmers see organic farming as a holistic approach, combining environmental protection with sustainable livelihoods. By emphasizing soil health, biodiversity conservation, and reduced chemical dependence, organic farming is viewed as a long-term strategy to ensure resilience, sustainability, and ecological balance in local agricultural systems. It is taken for granted that organic farming is basically conservation and eco-restoration endeavor, its success would largely depend on creator of mass awareness and participation of local population; farmers are aware of the potential benefits of organic farming, several structural and institutional barriers continue to limit its widespread adoption (Sapbamrer, & Thammachai, 2021).

Small and marginal farmers in West Bengal generally show a mixed but cautiously positive, somewhat paradoxical reaction toward organic farming. Many farmers recognize that organic farming reduces dependence on expensive chemical fertilizers and pesticides, which is economically beneficial for small landholders with limited financial resources. A major concern is the possibility of lower crop yields during the transition period, which can threaten their livelihood and food security. Since small and marginal farmers depend heavily on stable production and regular income, they tend to avoid practices that involve high risk, mainly due to the lack of adequate technical knowledge, training, and market access. The response of farmers is generally pragmatic and conditional, showing interest in organic farming but emphasizing the need for institutional support and economic security.

Is there any role of institutions & communication networking to boost organic adoption?

Response level: Y = 8.50%, N = 82.25%, U = 8.75%

**Revelation:** The processes such as the accommodation and assimilation of knowledge, the reformulation and contextualization of existing knowledge systems, and the diffusion and spillover of information across farming communities play a crucial role. These processes are fundamentally shaped by the effectiveness of institutional arrangements and the strength of communication networks that connect research organizations, extension agencies, market actors, and farmers. Despite the growing global emphasis on sustainable agriculture, the knowledge base associated with organic farming is often perceived by farmers as relatively

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external or “exotic” to their traditional farming practices. This perception creates a gap between formally generated scientific knowledge and farmers’ experiential knowledge systems. From the perspective of innovation diffusion theory, such gaps can significantly influence farmers’ technology adoption behaviour, particularly when innovations are perceived as incompatible with existing socio-cultural and farming contexts (Table-1). Effective communication networks within the Agricultural Knowledge and Information System (AKIS) framework enable the transformation of isolated information flows into collaborative knowledge systems through processes of knowledge sharing, feedback, and adaptation. Such interactions contribute to the development of locally relevant and context-specific organic farming practices.

**Table-2. Response level of respondents to FGD questionnaire stimuli**

Sl.no	FGD Questionnaire	Response level (%) of respondents			
		YES	NO	UNDECIDED	TOTAL
1.	Organic farming is a new concept altogether	35.00	54.25	10.75	100.00
2.	Organically produced vegetables can fetch more market prices	25.00	56.25	18.75	100.00
3.	Technologies are extremely inadequate for organic farming	31.25	50.00	18.75	100.00
4.	Farmers need more training on organic farming	93.75	05.00	1.25	100.00
5.	Women can participate more in organic farming than conventional farming	94.50	4.00	1.50	100.00
6.	What do you mean by certified organic farming?	2.00	96.00	2.00	100.00
7.	What are the basic parameters to be considered for defining organic farming?	14.75	84.00	1.25	100.00
8.	Are you ready to replace your conventional practices with organic rituals?	10.50	80.00	7.50	100.00
9.	Organic farming plays a vital role in conserving natural resources and protecting the environment	92.50	2.00	5.50	100.00
10.	Is there any role of institutions & communication networking to boost organic adoption?	8.50	82.25	8.75	100.00

The empirical responses obtained in this study (Table-2) clearly highlight the need for a comprehensive communication intervention that moves beyond conventional top-down extension approaches. Instead, a participatory communication process that encourages dialogue, collective learning, and knowledge co-production between farmers, researchers, and extension agents becomes essential that strengthen farmers’ confidence in organic practices, and facilitate the gradual institutionalization and wider adoption of organic farming technologies. This battery of responses depict the need for having a comprehensive communication intervention as well as a participatory communication process to socialize this idea of organic farming across the need and minds of myriads of farmers of India. Adoption of organic farming among marginal farmers in India is shaped by psychological motivations and structural factors. According to the Theory of Planned Behaviour, intention

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depends on attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control (Ajzen, 1991). Positive attitudes arise from perceived benefits like soil fertility, environmental sustainability, and premium market opportunities, while self-efficacy influences farmers' confidence in managing inputs, certification, and pest control (Bandura, 1997). Social networks and community norms further affect decisions. Behavioral economics emphasizes risk perception and uncertainty. Marginal farmers may view organic farming as risky due to yield variability, pest incidence, and uncertain prices, and loss aversion heightens reluctance (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979). Limited trust in certification and resistance to change also constrain adoption.

Socioeconomic variables such as education, farm size, credit access, extension services, FPO participation, and secure land tenure mediate and reinforce adoption by enhancing knowledge, reducing constraints, and supporting long-term investments (Feder et al., 1985; Meena et al., 2013; Uematsu & Mishra, 2012; Sarkar et al., 2021). In West Bengal, moving toward Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS), where farmers certify each other, is a prime example of building adoption through localized trust rather than external bureaucracy. Holistic policies addressing financial, technical, institutional, and behavioral factors are essential for sustainable organic transitions. Marginal farmers, resource-poor and risk-sensitive, need integrated interventions, technical aid, finance, and trust-building to shift perceptions and enable adoption.

### QUOTES

**Female:** "We women weed and compost daily, but husbands decide on chemicals."

**Mixed:** "Secure land helps try organic; tenants fear losing lease."

**Mixed:** "No chemicals, good for all, but who buys at lower price?"

**Male:** "Organic certification costs more than my yearly income"

**Male:** "We lack adequate technical knowledge, training, and market access"

### CONCLUSION

The present study found that farmers in the study area generally held positive attitudes toward organic farming; however, their actual intentions to adopt such practices were relatively weak, indicating that favorable attitudes alone do not necessarily translate into behavioral intention. Key factors influencing farmers' ability to transition from conventional to organic farming included market availability for organic produce, the certification system, knowledge of organic production, complex and costly certification procedures, and government policies. Respondents also reported positive perceptions of organic farming's environmental benefits, including improved soil fertility, water-use efficiency, biodiversity conservation, and reduced emissions. It should be noted that the findings are context-specific and may vary across different regions of the country. Rural women in Bengal are the "silent catalysts" of the organic revolution. Based on these findings, several policy recommendations are proposed. First, farmers' knowledge and capacity should be strengthened through improved infrastructure, community empowerment, and targeted education on organic practices. Second, compensation and incentive mechanisms can mitigate the perceived risks during the transition period and encourage adoption. Third, the government should provide more

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intensive training, facilitate market access, and offer subsidies for certification and product pricing to accelerate the adoption of organic farming.

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***Conflict of Interest***

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

***How to cite this article:*** Pandit, M., Pandit, R. & Sarkar, S. (2026). Psychological perceptions and socioeconomic determinants of organic farming adoption among smallholder farmers in West Bengal. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 14(1), 192-202. DIP:18.01.S23.20261401, DOI:10.25215/1304.S23