

An insight into the perception, attitude and purchase behaviour of Indian consumers towards organic products and its implications for sustainability

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Abstract

Ever since the concept of organic food got popular in the country, India has emerged as one of the largest markets in the world for organic food. The organic foods or products are healthy, do not contain chemicals or preservatives, are totally natural and much better than any form of non-organic food. Organic food is a product which is made without any help or any kind of pesticides, herbicides or insecticides. Since the organic food offers more health benefits than the conventional food, the Indian government is leading from the front to ensure multi-fold growth in organic market. This paper studies the consumer perception and attitude towards organic food purchase, their level of awareness regarding organic food and explores the factors that influence the organic food purchase behaviour of consumers. 100 samples were collected using non-probability convenience sampling method and same were used for data analysis. The results of data analysis show that increasing health consciousness, taste/preferences, product quality, and environmental concerns are major factors influencing the purchase of organic food in India. On the other hand, high prices, lack of awareness, authenticity issues, resources required for growing the organic food are some of the major challenges that come in the way of organic food.

Introduction

Over the past decade, consumption patterns of consumer has changed drastically. This change is more visible in food consumption as the consumers want to eat organic food because of their perception of organic food being healthy and grown with use of organic manual and other natural resources.

Organic food excludes all the external materials added to traditional food which tends to be toxic in nature. If one practices eating organically produced foods, one is guaranteed to have better and healthier diet to sustain the human body. Consumption of organic foods also reduces the risk of getting cancer. These foods are 90% safer in the sense that human waste or animal excretions are not being incorporated in the production. In traditional foods, it is believed that the water supplies have a percentage of human waste and animal excretions present. Organic foods support the environment friendly causes in that it doesn't allow the secretion of harmful materials into the atmosphere and ultimately the environment. Pesticides and herbicides used in traditionally produced foods are harmful to the environment especially to aquatic organisms. Therefore, organic foods encourage the cause to make the environment a safer place to live and help in improving the environment. These foods don't result in the emission of greenhouse gases which affect the atmospheric conditions.

Organic agriculture is done with an objective to produce healthy and quality foods without using any synthetic chemical products. Thus, organic agriculture does not only preserve the environment but it also improves public health by bringing significant benefits both to the economy as well as to the social cohesion of rural areas. The interest of consumers and public institutions towards organically produced foods has increased over time mainly in developed countries. Main concern of consumers in respect of organic foods is about food safety, human health and the environment.

Globalisation of organic food and its culture are the core factors for future popularisation. Main motivation for these organic foods is fast growing health markets. Retail outlet culture is now growing rapidly in India. Shelf life of these foods are minimum of 2-3 months. Quality, taste and flavour of these foods remain as good as conventional foods.

Organic farming provides long-term benefits to people and the environment. Organic farming aims to increase long-term soil fertility, control pests and diseases without harming the environment, ensure that water stays clean and safe, use resources which the farmer already has so that the farmer needs less money to buy farm inputs. Organic farming also emphasizes at producing nutritious food, feed for animals and high-quality crops to sell at a good price. Organic farming works in harmony with nature rather than against it. This involves using better farming techniques to achieve good crop yields without harming the natural environment or the people who live and work in it. Organic farming does not mean travelling 'back' to traditional methods. Many of the farming methods used in the past are still effective even today. Organic farming takes the best of these and combines them with modern scientific knowledge. Organic farmers do not leave their farms to be taken over by nature; they use all the knowledge, techniques and materials available to work with nature. In this way the farmer creates a healthy balance between nature and farming, where crops and animals can grow and thrive. To be a successful organic farmer, the farmer must not see every insect as a pest, every plant out of place as a weed and the solution to every problem in an artificial chemical spray. The aim is not to eradicate all pests and weeds, but to keep them down to an acceptable level and make the most of the benefits that they may provide.

Literature Review

The term 'organic' refers to the way in which agricultural products are grown and processed across the globe. Organic foods refer to those food products which are produced without using pesticides and chemical fertilizers (Allen and Alabala, 2007). Consumers perceive these foods as environment-friendly as these are produced without using pesticides and fertilizers or chemicals and comply with animal welfare standards (Darnhofer and Lindenthal, 2009). They are grown in safe soil, which have no modifications, and must remain separate from conventional products. Farmers are not allowed to use synthetic pesticides, bio-engineered genes, Genetically Modified Organism (GMO), petroleum-based fertilizers, and sewage sludge-based fertilizers.

Sustainable products always looked as the expensive option (Market & Opinion Research International Limited (MORI), 2003). Being environmentally friendly is considered to be accessible only to the middle classes. The consumers want to have options among the sustainable products rather than choosing products that are sustainable and that are not. Consumers collect and arrange information about product attributes and consequences to evaluate a product and make choices of their own. They depend on their involvement felt which is influenced by their experience. The importance placed on each parameter is based on the consumers' priorities and values. Experience develops personal relevance, importance, interest which together concludes the motivational state (Shroeder, 2003).

Generally, organic food avoids or neglects pesticides or synthetic fertilisers. Presumably organic food contains very fewer chemical residues and veterinary drugs as compared to conventional food. Environmental contaminants, however, are likely to be found in food of both organic and conventional productions. Organic food contains only one-third of pesticides as that of conventional food does (Baker *et al.*, 2002). It can be stated that lower exposure translates into lower risk. In conventional food, almost all produce will have pesticide leftover below the statutory maximum limits. Consumers are inclined to buy organic food products as they are environment-friendly and health-conscious (Tregear *et al.*, 1994; Davis *et al.*, 1995; and Fotopoulos and Krystallis, 2002a, 2002b) and have safety and quality concerns (Zotos *et al.*, 1999; and, Chrystohoidis, 2000a and 2000b) also have nutritional value, taste, freshness, and price (Zanoli, 1998; Zotos *et al.*, 1999; and Chrystohoidis, 2000a and 2000b).

Some studies also reveal a variety of other purchase motives that seem to reflect national interests such as 'support to organic farmers' for German consumers (Worner and Meier, 1999) or 'animal welfare' for British consumers (Meier and Woodward, 1999). However, there are some consumers who are not willing to buy these foods even with high income in their hand due to lack of some special value in the eyes of the consumers (Tregear *et al.*, 1994; and Roddy *et al.*, 1996) and doubts about product guarantees or certification

(Worner and Meier, 1999). Pujari and Wright (1996) in their study mentioned the 1990s as the 'the decade of environment' due to emerging environmentalism issues facing business and the public. Organic foods are produced without using chemical fertilizers and pesticides and thus reduce pollution (air, water, soil), conserve water, reduce soil erosion, increase soil fertility and use less energy. Environmental care is considered as one of the main motivational factors towards purchasing any product including organic products.

Several studies have shown that organic production causes less harm to the environment as compared to the conventional products. Consumers are getting more environmental conscious and willing to contribute to protect the environment via any or various means. Ling (2013) evaluated consumers' purchase intention of green products with an aim to examine drivers and its moderating variable that influence purchase intention. Previous research studies have also mentioned that consumers are willing to pay a premium price for the food product if it is justified by true value of the product (Rao and Bergen, 1992; and Tse, 2001). Consumers are inclined towards organic foods because of their environmental and health concerns (Smed and Jensen, 2003; and Fu et al., 1999). However, Laroche et al. (2001) argue that consumers have favourable attitude towards green products but there is limited information as to how much consumers are willing to sacrifice for such products.

With the increase in income, people prefer more of healthy and hygienic food which has led to an increase in the demand for organic food products (Corsi and Novelli, 2003). Generally, organic consumer is little less price sensitive and is more concern over quality. Ozguven (2012) figured out the motivation factors of consumers to buy organic food products. Most of the respondent consumers preferred organic milk, fruit and vegetables in the organic food category. The results indicated that quality and price were more explanatory factors. Price and quality were found to have more significant relationship as compared to other factors. Thorgosen et al. (2015) examined the factors influencing organic food consumption in the Chinese market. The paper stated on the findings of the study into consumer perception toward beef and the influence of these perceptions on consumption. The influence of attitudes & important others (subjective norms) on intention to consumer were explored. The findings revealed that both subjective norm and attitude influenced intention to consume, but it was attitude that was found to be of more importance.

Ayodele et al. (2017) find that consumers' positive attitudes for green products do not always transfer into purchase behavior and most of the consumers do not prefer to purchase green products, rather, the environmental concerns play a positive role in forming consumer perception. Ferraz et al. (2017) demonstrated the positive relationship between the intention and behavior and found that more the increasing intention of consumers, greater the purchase behavior for green products. Lavanya (2019) found that most of the consumers were aware of green products and marketing practices increased the awareness levels of buyers in terms of green product features and availability.

Consumer perceptions of quality, environmental friendliness, safety and healthiness affect their intention and behaviour of food purchase (Suciu et al., 2019). Johansson et al. (2020) in their study of activation and deactivation of consumer motives through social and moral salience found that the consumers were motivated by both economic and normative motives, and they actively made trade-offs between these motives as the choice environment changed. The study further finds that the green consumption was positively influenced by social and moral salience but only when both salience conditions were present simultaneously. Sardar et al. (2021) investigate the influence of antecedents of eWOM (Quality, Consumer Attitude, Credibility, Usefulness, Needs, and Adoption) mechanism on eWOM adoption and purchase intention. The study also examines how eWOM adoption mediates the impact of antecedents of eWOM adoption. The study revealed that all the predictors of eWOM were found to be significant. It was also observed that the eWOM adoption mediated the impact of eWOM antecedents on consumer purchase intention.

Wang et al. (2022) investigated the mediating role of attitude toward the green brand and the moderating effect of green trust for the relationship of green brand positioning and green customer value with green purchase intention. The study found that green brand positioning and green customer value had noteworthy significant impact on green purchase intention and attitude toward green brand. Attitude toward green brand acted as partial mediator for the relationship of green brand positioning and green customer value with green purchase intention and the study concluded that the green trust was found to

be acting as moderator for the relationship of green brand positioning and green customer value with green purchase intention.

Niloy et al. (2023) explored the factors affecting the consumers' decision to purchase green products through the employment of the extended version of theory of planned behaviour that included attitude towards brand, subjective norms, perceived behavioural control, digital communication, and environmental concern. It was found that the purchase intention of green products was dependent on attitude towards brand, perceived behavioural control, environmental concern, and digital communication. It was found that digital communication had both active and passive influence on attitude towards brand and subjective norms, while the environmental concern was found to be having a passive influence on attitude towards brand and perceived behavioural control. The study concluded that the digital communication was the strongest predictor of purchase intention, whereas subjective norm was found to be statistically insignificant in generating purchase intention of green products.

Applying the extended theory of planned behaviour in study of purchase intention of vegan cosmetics, Ngoc et al. (2024) found that all the three constructs of the extended theory of planned behaviour, i.e. environmental concern, trust, and perceived knowledge, chosen for the study were found to be having a significant positive effect on the respondents' purchase intention for vegan cosmetics. Parveen and Chaudhary (2025) investigate the impact of social media eWOM on green purchase intention and find that the eWOM significantly and positively influences green purchase attitudes and subjective norms. Green purchase attitudes along with the eWOM adoption and subjective norms ultimately influences the green purchase intention significantly, the study concludes. These findings have a far reaching implications for the environmental concerns and industries that promote such causes.

Research Methodology

Objectives of the Study

Present study aims to know the consumer perception, attitude and purchase behaviour for organic food products in India. The specific objectives of this study are as follows:

- To study awareness level about organic food items among Indian consumers.
- To study the perception of consumers towards organic food products in India.
- To study the attitude of consumers for purchase of organic food products in India.
- To study the factors influencing the purchase behaviour of the consumers for organic food products in India.

Research Design

Descriptive research design has been used in the paper keeping in mind the nature of study and the specific objectives of the paper.

Data Collection

A survey questionnaire was made keeping in mind the objectives of study. The sampling technique used for survey was a non-probabilistic convenience sampling. Data was collected with the help of questionnaire. The questionnaire was of structured non- disguised type. The questions were of mixed type. The chosen area for data collection was Delhi. Despite our sincere efforts, we were able to collect 100 samples which were found suitable for data analysis.

Statistical Tools

The research tools used in the study are descriptive statistics like frequency, mean etc.. The software used for data analysis is SPSS version 25.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Table 1 below shows the demographic profile of the respondents. As depicted from Table 1 containing the demographic profile of the respondents, a good number of respondents is found among all the demographic and demographic category. Almost equal proportion of male and female respondents is found gender-wise. As far as the age group is concerned, highest group is of 21-25 age group followed by 15-20

age group. Majority of respondents is graduate and post-graduates constitute 27% which is almost equal those having educational attainment upto high school. As the focus target of this study were the youngsters, majority is of students as far as the present status (occupation) of respondents is concerned.

Demographic Group	Demographic Category	Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	53	53
	Female	47	47
Age (in years)	15-20	36	36
	21-25	51	51
	26-35	9	9
	36-40	4	4
Educational Qualification	High School	28	28
	Graduate	43	43
	Post-graduate	27	27
	Above Post-graduation	2	2
Present Status	Student	62	62
	Self-employed	18	18
	Salaried person	14	14
	Businessperson	6	6
Monthly family Income (In Indian rupees)	Below 25000	60	60
	25001-40000	29	29
	40001-70000	6	6
	Above 70000	5	5

Source: Authors' own

Table 2: Awareness regarding organic food

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Not At All	8	8.0	8.0	8.0
	Little Bit	62	62.0	62.0	70.0
	Fully Informed	30	30.0	30.0	100.0
	Total	100	100.0	100.0	

Among all the respondent, 8 respondents didn't have any information about organic food, 62 had little bit of information and 30 were fully aware of organic food.

Table 3: Availability Of Organic Food In Market

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Easily available	61	61.0	61.0	61.0
	Not easily available	39	39.0	39.0	100.0
	Total	100	100.0	100.0	

Among all the respondents 61 people found organic food easily in the market while remaining 39 people didn't find it easily in the market.

Table 4: Purchase Frequency of Organic Food

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Few Times A Week	15	15.0	15.0	15.0
	Once A Week	29	29.0	29.0	44.0
	Once A Month	33	33.0	33.0	77.0
	Few Times A Month	23	23.0	23.0	100.0
	Total	100	100.0	100.0	

Among all the respondent 33 of people purchase organic food once a month, while 29 of people purchases organic food once a week, 23 of people purchase few times a month, while remaining 15 purchase organic food several times a week. Same has been depicted in Table 4.

Table 5: Purchase Place of Organic Food

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Generic Supermarket/Retailer	32	32.0	32.0	32.0
	Organic Health Store	27	27.0	27.0	59.0
	Online	31	31.0	31.0	90.0
	Producer/Farmer	6	6.0	6.0	96.0
	Other	4	4.0	4.0	100.0
	Total	100	100.0	100.0	

As depicted from Table 5 above, 32% buy organic food from generic supermarket/retailer, 31% buy online, 27 respondents buy from organic health store, 6 from producer/farmer and remaining 4 from other sources.

Table 6: Income Effect on Purchase of Organic Food

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	68	68.0	68.0	68.0
	No	32	32.0	32.0	100.0
	Total	100	100.0	100.0	

A perusal of Table 6 shows that 68% of respondents feel that their income has an influence on purchase of organic product while the remaining 32% feel contrary.

Table 7: Reason for Purchase of Organic Food

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Ethical Reason	16	16.0	16.0	16.0
	Environmental Concern	26	26.0	26.0	42.0
	Taste/Preferences	18	18.0	18.0	60.0
	Quality of Product	35	35.0	35.0	95.0
	Peace of Mind	5	5.0	5.0	100.0
	Total	100	100.0	100.0	

Among all the respondents 35 people choose organic products because of the quality of the product, 26 people choose to buy organic products because they are concerned of the environment. 18 people choose to buy organic products because of taste/preferences, 16 people choose to buy because of ethical reasons and the remaining 5 people choose it because they believe in peace of mind.

Table 8: Is Organic Food Healthier?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	74	74.0	74.0	74.0
	No	3	3.0	3.0	77.0
	May be	23	23.0	23.0	100.0
	Total	100	100.0	100.0	

As far as the healthiness of organic food is concerned, 74% of respondents believe that organic products are healthier, 23% of respondents said that they were not sure whether organic food products were healthy and the remaining 3% find organic food products as unhealthy. The same has been shown in Table 8.

Table 9: What Would Help Increase Your Trust Towards Food Product Which Claims To Be Organic?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Celebrity Endorsement	14	14.0	14.0	14.0
	Scientific Evidence Packaging	18	18.0	18.0	32.0
	Sustainable Investment Made by Brand	32	32.0	32.0	64.0
	Certification by Government or Official Stamp	24	24.0	24.0	88.0
	Other	12	12.0	12.0	100.0
	Total	100	100.0	100.0	

Among all the respondents 32 people would increase their interest towards the products if the products have sustainable investment made by brand, 24 people would trust the products if they are certified by government or have official stamp, 18 would trust if the products are scientifically proven and packaged, 14 people trust product if it is endorsed by the celebrities and the remaining 12 will prefer some other reasons.

Table 10: Is There Enough Information Available About Organic Food In Market?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	26	26.0	26.0	26.0
	No	31	31.0	31.0	57.0
	Some	43	43.0	43.0	100.0
	Total	100	100.0	100.0	

Among all the respondents, 43% think that there is some information available about organic food, 31% respond that there is no information available in the market and the remaining 26% think that there is enough information available about the organic products.

Table 11: How Far Can You Travel To Shop For Organic Food?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Less Than 1 Km	38	38.0	38.0	38.0
	1-3 Km	34	34.0	34.0	72.0
	3-4 Km	16	16.0	16.0	88.0
	More Than 5 Km	12	12.0	12.0	100.0
	Total	100	100.0	100.0	

Among all the respondents 38 would travel less than 1 km to shop for organic food, 33 would travel within 1-3 km, 16 would travel within 3-4 km and 12 would travel more than 5km to shop for organic food. The same has been shown in Table 11.

Table 12: Does Organic Food Taste Better Than Non-Organic Food?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Agree	76	76.0	76.0	76.0
	Disagree	24	24.0	24.0	100.0
	Total	100	100.0	100.0	

Among all the respondents 76 would agree that organic food taste better than non-organic food and 24 would disagree that organic food taste better than non-organic food.

Table 13: What Will You Prefer In Day-To-Day Basis For Consumption?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Organic Food	78	78.0	78.0	78.0
	Non-organic food	22	22.0	22.0	100.0
	Total	100	100.0	100.0	

Another important question that was asked to the respondents was whether they would prefer organic food over non-organic food in day to day consumption. And to this question, a whopping 78% of respondents said that they would indeed prefer organic food over non-organic food in day to day consumption. This has been shown in Table 13.

Conclusion and Discussion

This research work was an attempt to gauge the Indian consumers' awareness of organic food, what causes them to buy these products, and how consumers of India perceive organic food/products. This was done keeping in mind the sustainability/environmental concern and how the consumers think of it. Though this study uses a small sample size yet it has revealed interesting insights on Indian consumers' perspective on organic products. Major findings of the study are summed up below.

- The main problem associated with organic food is its popularity or awareness amongst the Indian consumers. Also, these products are not easily available in the market. A very few of the respondents were familiar with the organic food. The main reason for lack of popularity or awareness of organic food amongst the Indian consumers may emanate from less promotions and high prices of these products.

- Certification of the organic food products and to prove the authenticity of their product and also to generate consumer confidence is a major concern for the producers of organic food. Consumer only opts for certified organic food when it comes to purchase of organic food. Educated people can better understand the importance of organic food, similarly with increase in income of consumers also shifts their interest towards organic food and this factor also influences better standard of life, thus leading to increase in demand for organic food products

- Product quality has been found as the major reason why the consumers buy organic food. Also, environmental concern acted as one of the strong reasons for consumers to buy the organic food. Similarly subjective norms are another factor that influence buying behaviour of consumer towards organic food.

- Income of the consumers also has a bearing on the purchase of organic products in India. Over 70% of respondents said that income does play an important role in purchase of organic products.

- Majority of the respondents in this study said that they find organic food taste better than non-organic food. It was also one of the main reasons why the consumers prefer organic food over non-organic food. An interesting finding of this study is that the consumers are willing to travel as far as over 5km to buy the organic food. This shows their taste/preferences and loyalty, too some extent, towards the organic food. This may also be an indication that the organic products have started to find a place in minds of the Indian consumers.

- As the majority of the Indian population is not aware of the organic products, an extensive efforts will be required to create awareness of these products. Also, the availability of the organic products in the market is one of the major issues with the organic products along with the high prices of organic products,

less receptivity among consumers due to authenticity issues. These problems will indeed require immediate redressal by the policy makers/practitioners in the field.

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