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From Farm to Philosophy: How Organic India Turned Sustainability Challenges into a Holistic Green Business Model

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Abstract:
Green food enterprises in India face multifaceted sustainability challenges including soil degradation, supply chain opacity, plastic packaging toxicity, smallholder marginalisation, water scarcity, and mounting greenwashing scrutiny. This case study examines how Organic India, one of India's most vertically integrated green food companies, has systematically identified and addressed these industry-wide problems through regenerative agriculture, Fairtrade-aligned farmer partnerships, digital traceability, and circular economy packaging innovations. Drawing on the company's impact reports, third-party certification disclosures, technology-partner case studies, and recent journalistic profiles, the study maps ten core sustainability challenges to Organic India's strategic responses and measurable outcomes. The analysis reveals that the company's problem-solution model anchored in ROC certification, TraceX digital traceability, Abaca-fibre tea bags, a LEED Platinum manufacturing facility, and the Paani Shakti water stewardship project positions it as an instructive case for sustainable business management. The paper identifies gaps in independent life-cycle assessments, rigorous impact quantification, and social outcome verification, and concludes with managerial, policy, and research recommendations to enhance transparency and catalyse wider adoption of regenerative green food practices in India.

Keywords: Green Food, Organic India, Regenerative Agriculture, Fairtrade, Digital Traceability, Sustainable Packaging, Sustainable Development Goals, Circular Economy

1. Introduction

The Indian organic food market, valued at US$ 2.07 billion in 2024, is projected to expand at a compound annual growth rate of 22.2% through 2035 (Nandi, 2025). Within this burgeoning landscape, green food companies confront a paradox: the very aspirations that differentiate them — ecological stewardship, social equity, and authentic transparency — are also their most demanding operational and reputational challenges. Soil degradation from decades of chemical-intensive farming, fragmented smallholder supply chains, rising consumer scepticism of greenwashing, microplastic contamination from conventional tea packaging, and inadequate industrial composting infrastructure collectively define the problem space that a credible green food enterprise must navigate.

Organic India, founded in 1997 in Lucknow by Bharat Mitra and Bhavani Lev, began with a singular mission to promote authentic organic, herbal, and Ayurvedic wellness. Starting with the cultivation of

Tulsi (Holy Basil), the company has evolved into a diversified portfolio spanning herbal teas, dietary supplements, Ayurveda-inspired formulations, and spices. Its philosophy — to be a Vehicle of Consciousness in the global market — is operationalised through certified regenerative farming, ethical sourcing, and packaging innovation. In January 2024, Tata Consumer Products acquired Organic India for Rs. 1,900 crore, validating the brand's strategic significance in the global wellness economy (Tandon and Suneera, 2024). This case study adopts a problem-solution analytical lens to examine how Organic India has responded to ten identifiable sustainability challenges, making it a replicable model for green food enterprises globally.

2. Research Problem and Objectives

2.1 Research Problem

Green food enterprises in India operate at the intersection of ecological ambition and market pragmatism. While the demand for organic and sustainable products is accelerating, companies face a cluster of unsolved challenges: (a) How can a firm credibly restore soil health at scale without compromising farm economics? (b) How can supply chain transparency be achieved across hundreds of smallholder farms? (c) How can packaging be decarbonised without sacrificing product protection or consumer convenience? (d) How can the social and economic benefits of organic farming reach women and marginalised farming communities? And (e) how can a company substantiate environmental claims against the persistent threat of greenwashing accusations? Organic India's trajectory offers a rich setting to examine these questions empirically, given its 25 years of documented practice, multiple third-party certifications, and publicly disclosed impact data.

2.2 Research Objectives

The study pursues the following objectives:

- To identify the key sustainability and operational challenges confronting green food enterprises in India.
- To analyse the strategic responses adopted by Organic India to address each identified challenge.
- To evaluate the measurable outcomes and remaining evidence gaps associated with those responses.
- To derive managerial, policy, and research recommendations applicable to the broader green food sector.

3. Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored in three complementary theoretical perspectives. First, the Resource-Based View (RBV) of the firm helps explain how Organic India's certifications, farmer networks, and proprietary traceability systems constitute rare, inimitable capabilities that generate competitive advantage. Second, Stakeholder Theory frames the company's simultaneous value creation for farmers, consumers, communities, and the natural environment. Third, the Circular Economy framework provides the conceptual lens for analysing packaging innovations, waste management, and water stewardship initiatives. Together, these frameworks reconceptualise sustainability as a source of strategic advantage rather than a limitation, aligning with the notion of Creating Shared Value (CSV) articulated by Porter and Kramer (2011)

4. Methodology

This study employs a single, revelatory case study design (Yin, 2018), which is particularly suitable for

examining a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context. The case was selected purposively on three criteria: (a) Organic India's status as a first-mover in multiple sustainability domains including Fairtrade-certified herbal supplements, LEED Platinum manufacturing, and ROC certification; (b) the availability of multi-year impact reports providing longitudinal data; and (c) its acquisition by Tata Consumer Products, which amplifies its strategic exemplarity.

Data triangulation was achieved through four source types: primary documentary sources including Organic India Impact Report 2022-23 and the TraceX Technology partner case study; secondary academic sources comprising peer-reviewed literature on regenerative agriculture, eco-labelling, Fairtrade, LCA, and circular economy; industry and government reports including APEDA/CRISIL organic market study (2024) and IPCA Annual Report (2024-25); and journalistic and press sources including Forbes profile (Marquis, 2025) and certification announcements. Data were analysed using a structured challenge-response-outcome matrix enabling systematic comparison of problem types, intervention strategies, and reported impact metrics.

5. Findings

5.1 Green Food Products: Context and Consumer Expectations

Green food products are products that are produced and packaged in ways that minimise environmental harm while promoting human health (Kumar and Ghodeswar, 2015). Consumers prioritize safety, taste, health, nutritional value, and the credibility of organic labels when making green food purchase decisions (Luthra and Deshwal, 2022). Eco-labels serve as strong signals of trust, with empirical evidence indicating significantly higher purchase intentions for labelled products compared to unlabelled organic alternatives (Jin et al., 2018). Yet traceability and certification complexity have become the foremost challenges in green marketing (Srivastava, 2025), thereby underscoring the necessity of credible third-party verification and enhanced digital supply chain transparency.

5.2 Challenge-Response-Outcome Matrix

Table 1 synthesises the ten core sustainability challenges identified in the case and Organic India's documented strategic responses alongside key outcome indicators.

Table 1: Challenge-Response-Outcome Matrix for Organic India

Challenge / Problem	Organic India's Strategic Response	Outcome / Key Indicator
1. Soil degradation from chemical farming	Regenerative agriculture: crop rotation, composting, green manuring, mulching, biological pest management	ROC® certified; reduced synthetic inputs; improved soil organic matter
2. Supply chain opacity and greenwashing risk	TraceX digital traceability platform; 10 third-party certifications	Farm geo-mapping; consumer scan access to provenance data; full audit trail
3. Smallholder exclusion and income insecurity	Direct sourcing from ~2,000 farmers; Fairtrade International standards; assured procurement	USD 2.3 million disbursed; 8,500 acres; 20,000 rural livelihoods supported
4. Microplastic contamination from tea	Abaca-plant cellulose fibre tea bags; 100% recycled paperboard	Zero microplastics; chemical-free; staple-free; compostable;

bags	outer boxes	sealant-free
5. Plastic waste in supplement packaging	Amber glass jars; PP-to-bio-based cap transition plan	Target: 2,800 lbs of virgin plastic eliminated annually
6. Water scarcity in farming regions	70% rainy-season farming without irrigation; Paani Shakti rainwater harvesting project	41,986 m3 storage capacity added; aquifer recharge in 120+ ponds
7. Industrial waste from manufacturing	IPCA partnership; source segregation; closed-loop water recycling; zero discharge system	83% of waste recycled; 96.7 metric tons diverted from landfill
8. High energy consumption in production	LEED Platinum facility design; solar energy integration	India's first LEED Platinum organic food factory; score 87 out of 110
9. Consumer trust deficit in organic claims	Sachin Tendulkar brand endorsement; multi-certification transparency; traceability access	Enhanced mainstream market reach and brand credibility
10. Limited R&D and product innovation pipeline	New herbal tea launches; Araku Instant Coffee from tribal regenerative farms	Tulsi Detox Kahwa, Moringa Hibiscus; Arabica coffee from Araku Valley

Source: Compiled from OrganicIndia Impact Report 2022-23; BusinessWire 2025; TraceXTech 2023; Newswire 2019.

5.3 Regenerative Agricultural Practices

Organic India's foundational challenge was reversing soil health degradation across farms in five Indian states. In response, the company implemented a comprehensive suite of regenerative agricultural practices, including crop rotation, composting, green manuring, mulching, and biological pest management. Collectively, these practices contribute to the restoration of soil organic matter, improved nutrient cycling, and the promotion of on-farm biodiversity (Rempelos et al., 2023). Approximately 70% of crops are cultivated during the rainy season without the need for supplemental irrigation, reflecting a deliberately water-efficient farming design (Organic India Impact Report, 2022–23).

These interventions culminated in the attainment of the Regenerative Organic Certified (ROC) label across 11 SKUs of teas and supplements, introduced at Expo West 2025 (BusinessWire, 2025). Furthermore, the introduction of Araku Instant Coffee produced from Arabica beans cultivated by tribal farmers in the Araku Valley using regenerative methods illustrates the company's strategic extension of these principles into new product categories (MI-Newsdesk, 2025).

5.4 Certification Architecture and Trust Building

Organic India addresses supply chain opacity through a multi-layered certification architecture that encompasses organic standards, food safety, quality management, and ethical sourcing across its global operations. Table 2 outlines the ten certifications maintained by the company.

Table 2: Organic India's Key Organic and Quality Certifications

Certification / Standard	Type	Scope
1) USDA Organic	Organic – USA	Processing facility and herbal exports to the U.S.

2) EU Organic	Organic – Europe	Products sold in EU markets
3) NPOP	National Organic – India	Raw materials and farms audited under NPOP standards
4) ROC® (Regenerative Organic Certified)	Regenerative & Organic	Multiple teas and herbs; 11 SKUs across supplements and teas
5) FSSC 22000	Global Food Safety	Manufacturing facility food safety systems
6) GMP	Quality and Safety	GMP-compliant manufacturing processes
7) HACCP	Hazard Analysis	Facility HACCP-based safety controls
8) ISO-based Quality Certification	Quality Management	Select processes certified under ISO norms
9) Kosher Certification	Religious-dietary	Specific export herbal products
10) Traceability Certificates for Raw Materials	Internal Verification	Full traceability and organic proof required per herb/raw material

Source: OrganicIndia Impact Report 2022-23; OrganicIndia CSR/Quality Page.

To complement its certification framework, Organic India partnered with TraceX to implement end-to-end digital traceability across its supply chain. The platform geo-maps farms, digitises farmer profiles, monitors the adoption of regenerative practices, streamlines procurement processes, and maintains quality certification records, thereby enabling consumers to access verifiable provenance data through product-level scans (TraceXTech, 2023). The Technological–Organizational–Environmental (TOE) framework indicates that the successful adoption of such agri-tech solutions depends on factors such as farmer expertise, resource availability, and the presence of supportive institutional networks (Abdul Wahab et al., 2024). Organic India addresses these conditions through structured training programmes that equip farm managers with the capability to interpret and effectively utilize digital data in decision-making processes.

5.5 Direct Sourcing Model and Farmer Welfare

Since inception, Organic India's farmer network has grown from a single partner in 1999 to nearly 2,000 direct farmer partners across 121 villages in five states, covering approximately 8,500 acres of certified organic farmland and supporting an estimated 20,000 rural livelihoods (OrganicIndia Impact Report, 2022-23). In 2022-23, the company sourced 3,435 metric tons of raw materials directly and disbursed over USD 2.3 million to farmers. Organic India introduced the world's first Fairtrade-certified herbal supplements in 2018 (AmericaFairtrade, 2018), integrating Fairtrade International standards with its organic framework to guarantee fair prices, safe working conditions, and transparent supply chain practices. The company received the Outstanding Sustainable Farmer Income Enhancement Award at the FICCI Agri Summit 2021, reflecting government-level recognition of these contributions (Murdeshwar, 2021).

5.6 Packaging Innovation: Circularity over Compliance

Research by Hernandez et al. (2019) reveals that a single conventional tea bag can release nearly 12 billion micro plastic particles, thereby reframing packaging as a significant public health concern. Complementing this, a major retailer survey reports that 97% of respondents consider packaging a

critical factor in organic purchase decisions (APEDA and CRISIL, 2024). Table 3 presents Organic India's packaging sustainability performance across product categories.

Table 3: Packaging Sustainability Assessment by Product Category

Product Category	Recyclable or Biodegradable (%)	Strategic Response
Boxed Tea	82%	Strong sustainable baseline; target 100%
Supplement Bottles	99%	Near-complete; phasing out PP caps for bio-based alternatives
Psyllium Canisters	0%	5-year transition plan to plant/bio-based materials underway

Source: OrganicIndia Impact Report 2022-23.

For its tea bags, the company utilizes Abaca plant–based cellulose fibre that is chemical-free, staple-free, sealant-free, compostable, and free from microplastics. Outer tea boxes use 100% recycled paperboard with a minimum of 30% post-consumer content. In the supplements category, products are packaged in light-protective amber glass jars. A phased, five-year transition from polypropylene caps to bio-based alternatives is underway, with the objective of eliminating approximately 2,800 pounds of virgin plastic annually.

The company also acknowledged a critical sustainability gap in its psyllium packaging, which previously had 0% recyclability. This limitation, highlighted in its impact report, prompted a redesign initiative. The 2023 transition to a paperboard canister not only enhances environmental performance but also improves consumer usability (Mohan, 2023)

5.7 Waste, Water, and Energy: Closed-Loop Manufacturing

In partnership with IPCA, Organic India recycled or reused 83% of its total waste amounting to approximately 96.7 metric tons during 2022–23, thereby significantly reducing landfill diversion (Organic India Impact Report, 2022–23). The company has also implemented a zero-discharge water management system that integrates closed-loop recycling, sewage treatment, reverse osmosis (RO) reject-water recovery, and the reuse of treated wastewater for irrigation purposes.

Further strengthening its water stewardship efforts, the *Paani Shakti* rainwater harvesting initiative led to the enhancement of 120 ponds and one dam in 2022, creating an additional storage capacity of 41,986 cubic metres and delivering direct benefits to surrounding farming communities.

Notably, the company's manufacturing facility achieved distinction as India's first LEED Platinum-certified organic food factory, securing a score of 87 out of 110. This certification provides internationally recognized third-party validation of its environmental performance and sustainability standards (Newswire, 2019).

5.8 Contribution to Sustainable Development Goals

Organic India maps its activities to 12 of the 17 United Nations SDGs. Table 4 presents the ten most substantiated SDG alignments with their corresponding company initiatives.

Table 4: Organic India's SDG Alignment

SDG No.	Goal	Organic India Initiative
SDG 1	No Poverty	Fair pricing, assured procurement, and long-term farmer partnerships
SDG 2	Zero Hunger	Organic farming promotion; rural food security and nutrition support
SDG 3	Good Health and Well-Being	Herbal wellness products; community health camps; preventive healthcare
SDG 5	Gender Equality	Women employment in processing; rural women self-help group training
SDG 6	Clean Water and Sanitation	Paani Shakti rainwater harvesting; RO plants; closed-loop water recycling
SDG 7	Affordable and Clean Energy	Solar energy at facilities; energy-efficient LEED Platinum manufacturing
SDG 8	Decent Work and Economic Growth	Rural job creation; ethical supply chain; safe working environments
SDG 12	Responsible Consumption	Regenerative farming; waste reduction; recyclable and compostable packaging
SDG 13	Climate Action	Soil-carbon regeneration; reduction in chemical inputs; climate-positive farming
SDG 15	Life on Land	Biodiversity preservation; organic cultivation; forest-friendly sourcing
SDG 17	Partnerships for the Goals	Collaboration with NGOs, farmer organisations, and global certification bodies

Source: OrganicIndia Impact Report 2022-23; United Nations SDG Portal.

6. Discussion

6.1 A Problem-Solution Business Model for Green Food

The findings illustrate that Organic India's competitive lies not merely in its products, but in a deeply embedded, system-wide approach to solving interconnected challenges. Rather than treating sustainability as an isolated attribute, the company translates each environmental and social concern into a strategic initiative that generates value for multiple stakeholders—farmers, consumers, the environment, and the firm itself. This is consistent with Porter and Kramer's (2011) Creating Shared Value framework, which posits that sustainable competitive advantage arises when companies address societal problems as market opportunities. The ROC certification solves four problems simultaneously: it restores soil health, commands premium market pricing, verifies ethical labour practices, and provides a credible internationally recognised trust signal. Similarly, the partnership with TraceX reconfigures the challenge of supply chain opacity into an opportunity for transparency, allowing the company to present a clear, verifiable provenance narrative that is directly accessible to consumers.

6.2 Fairtrade as a Structural Response to Smallholder Vulnerability

Organic India's introduction of the world's first Fairtrade-certified herbal supplements reflects a structural, market-based response to farmer marginalization rather than a purely philanthropic

intervention. By embedding Fairtrade standards within its sourcing contracts, the company institutionalizes mechanisms such as premium pricing, assured procurement, and community development premiums, thereby reducing farmers' exposure to market volatility and intermediary exploitation. This contrasts with voluntary corporate social responsibility initiatives that remain discretionary and reversible. Recognition through the FICCI award further indicates that the model has achieved sufficient scale and credibility to attract policy-level attention, positioning it as a potentially replicable framework for inclusive and sustainable agribusiness development.

6.3 Packaging as a Public Health and Circular Economy Issue

The microplastic evidence from Hernandez et al. (2019) reframes the packaging challenge from an environmental externality to a proximate consumer health risk, strengthening the business case for plastic-free tea packaging. Organic India's Abaca-fibre tea bag is positioned at the convergence of food safety, environmental stewardship, and regulatory risk mitigation. However, as highlighted by Gomez-Garcia et al. (2023), compostable materials in India often fail to reach appropriate industrial composting facilities, thereby constraining their actual environmental impact. This divergence between design intent and end-of-life outcomes underscores a critical implementation gap. Addressing this gap requires a more integrated approach, including company-led composting pilot initiatives and targeted consumer education campaigns, alongside continued advancements in material innovation.

6.4 Digital Traceability as Governance Infrastructure

The TraceX partnership illustrates how digital agri-tech platforms can function as governance infrastructure rather than merely operational tools. By geo-mapping farms, digitising farmer profiles, and providing consumer-accessible provenance data, the system creates a decentralised accountability mechanism that supplements the auditing capacity of traditional certification bodies. This perspective aligns with the Technological–Organisational–Environmental (TOE) framework, which emphasizes the role of organizational capabilities and environmental context in shaping effective agri-tech adoption (Abdul Wahab et al., 2024). In this case, digital traceability is not merely a tool for monitoring, but a mechanism for enhancing transparency, trust, and compliance across the supply chain. Furthermore, the potential integration of TraceX-generated data with national certification registries presents a scalable pathway for strengthening supply chain governance within the broader Indian organic sector.

6.5 Remaining Evidence Gaps

Despite Organic India's documented achievements, several material evidence gaps remain that warrant systematic investigation:

- Environmental claims relating to carbon sequestration and biodiversity enhancement lack validation through independent life cycle assessments.
- The economic impact on farmer incomes is largely supported by anecdotal evidence and requires quasi-experimental methods to establish causal relationships.
- Social outcome indicators such as health, education, and female labour participation remain unstandardized and are not verified by third-party assessments.
- Transparency regarding long-term contract fairness and comparative market pricing for farmer partners is limited and not publicly disclosed.
- The end-of-life performance of packaging innovations has not been empirically validated through structured composting pilot programmes.
- Consumer purchase behaviour specific to Organic India products has not been rigorously examined using field experiments or willingness-to-pay analyses.

- Awards and recognitions, while serving as credible signals of performance, do not substitute for peer-reviewed and quantitatively robust impact evaluation.

7. Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study is subject to several limitations. It relies predominantly on company-disclosed data which, despite triangulation with external sources, may be influenced by reporting selection bias. The use of a single case study design further constrains generalisability, rendering the findings analytically transferable but not statistically representative. In addition, the absence of primary fieldwork—including farmer interviews and on-site facility assessments—limits the depth of social and environmental impact evaluation. The temporal scope of the analysis is largely synchronic, with data concentrated in the 2022–23 period, thereby restricting the ability to assess long-term trajectories and the durability of observed outcomes.

Future research should adopt more rigorous and multi-method approaches to address these gaps. Product-level life cycle assessments of key offerings such as Tulsi tea, psyllium products, and Araku coffee would enable precise identification of environmental hotspots across production, packaging, transportation, and disposal stages. Quasi-experimental or panel study designs involving Organic India's partner farmers and matched control groups would facilitate causal evaluation of income effects and female labour participation linked to premium pricing and Fairtrade standards. Field experiments in urban retail contexts could be employed to measure consumer willingness to pay under varying levels of traceability and certification disclosure. At the same time, city-level composting pilot programmes, implemented in collaboration with municipal bodies, would provide empirical validation of the real-world biodegradability of Abaca-fibre packaging. Finally, extending the analytical framework to comparative case studies involving peer firms such as 24 Mantra Organic and Organic Tattva would help identify sector-wide patterns alongside firm-specific innovations.

8. Policy and Managerial Recommendations

Companies should prioritize publishing independent life cycle assessments for core products, with clear disclosure of assumptions and methodologies to identify environmental hotspots (Doublet and Jungbluth, 2010). Farmer impact reporting should be standardized using indicators such as household income, asset ownership, food security, and gender-disaggregated labour outcomes, supported by independent verification. Circular packaging efforts must extend beyond design to implementation through city-level pilot projects that integrate compostable materials with effective collection systems and consumer awareness.

Policymakers should facilitate these efforts by providing methodological guidance, financial incentives, and open-access registries for life cycle assessment results. Certification and traceability systems require strengthening to ensure transparent public access to audit outcomes, while integration of digital platforms like TraceX with national registries can enhance supply chain governance. The development of district-level industrial composting infrastructure remains essential to ensure the effective end-of-life processing of compostable packaging.

Future research should focus on context-specific life cycle assessments of herbal and tea products in India, covering production through disposal stages (Soheili-Fard et al., 2018). Longitudinal and quasi-experimental designs are needed to assess the sustained impact of farmer partnerships on income, labour, and social outcomes. Additionally, field-based consumer studies in urban markets should examine

willingness to pay and the influence of traceability and certification disclosures on purchasing behaviour (Ribeiro, 2023).

9. Conclusion

This study clearly demonstrates that Organic India's competitive advantage is rooted in its ability to systematically convert sustainability challenges into structured and scalable business solutions. Soil degradation is addressed through regenerative agriculture and ROC certification; supply chain opacity is transformed into TraceX-enabled digital traceability; smallholder vulnerability is mitigated through Fairtrade integration and assured procurement; microplastic risks in tea packaging are countered through Abaca-fibre innovation; and industrial waste is reconfigured into resource efficiency through LEED Platinum-certified, closed-loop manufacturing. These interventions collectively reflect a coherent strategic architecture in which environmental, social, and economic objectives are closely aligned.

The study is highly significant as it provides a comprehensive and practical understanding of how sustainability can be operationalized as a core business strategy rather than treated as a peripheral concern. It offers valuable insights for companies, policymakers, and researchers by demonstrating that ecological stewardship, social equity, and economic performance can function as mutually reinforcing pillars. The acquisition by Tata Consumer Products at approximately ₹1,900 crore further validates the commercial viability of such values-driven models. At the same time, the study emphasizes the importance of strengthening empirical validation through advanced methodologies such as life cycle assessments, quasi-experimental income studies, and packaging end-of-life evaluations.

Overall, Organic India emerges as a powerful and forward-looking model of sustainable enterprise. The study makes a meaningful contribution to academic literature and managerial practice by presenting a replicable framework that integrates innovation, certification, and inclusive farmer partnerships. It stands as an important and beneficial reference for organizations seeking to build credible, scalable, and impact-driven sustainability strategies in India's evolving green food sector.

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