

# The future of organic farming

Delowar Jahan talks to Saudia Afrin of The Daily Star.



Delowar Jahan is a farmer and coordinator of Prakritik Krishi.

Can you share your journey with Prakritik Krishi, which has been a remarkable and transformative experience?

Prakritik Krishi, an agricultural approach rooted in generational wisdom and hands-on experience, was founded in 2012 by a group of young visionaries responding to the harmful agricultural practices affecting both the environment and people's lives.

I come from a sharecropping family, a historically subaltern community that has endured generations of exploitation. My ancestors, living in villages along the southern Padma River, rebelled against indigo planters who forced them into indigo cultivation. In the ensuing conflict, they killed an indigo planter and were forced to flee their village.

I first heard this story in eighth grade while witnessing the struggles of farmers in the 1990s—rising production costs, dependence on chemical fertilisers, small loans to stay afloat, and unfair market prices. These hardships deeply shaped me, fuelling my resolve to break the cycle of exploitation so that future generations of farmers would not endure the same fate.

During this time, my path diverged from my friends. Instead of playing, I devoted

myself to understanding the struggles of marginalised communities—particularly fishing and farming communities—while exploring historical sites, especially nilkuthis, which bore the imprints of past exploitation.

I realised I needed a profession that would allow me to connect deeply with people. With this in mind, I enrolled in the Mass Communication and Journalism Department at Chittagong University. During my early days there, I discovered that many of my rural peers had similar experiences—their families, too, were struggling. We often asked ourselves: how much longer will this continue? We began to organise, recognising the urgent need to understand these issues. Our families needed protection, and we had to find a way forward.

At the same time, I grew increasingly dissatisfied with the existing curriculum, believing it lacked vocational and practical relevance. This frustration led to disagreements with my teachers. However, with the support of well-wishers—mainly professors and peers—I focused on fostering alternative learning spaces.

We began organising parallel classes with like-minded individuals and initiated study circles to explore peasant



PHOTO: ZAHANGIR SHAH

Delowar Jahan provides university students from Japan with insight into sustainable agriculture.

uprisings and the struggles of the farming community. After graduating, I briefly worked in agro and environmental journalism from 2009 to 2011 in Dhaka, aiming to understand agricultural crises on national and global levels. However, we soon wondered whether our discussions were truly making an impact. In 2012, we chose to take action—what we advocated needed to be put into practice.

By then, we had acquired valuable experience, knowledge, and a clearer vision for addressing the agricultural crisis. We urged farmers: “Stop using chemical fertilisers! Stop pesticides! Reject company dependencies! Do your own farming!” But their lands were already degraded by chemicals, and the ecology was damaged. The question was—how could they transition? We decided to lead by example.

In 2013, we secured 36 shottangsho of land in Amtali village, Manikganj, and started our first chemical-free cultivation. Engaging with farmers,

we developed an approach we called “Subaltern Communication Research”—understanding marginalised communities’ challenges and co-creating solutions. In farmer meetings, the consensus was clear: natural farming was the only way to break free from corporate control. This period marked the birth of the name ‘Prakritik Krishi.’

Between 2013 and 2017, we worked diligently to refine our method—restoring soil fertility, reviving biodiversity, and creating a sustainable farming ecosystem. Initially self-funded, we faced setbacks, including losing our land to river erosion in 2013. In 2014, an NGO provided land in Jhenidah to pilot organic farming. We sent one of our entrepreneurs to start farming, organise farmers, and hold regular baithaks (meetings). However, farmers remained hesitant—organic farming lacked structured production, distribution, and marketing systems to compete with chemical farming.

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- » Our ultimate vision is to create an open agricultural university, deeply embedded in farming communities and guided by organic principles, where both teachers and students are farmers.
- » The government allocates Tk 30-40 crore annually in subsidies for chemical fertilisers, pesticides, and hormones, while organic farming receives no support, leading to an uneven playing field.
- » We also conduct one-day training for farmers on organic farming, covering soil quality, seasonal crops, seed varieties, eco-friendly lifestyles, and hands-on techniques.
- » The biggest challenge in natural farming is psychological resistance. Farmers shifting to organic methods often face neglect, ridicule, and even abuse, with some labelled crazy for rejecting chemical fertilisers.
- » Market management is another challenge, as the system favours chemical farming. University curricula, the Department of Agricultural Extension, and dealers all promote chemical fertilisers over organic methods.

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