

A crisis, an opportunity

The 50th year of the Insecticides Act has coincided with distressing news from the countryside. In Yavatmal district of Maharashtra, more than 30 farmers and farm labourers have died due to pesticide poisoning. In 2013, in Bihar, more than 20 school children lost their lives after consuming mid-day meal contaminated with a highly toxic pesticide.

In India, the consumption of pesticides has shown an upward trend from approximately 14,000 metric tonnes in 1965 to close to 56,000 metric tonnes in 2014-15. Pesticides are toxic chemicals. Monocrotophos, the pesticide said to be responsible for deaths in both Bihar and Yavatmal, is classified by the WHO as highly hazardous. In response to the deaths caused due to the consumption of pesticide-contaminated imported wheat, the Government of India enacted the Insecticides Act, 1968. The Act regulates the import, manufacture, sale, transport and distribution and use of pesticides.

There might be multiple reasons at play in the Yavatmal tragedy. One is the lack of awareness among the farmers about the hazardous nature of the pesticide. As per the Insecticides Rules of 1971, the pesticide containers should carry a specific colour mark which is associated with the toxic nature of the pesticide. But as an ongoing survey in Bhandara district in Maharashtra shows, farmers are often oblivious of the implication of the colour code. They also do not read and follow the instructions on the label or the leaflet provided with the container.

For the selection and application of pesticides, farmers rely heavily on the dealer for advice. The advice provided by the dealers rarely focuses on safety. Regulations regarding basic educational qualifications of pesticide dealers were introduced as late as 2015. Last year, the Ministry of Agriculture exempted existing licencees who are more than 45 years old and who have pesticide dealership experience of more than 10 years. This change defeats the purpose of the regulations.

The advice provided by the dealers on the selection of pesticides is driven by their economic interest rather than knowledge of pest control. Non-genuine pesticides flood the market. A recent report of FICCI claims that the non-genuine sales account for approximately 30 per cent of the volume of the domestic pesticide industry.

The framework of pesticide risk regulation as laid down by the 1968 Act has failed to achieve its objectives. The 29th report of the Standing Committee of Agriculture, published in 2016, has recommended the formation of a Pesticide Development and Regulation Authority. The government has not taken any decision on this recommendation. The Pesticide Management Bill, 2008, is pending in Parliament. However, states will have to engage with farmers and assist them in the selection of pesticides, and create awareness about the hazards.

One way to change the status quo is to initiate a prescription-based system through the use of mobile technology. Existing e-pest surveillance programmes like Crop Pest Surveillance and Advisory Project, initiated by the Maharashtra government in 2008, that are designed to undertake real-time monitoring of pests and to provide pest control advice to the farmers by SMS, could be reformed into a multi-purpose Pesticide Prescription and Transaction System (PPTS).

The mobile number of the farmer will be registered with the proposed PPTS. The prescription in the form of a unique reference number (URN) will be sent to the farmer by SMS. The URN will also serve as the prescription tracking number. The farmer will have to share the URN with the dealer who will validate the URN with the PPTS. This will decode the URN and a system-generated one-time transaction password (OTP) along with the decoded prescription will be sent to the farmer's registered mobile number. The dealer will have to feed the OTP in the system to

complete documentation of the transaction. The system will then generate a receipt along with details of prescription including the URN.

For each transaction, the PPTS will also provide information about hazards and suggest safety measures to the farmer. Thus, the PPTS will be a robust data platform that will address the lack of awareness and also end the dependence of farmers on dealers as pesticide advisers. The inbuilt traceability feature will also help to limit the selling of illegal and non-genuine pesticides.

Do the central and state governments have the will to convert the tragedy like Yavatmal into an opportunity to reform the system?

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