

Unsafe on the farm

Between July and October last year, more than 40 farmers died in Maharashtra's Vidarbha region in what were feared to be cases of pesticide poisoning — the pestilence was at its worst in Yavatmal district. A report of a special investigation team (SIT) into the deaths has confirmed these fears and raised troubling questions on farm safety. The report that was submitted to the Nagpur Bench of the Bombay High Court on Tuesday blames several departments of the Maharashtra government for failing to discharge their duties under the Insecticides Act, 1968. It notes that agriculture department officials did not take action against outfits that sold "non-recommended pesticides". It also points out that the health department does not have a machinery "for compilation of reports exclusively of pesticide-affected patients".

But the SIT report itself is problematic on more than one count. It blames the affected agriculturists for not following safety measures while spraying pesticides and recommends that farm labourers obtain "fitness certificates" from government health centres before using pesticides. The report recommends strict action against those who fail to observe the "stipulated precautionary" steps. There is no denying the lacunae in farm safety. But putting the onus of their health on the agriculturists would only result in their harassment, especially when it's now well-known that a majority of farmers lack awareness about the correct use of pesticides.

A National Human Rights Commission report that probed the Vidarbha farmers' deaths in October noted that most agriculturists depend on government agencies for information on the safe use of farm inputs. But as the SIT report notes, the agriculture department in Maharashtra is seriously short-staffed — only six of the 16 tehsil agricultural posts in Yavatmal have been filled. With the local agriculture officer most often not at hand, the pesticide dealer becomes the unofficial authority recommending pesticides to farmers — there's no gainsaying that these dealers are guided more by their economic interests than farmers' safety.

The Insecticides Act does hold manufacturers responsible for pesticide-related accidents such as those in Vidarbha. But the law is riddled with anomalies that make its implementation nearly impossible. The larger companies outsource production to smaller outfits who have to declare a "responsible person" to be held accountable for violations. But this person is a shadowy figure, most often a lowly-paid employee, who cannot be traced in times of violations. Since last year, the Union cabinet has been working on a Pesticides Management Bill. The farm safety issues that have come to light in the wake of the deaths of Vidarbha should inform this exercise.

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