

We need far more stringent laws to save farmers and food items from pesticide toxicity

A special investigation team, set up by the Maharashtra government to probe the deaths of 40 farmers and farm labourers in Amravati and Yavatmal districts last year from pesticide poisoning, has blamed the administrative machinery as well as the victims for failing to follow safety protocols while handling such toxic substances. To prevent such incidents from happening again, the panel has recommended measures, including a ban on monocrotophos — a widely used insecticide — and unregistered plant growth regulators, besides dedicated quality control staff to check pesticide quality, intensive care units in district and rural hospitals, and stringent IPC sections against farm owners and labourers not adhering to stipulations.

In a country in which agricultural infrastructure is in a flux (district extension centres that are responsible for taking scientific knowledge to the farms for better yield and productivity are in dire straits) and the “link between science and agriculture has snapped,” as M S Swaminathan said recently, these proposals seems too ambitious. Instead of putting the onus on farmers, as the report seems to have done, the role and responsibility of the manufacturers of these pesticides must be scrutinised first. In fact, the Insecticide Act says that “manufacturers and distributors of insecticides and operators shall arrange for suitable training in observing safety precautions and handling safety equipment provided to them.”

Moreover, two of the pesticides blamed for these deaths—monocrotophos and oxydemetonmethyl — are classified as Class I pesticides by the World Health Organization because of their acute toxicity. They are banned in several countries, including the EU. However, they are widely used in India. A CSE report says: “As per the data available with the Directorate of Plant Protection, Quarantine and Storage, a body under the Union Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare, Class I insecticides (pesticides) accounted for close to 30 per cent of India’s total consumption of insecticides (pesticides) by weight in 2015-16. Every year, there are about 10,000 reported cases of pesticide poisoning in India.

India needs a new pesticides management law to address issues related to the unsafe use of pesticides. It must also ensure strong enforcement to address farmers on how to avoid acute toxicity and prevent chronic toxicity due to pesticide residues in food items.

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