

# Poisoning cases mar India's bid to be a global pesticides hub

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Special interest groups in India are now clamouring for legislation to respond to the growing number of pesticide poisonings. Credit: Zefe Wu/Pixabay

India is bidding to boost the manufacture, use and export of pesticides. However, it must also deal with the grim fact that the annual average of fatal pesticide poisonings in the country is no fewer than 30,000 and could see an increase if the government pushes through with the plan without tighter regulation.

The pesticide industry's new push can be seen in a document, released last year by the influential Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI), which talks about the "huge unrealized potential for growth" of the agrochemical industry and calls for "adequate support via [government policies](#)."

The FICCI report refers to recent "investments, mergers and acquisitions" that have been helping Indian firms "reduce R&D costs and development time" to become internationally competitive. It says that while 50 percent of production is already being exported, there is a "potential for further increase in exports."

According to FICCI projections, India's pesticides industry will be producing close to 1.5 million tonnes annually by 2022 given that the country has "capability in low-cost manufacturing, availability of technically trained manpower, better price realization globally and strong presence in generic pesticide manufacturing."

"We are aware of the plan to liberalize pesticide manufacture with the aim of making India a hub for high-end technical pesticides meant for export," says Narasimha Reddy, director of the non-profit Pesticide Action Network (PAN) India. "But, we feel that first priority in any legislation should be given to dealing with the unacceptably large number of pesticide poisonings, whether accidental or suicidal."

The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) of the police department recorded 133,623 suicides in 2015, of which 23,930 were committed by swallowing pesticides. In that year, there were also 7,000 deaths from accidental pesticide poisonings.

With an upward trend in farmers' suicides proving embarrassing for the government, the NCRB stopped releasing details of methods used by farmers to commit suicide after 2015. But NCRB records for

1995—2015 indicate that a total of 441,918 pesticide suicides were recorded in India over those two decades—an annual average of 22,095.

Chandra Bhushan, deputy director-general of the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE), a leading Delhi-based non-profit, blames lax regulation by the central ministry of agriculture and the provincial agricultural departments for the 10,000-odd cases of accidental pesticide poisoning that are reported yearly on average. "Pesticide-related deaths and injuries can certainly be avoided by better regulation and enforcement," he says.

## **New pesticides bill**

Tighter regulation is on its way through the Pesticides Management Bill 2020 that seeks to replace the Insecticides Act of 1968 which is obsolete and lacks the teeth to deal with gross misuse of pesticides. The bill is due to be tabled in Parliament during the 2 March-3 April second leg of the current budget session.

"The new draft bill is aimed at protecting the interests of the farmers so that they are assured safe and effective pesticides," environment and information minister Prakash Javadekar explained.

According to Javadekar, the bill, details of which cannot be disclosed until actually tabled in parliament, provides for compensations to farmers—to be funded with penalties levied on manufacturers and dealers—in the event that pesticides sold to them are of low quality and fail to protect crops.

An official in the agricultural ministry, who cannot be named under standard briefing rules, said the government intends to regulate, through the bill, all aspects of pesticide manufacture and sale, such as pricing, marketing, labeling, storage and disposal of pesticides.

Nevertheless, there are concerns that the bill, which is largely driven by pesticide manufacturers and exporters, may end up serving the interests of big business rather than that of India's farmers who form 65 percent of the country's 1.2 billion people and are distressed enough to commit suicide in droves.

Of the 318 pesticides registered for use in India, 18 are classified as extremely or highly hazardous (Class 1A and 1B by WHO classification). Extremely hazardous pesticides in the list include bromadiolone, captafol, dichlorfos, phorate and phosphamidon.

Also, 104 pesticides banned in two or more countries, have continued to be used in India with disastrous consequences for human health and environment. In 2015, the government set up a committee led by Anupam Verma, a leading agricultural scientist, to review 66 of the pesticides in the hazardous category.

Although the Verma committee recommended a ban on 13 pesticides, the phasing out of six by 2020 and review of 27, the agricultural ministry prohibited only 10 pesticides, phased out six and restricted two others.

The inadequacy of the Verma committee's recommendations and subsequent bans became apparent in October 2018 when 40 farmers died and 800 were hospitalized in Maharashtra state due to alleged poisoning with monochrotophos, a pesticide banned in more than 60 countries. Calls by WHO to ban monochrotophos in India, because of its risks, have gone unheeded. Monochrotophos, which falls in WHO's 1B category, continues to be manufactured, used and exported.

As a result of the Verma committee's recommendations, the agricultural ministry started a program of monitoring agriculture commodities and analyzing them for the presence of pesticide residues. The ministry also instituted "Integrated Pest Management Centres" tasked with sensitizing

farmers to safe and judicious use of pesticides and to the use of biopesticides and alternative plant protection methods.

"Such measures can make a difference if fully implemented. But the fact is that the government's agricultural extension program is grossly understaffed and has all but collapsed," says Reddy. "The result is that poorly trained traders, interested only in chalking up sales, push dangerous chemicals on to ignorant farmers who resort to usage and dosage practices that are dangerous for humans, livestock and wildlife."

In theory, says Reddy, it is the job of the Central Insecticide Board and Registration Committee and the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India to prescribe and ensure application of correct dosages of approved pesticides for each crop. "That rarely happens for lack of staff and funds."

The impact of pesticide misuse is particularly severe in the resource-poor rural areas where farm workers fall sick or die only because they are not provided with protective gear for use while spraying toxic pesticides or cannot access timely and competent medical treatment.

## **Second biggest pesticides user**

Of concern is evidence that far more pesticides are being used in India than officially recorded. Presentations made in 2016 to the parliamentary standing committee on agriculture by a government official of the department of chemicals and petrochemicals estimated the figure to be in the region of 1.2 billion tonnes annually.

That would make India the biggest user of pesticides in the world after China, which consumes 1.8 billion tonnes annually and far ahead of the US at third spot with 386 million tonnes.

According to the official's submissions, there are complaints from the Indian pesticides industry that their sales are being hurt by multinational companies bringing in formulations that are then used to manufacture final products in India and pushed into the market. "Therefore, the usage is large compared to what it should be," the official told the parliamentary committee.

In its document, FICCI has demanded stringent action by government against companies failing to share import-export data as per norms set by the Central Insecticide Board and Registration Committee and tightening of the review process on imports of agro-chemicals, especially from China.

ASHA (acronym for Alliance for Sustainable and Holistic Agriculture), a large, volunteer-driven network of organizations and individuals, has demanded that the new legislation look beyond regulation as a clearing house or facilitator of big business and focus on the risks to human beings and to biosafety.

Kavitha Kuruganti, national convenor of ASHA, says the new bill should aim to regulate the entire product life-cycle with liability fixed on manufacturers. "Registration of a pesticide should be based on actual need and should in no case be granted to products that have been banned or been severely restricted in two or more countries," she said.

"ASHA would like to see in place a proper data system to record all poisonings and a redressal mechanism for individuals and communities affected by pesticides that is funded by a cess levied on profits made by the pesticides industry on local sales and exports," Kuruganti said.

Devinder Sharma, founder-member of Kisan Ekta (Farmers' Unity), a leading coalition of farmers' organizations, says the new legislation is an opportunity to fix liability on pesticide manufacturers. "India's

legislators should take a cue from the numerous lawsuits brought up against multinational players like Bayer-Monsanto and BASF for damage caused to the environment, unintended crops and human health."

On 15 February, a U.S. court in Missouri ordered German agrochemical giants Bayer and BASF to pay US\$265 million as fines for 'off-target' damages caused by spraying with Dicamba, a broad-spectrum herbicide developed for biotech crops by Monsanto, the US agribusiness major which was acquired by Bayer in 2016.

"It must not be forgotten that the US multinational Union Carbide got off lightly after its pesticide plant in Bhopal caused the world's worst industrial disaster only because of weak laws," Sharma said. At least 3,787 people died and thousands were severely injured after toxic gas leaked from the plant in December 1984. Legal proceedings continue in India's Supreme Court for compensation beyond the \$470 million paid by the company.

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