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Kill the slow poison now

Chemical-free cultivation is possible. So why does India need another decade to phase out the killer Endosulfan?

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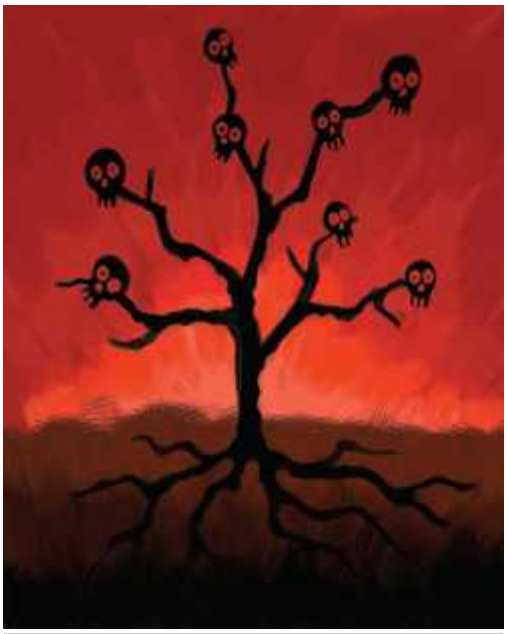

Illustration: Anand Naorem

ENDOSULFAN, ONE of the most toxic chemicals in use today, has now been banned. In a decision taken in Geneva last week, under the legally binding Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants, the pesticide will not be used, manufactured, or traded any longer. India, along with Uganda and China, has exemptions to continue its use for possibly another 11 years. India produces more than 80 percent of the 12,000 tonnes manufactured globally, consuming over half of it on cotton, cashew, tea, fruits, horticulture, etc. The ban has also created in some quarters unfounded fears of crop loss and a higher cost for food, when the issue should be safer alternatives and health.

Three companies in India control endosulfan worldwide. Over the past years, the industry has resorted to all sorts of tricks to prevent the ban. Filing criminal cases against activists and academics, preventing any report that even hinted at a link between endosulfan and health, disrupting review committees, and even raising the bogey of a European conspiracy. Ultimately they lost. The evidence against endosulfan was overwhelming enough to convince over 170 countries to stop its production or use. Kerala's chief minister sat on a fast demanding the ban, while Agriculture Minister Sharad Pawar and Environment Minister Jairam Ramesh opposed it. Finally, public health concerns won the day.

Though all pesticides are poison by definition, some like endosulfan are particularly toxic. They persist in the environment for a long time, accumulate over the food chain and travel long distances globally, contaminating food in distant lands like the Arctic. In all such cases, chronic human health impacts are difficult to prove, since they occur over long periods of time, and in very low doses of exposure. The growing science of this linkage is relatively new, less than three decades old, but very persuasive. Impacts of endosulfan can be disastrous, causing congenital diseases, physical deformities, and epilepsy besides cancer. Such impacts have been documented in several countries, including in Kasargod, Kerala. India has an almost non-existent record of epidemiological studies, especially where such toxicity is concerned, and it is this lack, which the industry has been exploiting over the years.

With the ban now in place, it is time for mainstream alternatives, and to support farmers who fear lower productivity. Alternatives do not necessarily imply a one-on-one replacement of one chemical by another. They lie in carrying out pest management through adopting different farming practices and even by chemicalfree farming. Such initiatives, even though promoted by no less than the World Health

Organisation and the Food and Agricultural Organisation through efforts like the Integrated Pest Management programmes, have not become mainstream in India despite their positive results. Industry pressure to market pesticides like endosulfan as the one-stop solution has been a key factor in preventing this. The ban, and the time India has to implement it, opens up space to take all such successes seriously and propagate them.

Alternatives lie in carrying out pest management by adopting different farming practices

This is also a chance to think proactively. Over the years, several independent studies in India have shown the presence of pesticide residues in food and water. Endosulfan and other toxic chemicals like DDT are present in rivers as well as groundwater. At no stage do our water filtration or food screening systems remove or detect these. The food safety law does not have adequate safeguards. Pesticides, once registered, cannot be de-registered, despite new data relating to their toxicity. Such data is not released in the public domain, and is treated as proprietary. This equation needs to be reversed and the burden of proof of a chemical being safe needs to reside on the industry rather than the consumer. The future is in prevention, and the ban is a chance to move in that direction.

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