

Slow Death and Fast Profits: The Globalisation of Pesticides and Poison

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The next time anyone in India serves up a good old 'wholesome' meal of rice and various vegetables, they will probably take in half a milligram of pesticide also, around a pin prick. That would be more than 40 times what an average North American person would consume.

India is one of the world's largest users of pesticides and a highly profitable market for the corporations that manufacture them. Ladyfinger, cabbage, tomato and cauliflower in particular may contain dangerously high levels because farmers tend to harvest them almost immediately after spraying. Fruit and vegetables are sprayed and tampered with to make them more colourful, and harmful fungicides are sprayed on fruit to ripen them in order to rush them off to market.

Research by the School of Natural Sciences and Engineering at the National Institute of Advanced Studies in Bangalore has indicated disturbing trends in the increased use of pesticide. In 2008, it reported that many crops for export had been rejected internationally due to high pesticide residues.

Kasargod in Kerala is notorious for the indiscriminate spraying of endosulfan. The government-owned Plantation Corporation of Kerala aerielly sprayed the harmful pesticide on cashews for a period of over 20 years. Consequently, it got into rivers, streams and drinking water. Families and their children have been living with physical deformities, cancers and disorders of the central nervous system ever since.

Officials and the pesticide companies benefited from the spraying. At the time, cashew was grown without pesticides throughout Kerala, but the government run plantation invested millions of rupees of public money in spraying the deadly pesticide. Endosulfen poisoning cases also emerged elsewhere, including in Karnataka.

Monsanto's controversial Round Up is now being used in place of endosulfan, which is in fact still being used in various parts of the country.

According to the writer Marie-Monique Robin, whoever controls the food (and pesticide) business controls the world. And Monsanto, backed by the US Government, is setting out to do this through its genetically manipulated (GM) seeds and its pesticides and weedicides.

This is the company has been responsible for manufacturing polychlorinated biphenols that cause cancer, dioxins that lead to chloracne, GM bovine growth hormone that produce mastitis in cattle and genetically modified organisms containing insect toxins, including GM corn, GM soya and Bt cotton, which are strongly associated with a range of health hazards. It also produced Agent Orange which the US dropped on Vietnam to destroy jungle and consequently led to mass death, disease and deformities. In June 2001, adding insult to

injury, Monsanto was accused by farmers of Ninh Thuan province of pressuring them to use genetically modified seeds that resulted in corn and maize crop failures and economic ruin. In Indonesia, the corporation bribed more than 140 government officials to have its Bt cotton released without an environmental risk assessment.

Dr Meryl Hammond, founder of the Campaign for Alternatives to Pesticides, told a Canadian parliament committee in 2010 that a raft of studies published in prestigious peer-reviewed journals point to strong associations between chemical pesticides and serious health consequences, including endocrine disruption and fertility problems, birth defects, brain tumours and brain cancer, breast cancer, prostate cancer, childhood leukaemia, cancer clusters in communities, gastric or stomach cancer, learning disabilities, non-Hodgkin's lymphoma and canine malignant lymphoma

The committee heard testimony from 85 witnesses and analysed over 50 briefs, which produced a frightening overview on the effects of pesticides and their pervasiveness in the environment.

There is also evidence demonstrating a potentially dangerous link between many pesticides and naturally occurring substances. For example, a British study done way back in the 1970s and reported in the journal *Nature* indicated that the insecticide carbaryl can combine with nitrites from food additives in the stomach and create a carcinogenic and highly mutagenic substance.

An article in the journal *Hortscience* in 2009 indicated falling nutritional values as a result of industrialised agriculture, and various studies point to the health risks from intensive, industrial methods as chemicals and the impact of genetic modifications become prevalent within the food chain.

In addition to health risks posed by pesticides and the powerful agribusiness sector, there are the well documented issues relating to seed monopolies and patenting, the expansion of superweeds and superbugs, the destruction of biodiversity and local rural economies, water run offs from depleted soil leading to climate change, severe water resource depletion and contamination and the impoverishment of farmers.

There are also concerns over dead soil. The Navdanya organisation in India found that Bt-cotton had significantly reduced vital soil enzymes and bacteria, so much so that within a decade of planting GM cotton, or any GM crop with Bt genes, the destruction of soil organisms could be complete, resulting in dead soil unable to produce food.

The biggest beneficiaries of what is currently happening are the likes of Monsanto, Syngenta and Cargill and the associated pharmaceuticals industry, which rakes in massive profits from trying to 'cure' us of the resultant diseases. Look no further than the 2009 documentary 'The Idiot Cycle' to see the link. The biggest losers are ordinary people and our health along with the many Indian farmers in particular who have been forced into debt and committed suicide en masse.

If the present path is continued, the mass of the population will find itself increasingly reliant on an insecure supply of expensive chemically-laden food and greater water scarcities.

Although the powerful agribusiness sector has so much invested and possesses great influence, throughout the world the public is increasingly calling these companies to

account. In many respects, there are parallels with the tussle with tobacco companies over lung cancer. But this time the effects are much more pervasive and impact the entire planet.

Where is the logic in giving the thieves the keys to your home? Why hand over the country to those who regard food and fertile land as resources to be looted for profit? If someone was standing in front of you threatening your life or the lives of your children, wouldn't you take action? There's no difference between that situation and what the corporations are doing to our food.

*Originally from the northwest of England, **Colin Todhunter** has spent many years in India. He has written extensively for the Deccan Herald (the Bangalore-based broadsheet), New Indian Express and Morning Star (Britain). His articles have also appeared in various other newspapers, journals and books and his East by Northwest website is at: <http://colintodhunter.blogspot.com>*

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