

## **PESTICIDES IN PUNJAB: FARMERS' TESTIMONIES**

*"We do not agree with these poison companies. We want to stop these poisons and we like organic farming as it's free from poison and is not harmful to the animal or person eating those vegetables. So the results are better. The age is longer and the person does not get affected by any disease. So we are happy with nature" (Farmer, 42, Guru Ki Dhab)*

As evidence for the Ad-Hoc Monitoring Report submitted by ECCHR and its partners to the Panel of Experts of the Food and Agriculture Organisation, a group of 32 farmers in Punjab were interviewed. This provided a better understanding of the working conditions of farmers and the implementation of the FAO Code of Conduct on Pesticides Management by two major pesticides companies, Bayer CropScience AG and Syngenta AG. A questionnaire was designed to find out about farmers' understanding of pesticides labels, companies' efforts to provide personal protective equipment to farmers, adequate training to dealers and distributors, and monitoring of health and environmental effects, all in accordance with standards set by the Code of Conduct. The farmers' responses to the given questions revealed facts that in our view appear to violate the FAO Code of Conduct on Pesticides Management.

The agricultural practice of a small number of farmers is described in the following sections based on the answers they provided during their interviews:

### **1.) A farmer from Guru Ki Dhab village of Punjab (42 years old)**

*"I want to know what happened that we need to use these chemicals."*

This farmer owns 16 acres of land which he farms with his two brothers. They grow vegetables, mustard, grass, and rice. He uses Confidor (Bayer) as well as Matador (Syngenta). He applied Confidor for about ten years for 2-4 hours in summer and a whole day in winter. He told us that it is impossible to spray for longer periods during the summer due to the great heat, which explains why he sprays for less hours during the hot season. He also explained that more gas is produced while spraying at these temperatures, which creates more health problems for him and his

brothers. He has used Matador for 5 years now, applying it once a year for 4 hours.

The farmer is able to read and write, but only in Punjabi. For this reason he cannot read the inscriptions on the Confidor and Matador bottles as they do not include Punjabi. Moreover, all the safety leaflets that are provided with the product appear the same to him. He argues that it is therefore enough to read one of them.

The shopkeeper selling Confidor advised him not to spray while eating food and that he should wash his hands with soap after use. He was also told about goggles and gloves. However as he did not receive these items from the company or in the shops, he sprays without gloves and with only his mouth covered by a cloth. He and his brothers also use mustard oil on their hands in order to protect against itching and burning. He has experienced rashes on his hands as he does not wear gloves although their use is advised in the leaflet. Five years ago the retailers stocked some gloves. Now they generally have neither masks nor gloves. On the occasions they do have these items, farmers have to pay for it. Although this farmer asked for personal protective equipment, the company did not provide any. The farmer is not satisfied with this situation. He says:

*“If it [the company] sells poison then it can also give gloves and boots”.*

The farmer has never received any visits from field assistants or sales managers from Bayer or Syngenta. He has never met them elsewhere. He has never been asked by any company staff about health problems. He thinks this is due to the fact that they only want to sell their products. They go only to the retailers and advertise their product. He has not received training and never attended training in a bigger city in the vicinity.

When talking about the problems caused by the use of pesticides he refers to problems both for humans and the cattle.

*“A human being getting hundred years old should be fine for the first 50-60 years but in Punjab people starting to get joint pain, fever and other problems from 40 onwards. Animals also have diseases and these diseases then go into the milk that people drink.”*

In general, if he sprays in the morning, he is affected by weakness and headaches in the evening. He informed the shopkeeper about this, but the shopkeeper said that this is normal and occurs every time. He has also gone to a doctor to get medicine for these problems. He has never been to the company to complain about the problems:

*“What can they do, they only make the poison and insects die with it.  
They do this only”.*

Being asked about the role that companies should play, he replied:

*“Foreign companies come with their drugs and say we will double the production and farmers sow more than three crops in a year. They do not think about the harms to human beings and to the country. Companies have responsibilities. If they produce poison, then they should also produce the drug without poison or having less poison with the use of which we have no harms. ...Company should produce natural drugs, which contain no poison because we use these crops as food”*

## **2.) Three farmers from Kotkapura village aged 63, 35 and 31**

All three farmers grow wheat, mustard, and rice and own between 6 and 20 acres. They currently all use Confidor (Bayer) and Gramoxone (Syngenta). Generally Gramoxone is used once a season for rice and cotton and Confidor throughout both seasons. All of them used Matador until recently but they think it is the most dangerous one and therefore try to reduce their use of it. They obtain these products from the local Syngenta and Bayer dealer.

Personal protective equipment is not available to them in shops and they do not know any other place where they can get protective equipment. They no longer ask dealers/distributors about personal protective equipment as they already know the answer: the company does not deliver the equipment therefore the shopkeeper can't provide it. This has been the case for years. In practice, they do not use any specific protective equipment and spray Matador using a knapsack, wearing normal clothes and shoes. They also apply mustard oil before spraying and try not to touch the product with their hands. One pesticide, Regent (Bayer), is sold as a granulate and so gloves are provided the product for applying it. However the gloves are very thin and break easily so they end up working with punctured gloves. They have therefore stopped

using the gloves since wearing them makes application more difficult and time consuming.

The farmers also all dispose of the pesticides bottles in the same way. First, they wash the bottles and store them. A collector visits regularly and buys the empty bottles; the farmers receive about one rupee per bottle. The collector then brings these bottles to a factory near Kotkapura. He sells them to the factory where they are cut and melted together with all the other plastic to be reused. One of the interviewees also uses the bottles on his farm for agricultural purposes e.g. to fill the knapsack and to wash cattle.

Apart from Gramoxone they frequently mix different pesticides and then apply them together. The Syngenta dealer told them that it is possible to mix the pesticides and that they could do it. According to them all dealers tell them this.

One farmer explained how Matador causes pain when it gets onto the skin during spraying. The pain usually lasts for four to five hours, but may last up to ten if the amount splashed onto the skin was high. If the farmer uses Matador for 5-6 hours he has also problems with his eyes and breathing. In order to treat these symptoms the farmers take medicine and wash out their eyes with cold water. The farmers told their dealers about the health problems they have but no solution was offered. The Matador dealer told him that the itching is an unavoidable “natural byproduct” of using the product and that he has to live with it.

They have not received any training by the distributor, dealer or manufacturer. They were never visited directly by Bayer or Syngenta salespeople or field assistants. Their only opportunity to meet company people is at promotional meetings. One farmer went to such a Bayer meeting with around 200 farmers some years ago. Two or three new products were introduced, however, there was no explanation of safety issues, nor was any personal protective equipment offered or on sale.

### **3.) Farmer (38 years old) from Chungan Kothe in Handaya Village**

The farmer has been working in agriculture since 1990. He studied until he was seventeen and now farms land of about 28 acres together with his father and brother. They also have four employees helping on the fields. They grow mostly paddy rice as well as some wheat, potato, and onions.

He used to help his father when he was a child and has been observing the fields since then. He describes the development as follows:

*“As new diseases develop, newer pesticides come in the market and we have to use that particular pesticide”*

While working in family agriculture, the farmer applied Monocrotofos, and Endosulfan. He further explains that earlier there were fewer diseases but now they are plenty and costly pesticides have to be used against them. Asked about the reasons for this he explains:

*“The reason is that the nature has its own system. Human beings are also becoming greedy with every passing day. They never leave their fields empty”.*

In previous times one spray was sufficient but now it has to be repeated up to five times. This increases costs and it becomes very difficult for him to get a return from his crops that equals production costs. He explains in more detail that:

*“Fertilizer rates have been skyrocketing. Same goes for spraying. At the same time potato prices have been reduced to just Rs200 per quintal.”*

The farmer explained that Bayer staff come five to six times a season to their farm on invitation. When they visit the fields, the farmer explains about the disease he is facing and asks for suggestions regarding its eradication. The company representatives are also present while the spraying is actually taking place. On being asked about precautions, the farmer reports that when using Nativo they don't use gloves but they cover their mouths with cloth and they use glasses. Moreover there is the general problem that it is difficult to walk on wet soil and therefore they often do not even wear shoes.

Regarding training from dealers, the farmer said he only discuss which are the best products to use with the dealer, but not about health hazards and safeguards against them. The farmer attended a fair in Ludhiana where company representatives were also in attendance. However, according him:

*“Companies are more interested in selling their products. No advice is offered to farmers there”.*