

## **PARAQUAT: TIME TO GO! YOU CAN MAKE THE DIFFERENCE.**

**By Arjunan Ramasamy, Malaysia, April 2002.**

I am Arjunan Ramasamy, 56 years old and have been a plantation worker for 33 years. Now I have been medically boarded out as I could not continue my work as a oil palm harvester. I suffered severe back pains and my body could no longer take the hard work of cutting down palm oil fruit bunches that weighed sixty kilograms or more. I am married to Patchiammal Muniandy and we have 4 big boys who are all married. I am now a grandfather as well. In my country, Malaysia, I am identified as a Malaysian Indian.

In 1936, my grandfather boarded a ship, the S.S Rejula from India to Malaysia. He was one of those recruited during the British rule in India and Malaysia to work in the plantations in Malaysia. My grandfather was a migrant worker who was employed as an estate worker in Ulu Bernam, Perak, in an oil palm plantation called United Plantations. This was a Danish company where my father, mother, myself and my son also worked hard. Since the plantation was deep in a jungle area with no road access to the town center, we in the family had to work in the estate as it was the only way for us to earn a living and have a roof over our head. In short, four generations of my family gave their lives to the same plantation.

I studied and completed my Primary schooling in a Tamil school within the estate. I dropped out of schooling as there was no secondary school in the plantation. So at the age of 14, I began work in the plantation. My first salary was 50 cents a day. At that time my work was cleaning and removing moss, cutting grass, getting rid of poisoned rats and spraying pesticides. After a few years when I was more adult, I became a harvester of oil palm fruit bunches.

As a Pesticide Sprayer, I did not know of the dangers of the Pesticides I used. The pesticide was in solid form and blue in colour. The chemical was boiled in water and kept in drums. Each morning, together with others, I scooped it out, mixed the pesticide and filled up the spraying pump, The pumps strapped to our backs, we sprayed for eight hours daily. At times, when there was a leakage in the pump, the pesticide would drip onto our backs. Many workers developed sores and suffered itchininess of their skin due to the poison.

Sometimes the workers were referred to the Estate Group Hospital. There, they were given a “white” cream to rub on their body and some tablets, mainly panadol by the Hospital Assistant (HA). Some workers stayed in the hospital for 2 or 3 days, to recover from the pesticide poisoning.

The plantation workers were not provided with any safety equipment. During lunch break, we were given a kind of oil, which we used on our hands. Then we washed our hands with soap before eating. But some sprayers just ate their food without cleaning themselves well as they did not know of the dangers of the chemical they had used.

Some plantations did provide workers with protective equipment, like masks Even when it was provided, the workers did not use the protective gear as they felt uncomfortable and it was an obstacle to them spraying the pesticide. The gears and equipment were not at all good for our hot and humid climate.

Today more and more women are working as Pesticide Sprayers. Malaysia has about 30,000 women pesticide sprayers. Majority of the workers in the plantations are Indian women. Women became pesticide sprayers when the plantations moved from rubber to oil palm cultivation. There is very high usage of pesticides, especially herbicides, in oil palm plantations. One of the most commonly used pesticide is Paraquat. There are other kinds of pesticides which are also used, but I do not know the names.

Pesticide Chemicals are very harmful to the women workers. As a worker and as a union leader for 20 years, I know that women sprayers have suffered very much. Many have complained of stomach pains, of headaches, bad back pains and also prolapsed womb. I know of women who have had miscarriages and lost their babies. Women sprayers have suffered from breast pains and also their breasts swelling or puss developing in their breasts.

The Management would fine the Pesticide Sprayers \$1.50 if they found any weeds still alive after the area had been sprayed with pesticides. But when a worker's health is affected due to the pesticides, the management totally ignored it. The same medicines like calamine lotion for itchiness and panadol for pain are prescribed. There was no monitoring of the effects of pesticide poisoning on our health. The workers could not take any action, like requesting for investigations or for referrals to specialists for a medical check up as the workers themselves did not know that they were suffering from poisoning.

Even if the workers had the opportunity to meet the doctor, they were not able to explain their health problem to the doctor due to language problems and no knowledge of the poisons they were using. Hospital Assistants in the plantations are mostly men. The women plantation workers reluctant to share and explain some of their health problems especially the problems related to their reproductive health. Many suffered in silence and thus have been affected very badly. Several women have died of cancer in the plantation especially cervical cancer. And it has been found that most of them have been involved in pesticide spraying.

The Management does not encourage medical leave. Thus doctors and HAs employed by the plantations would not give medical leave but prescribe medicines and then ask the workers to go back to continue their spraying. When the women sprayers requested for a different kind of job because they could not take the exposure to pesticide chemicals, they were told to resign. The plantations found that they could exploit foreign workers and employ them instead. Today, in most of the plantations almost half of the workers are

foreign workers, employed on a short contract basis with lower pay. The foreign workers like the women, do not know about the dangers of pesticide chemicals. Many of the women continued to work as sprayers because they needed the housing provided by the plantation.

Pesticide sprayers have to work for 8 hours daily. They have to endure terrible heat under the hot sun. Some of the common symptoms are back pain, giddiness, difficulty in breathing, skin problem, nausea, eye irritation, headache and tight feelings in the chest and fatigue. As the report, "Poisoned and Silenced" state very clearly, show that paraquat has slowly poisoned our women. Unfortunately, the National Union of Plantation workers (NUPW), not gender sensitive and unclear of the effects of the poisons and their impact on human health, were only able to get extra 12 cents a day. Pesticide spraying was seen as high risk job and thus the 12 cents became an incentive for them to work. Health was sacrificed.

For a long time I have been involved actively with the National Union of Plantation Workers (NUPW). I was involved in the Executive Council of the Union for more than 12 years. Though the Union is aware of the workers' situation, it did not take any serious action to protect the worker's health. The Union as mentioned was only able to treat it as high risk job and thus extra amount in the basic salary. This way of solving the problem has been a frustration for me.

While I was struggling to make the NUPW a genuine union for the workers, I came to know a women's organization, Tenaganita or Women's Force. After various discussions we started to work together closely to develop women leadership in the Union so that women's concerns and voice will be heard and recognized in the union. Together we raised the issue of pesticide poisoning when Tenaganita came out with their publication in 1992 called "Victims without Voice".

And today, after two years of intensive research, Tenaganita once again has revealed in their study, "Poisoned and Silenced", how badly women pesticide sprayers are being poisoned with chemicals especially paraquat for a long time.

The women in the plantations do not want their health becoming worse and worse. They have children and many are afraid that their children may already be affected. Both the management of the plantations and the pesticide industry are responsible for the poor and worsening health of the women in the estates. At the moment, Tenaganita is playing an important part in the life of the estate workers' by providing them with information and educating them about the dangers of pesticide chemicals.

But we know that this is not enough. No amount of protective equipment can stop the poisons from going into their bodies. Paraquat is very dangerous and today I know it is a highly toxic pesticide. A poison is a poison. It is made to kill. It is dangerous.

Though a lot of attention has been given to develop Malaysia, very little has been done to protect the health of workers especially of women. Little has also been done to stop the flow of poisons on women, on children and on to our environment. As a representative of my people, I ask you from the bottom of my heart, to understand the call to stop further poisoning our women and children and our environment. We want your company to be responsible, to value life and to respect the health and rights of women and workers in the plantations. So, please stop producing paraquat. Stop selling paraquat. Please put money into finding alternatives . I know if you put your mind, heart and soul, you can make a difference to our lives

Four generations, my grandfather, my parents (father and mother), myself and now my son, have given our lives for the plantations that have profited from us. Malaysia has developed from our sweat and blood. We cannot continue in these conditions. It is time to change. I believe you as shareholders in Syngenta can make a difference to our lives.

**STOP PARAQUAT!**

Thank you.

**Arjunan Ramasamy**

April 2002