

Poor pest control led to crop loss, suicides

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BANGALORE: Ignorance of integrated pest management coupled with unfavourable climatic conditions led to a pest outbreak in Bidar and Gulbarga, triggering a spate of suicides among farmers in 1997, according to a study by the National Institute of Advanced Studies.

Conducted by P.K. Shetty of Environmental Studies Unit, the study has revealed that the "farmers do not use the right kind of pesticides at the appropriate time".

For instance, to kill the egg or first, second or third instars of larvae of the tur pod borer, there are different insecticides available in the market. Most of the farmers either spray one chemical or mix two or more chemicals (which either do not act synergistically or are antagonistic to each other) not knowing that if the larvae of the pest *Helicoverpa* are not controlled in the first three instars, it would be difficult to control them in advanced stages.

"Improper and indiscriminate use of pesticides has adverse effects on the natural enemies of pests. According to farmers, some birds like crows, drongoes, mynahs and the small green bee-eater are now not commonly found in the fields," the report states. Hence, it has become essential to introduce natural enemies like *Trichogramma* or sucking pests (green lace wings) and the nuclear polyhedrosis virus to bring down the pest population.

The average cost of cultivation

per acre of tur in a normal season is Rs 3,630. But in 1997-98, due to excess rain and high temperature and humidity, which favoured multiplication of pest, the additional expenditure of Rs 2,030 per acre was incurred by farmers. The vicious chain of credit system — where private money lenders are mostly pesticide dealers and supply agro-inputs only to those farmers who can be relied upon for return of money — deprived many farmers of the input at reasonable prices.

The study cites indebtedness and tenancy as other reasons for the tragic deaths. "Most of the deceased farmers in the region, who had taken land on lease for cultivation, were not qualified to receive any institutional credit or entitled to compensation in case of crop failure. When the crops failed, they became answerable to land owners, local merchants and money lenders. Inconsistencies in market prices forced them to take the extreme step," the report says.

And the most disturbing of all, the easy availability of pesticides in most of the villages has fuelled this fatal trend. According to a doctor at Bhalki, "We get 100-150 pesticide-related poisoning cases during a cropping season."

The situation calls for immediate remedial measures as many farmers have switched to capital intensive agriculture using new varieties of seeds and modern agricultural practices. And of the crops which has attracted a maximum number of new farming entrants is tur.