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How much 'slow poison' does your cauliflower carry?

Seema Singh

BANGALORE: While the death of 80 peacocks in Madhya Pradesh has brought the issue of excessive use of pesticides once again into focus, the fact that even now there is no quality control mechanism by which agricultural and horticultural crops in the market can be tested for pesticide residues remains unnoticed.

Perhaps, inquiries on the subject has prompted the Directorate of Horticulture in Bangalore to set up a bio-tech lab sometime next month on Bannerghatta Road to tackle such issues. Till then nobody knows how much of pesticide sprinkled a trifle too generously on vegetables like cabbage, cauli-

flower, greens and grapes are we consuming.

Said K.R. Jairam, joint director planning: "We don't have any quality control system to check the horticultural crops sold in the market. Once this lab is operational, we will take random samples of the vegetables and fruits to test the amount of pesticide residue."

According to agricultural scientist P.K. Shetty, Environment Studies Unit of the National Institute of Advanced Studies, many vegetable growers dip their products in concentrated solution of pesticide or fungicide so that they look fresh and do not attract insects when kept in the store. "I had conducted a study in Bangalore some time ago and found that a large

number of cauliflowers and cabbages sold in the market were dipped in pesticide solutions to ward off those crawling creatures which invariably put off customers and affect sales."

Since Shetty was to take up a larger study commissioned by the Department of Science and Technology, he did not deem it urgent to make the study public. He is currently busy preparing a data base on the use and abuse of pesticides in the four states, also agriculture strongholds of India: Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra and Punjab. And the findings are hopelessly discouraging.

The field studies conducted in the districts of Karnataka show that almost 100 per cent of the

farmers (a random sample of small, medium and large farmers proved this) are using at least 2-3 times the required number of pesticide sprays on the crops. "In Malnad region the yield of paddy per hectare is about 20 quintals and in Bellary and Raichur region (monoculture prevails), it's over 40 quintals. It was noticed that a feeling of competition drives the farmers to grow more than their neighbours, without caring for the quality of their final product," Shetty noted.

As regards horticultural crops, the type of water used — sewage, effluent or untreated sludge — determines the 'health' of the fruits and vegetables. Besides, each pesticide and each crop has its

minimum waiting period, after which the growers are not supposed to spray. "But we have found that due to unawareness and lack of any control mechanism, growers spray till the last minute and even after harvest," Shetty added.

The ongoing study confirms that in the recent past, use of banned pesticides has indeed come down, thanks to environmental activists, but the overall and indiscriminate usage has gone up.

One reason why the subject has not attracted enough attention is because unlike the instant deaths of peacocks, the damage to human beings is slow.