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'Our life is about shaking people up': Sunita Narain

By Rashme Arora

The director of the Delhi-based Centre for Science and Environment, which has shaken Indian consumers with its findings that 12 soft drink brands marketed by Coke and Pepsi have pesticide content 30 times higher than acceptable limits, lashes out at the double standards of global companies in the developing world and insists that confrontation is the only way to bring about change in this country



The Delhi-based Centre for Science and Environment, a non-profit NGO, analysed 12 major soft drinks brands marketed by two large MNCs for organochlorine and organophosphorus pesticides and synthetic pyrethroids, all commonly used in India as insecticides in agricultural fields and in households. All the samples were found to contain residues of four extremely toxic pesticides and insecticides: lindane, DDT, malathion and chlorpyrifos. In all, the levels of pesticide residues far exceeded the maximum residue limit for pesticides in water used as 'food', as set down by the European Economic Commission (EEC). According to the CSE test, pesticides in all the PepsiCo brands average 0.0180 mg per litre -- that's 36 times higher than the European Union limit of 0.0005 mg. In the Coca-Cola brands, the average is 0.0150 mg, 30 times higher. While the contaminants in Pepsi were 37 times higher than the EEC limit, rival Coca-Cola exceeded the norms by 45 times. It was also found that pesticide levels in the soft drinks were similar to those found in bottled water that was tested by the CSE earlier this year.

The study said: "Each sample (of soft drink) had enough poison to cause, in the long term, cancer, damage to the nervous and reproductive systems, birth defects and severe disruption of the immune system."

The soft drinks sector in India is a much bigger money-spinner than the bottled water segment. In 2001, Indians consumed over 6,500 million bottles of cold drinks. Since the main consumers are children and teenagers, the findings of the study are particularly ominous.

While Sunita Narain, director of CSE, has been commended for the study she has also been accused of sensationalising the findings through the media, setting off panic amongst consumers and attacking MNCs. In this interview, she clarifies CSE's stand, motivation and methodology.

What is the update on the controversy over pesticides in leading brands of soft drinks?

Pepsi and Coke have accused the CSE of lying and cheating. They are going around meeting different organisations and political groups and telling them that it is high time a code of conduct was introduced to curb and restrain the work being done by NGOs. It's like they want to put brakes on our work. They seem to forget that NGOs, by their very nature, are confrontationist. This is the only way change can be brought about in this country, otherwise we would all continue to sleep.

Why are they behaving in this fashion?

The cold drinks controversy has raised key issues which will need to be resolved in the coming months. We need to establish what kind of relationship will exist between civil society and the corporate world. So far, most of the issues that NGOs have dealt with have related to the government. These have ranged from building dams to the way the Government of India was running large thermal power stations. In the past, people had to deal with the license raj and their job was to 'convince' a government department or official to give them a license; it was all about fixing. They did not have to deal with anyone outside the government. Suddenly, the situation has altered and we have taken on the corporate world. So far so good, but the corporates in turn must learn how to work with us.

The corporates have reacted to our charges in the most infantile manner. I'm not sure they understand the kind of activism we do or how we have been working during the last decade. They must realise we are not a bunch of charlatans or some petty crooks or even some vague do-good organisation. Initially, we did work with a high degree of emotion but now we make sure all our data is rigorously compiled and is backed by scientific data.

You see, the decline of the Indian government has left a huge space which is now being filled by the private sector. Just because they are filling that space does not mean there should be no checks-and-balances in the work they are doing. They however feel no one should impose these checks-and-balances on them. In the west, corporates have begun taking recourse to the SLAP law. SLAP stands for Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation and it is being resorted to by corporates in their effort to gag civil society groups because by doing so, you take away space for public discourse. The corporates want all discussion and conversations to be held behind closed doors. When Oprah Winfrey mentioned during the course of her programme how, after hearing about mad cow disease, she was scared of eating beef, she was slapped with a billion dollar lawsuit by beef manufacturers. Their position was that by expressing her fear publicly, she had influenced millions of other consumers not to eat beef. Corporates do not want public discourse.

I would like to add that CSE would have appreciated it if Coke and Pepsi had taken the stand that, alright, let CSE's findings be counter-checked by some other independent organisation. After all, we have fought pitched battles against several corporate houses in the past. Ratan Tata, despite providing a substantial amount of money for our corpus, brought a Rs 100 crore legal notice against us when we wanted a ban imposed on the use of diesel. We met him and he agreed to withdraw the notice. He also came around to accepting our point of view. Not once did he threaten to take back the corpus amount given to us. This is the kind of mature corporate leadership that was shown by his group. In the same way, in our fight with Rahul Bajaj, we called him an 'environmental criminal'. That was later sorted out. But these multinationals do not seem to understand that if we have made our findings public it is because we are concerned about public health and that this battle must be fought in the public arena.

Our life is about shaking people up. Okay, people can accuse us of being obdurate and pig-headed, and we probably are that. All I can say is one needs a great deal of pig-headedness to do this kind of work and then bring it out into the open.

CSE has checked out 12 brands of soft drinks being sold in the Indian market and found that each contained deadly pesticides. Why the focus on bottled drinks made by multinationals when freshwater, groundwater and food are probably equally contaminated?

Our findings show that malathion is 87 times higher, chlorpyrifos is 42 times higher and DDT and metabolites are 15 times higher than what has been prescribed by EEC standards. We checked for pesticides in bottled cold drinks being manufactured and sold in the US and found they were all pesticide free. It speaks for the double standards being used by the global companies and if we have to fight them to ensure pesticide-free drinks then why not? We are asking that the government tighten regulations on companies irrespective of their size and power.

The groundwater which is being accessed by these companies is itself loaded with pesticides, isn't it?

At present there is no regulation whatsoever on the use of groundwater. So much so that companies which are making huge profits in this country are accessing our groundwater resources completely free of charge. Surely the government should have made it mandatory by now that companies must pay for the water they use, but there is no Groundwater Act whatsoever. Whether it is a destitute farmer or a superbrat company, there must be a law in place which regulates the use of groundwater.

This brings me to two other related issues. We need a pesticide policy which ensures wise and safe use of pesticides. We also need to have a potable drinking water policy in place which ensures minimal standards for the water we drink. There is no act, no law which defines the quality of water being drunk by the average citizen. The government needs to define what safe drinking water is and then make these norms legally enforceable. Parliament had set up a sub-committee some years ago to discuss these matters. Their recommendations were sent to the Ministry of Urban Development which was not interested in

seeing this matter through.

At least with the bottled water industry, there were some norms warning against pesticides but for the cold drink industry there are practically none.

Your research methodology has been questioned by some critics, however?

Our research methodology has been to look at the market share of different companies in the different cities. For example with bottled drinks we looked at the different companies which had more than a 10% market share and so found that Bisleri was one of the biggest suppliers. In the cold drink segment, 90% of the market share was held by Coke and Pepsi. If there are only two cold drink companies, what can we do?

When we highlighted the pesticide content in bottled water, Ramesh Chauhan, the owner of Bisleri, accused us of being in the pay of Coke and Pepsi and of targeting Indian companies. When CSE advocated the banning of diesel, Telco reportedly accused us of being in the pay of Maruti, and when we launched our campaign in favour of CNG, we were accused of being in the pay of CNG suppliers.

It is reported that you have used EU and not WHO guidelines, though the former are too stringent. Indian guidelines are non-existent. The only guidelines are the US FDA, WHO and EU guidelines. We did not opt to use the former two because their guidelines do not cover all our pesticide residues which are both single and multiple in nature.

Would you agree that a study of the drinking water being supplied by municipal corporations would have been more relevant, since this is what is being drunk by all of us?

We are involved in a study on this score also. But this study is linked to how old the drinking water pipes are in different colonies. As a result, we need to collect samples right around the year from different localities in order to make it more representative.

We are presently also doing a study on the pesticide residue in the vegetables we eat.

What is the credibility of your laboratory, where you conducted this study?

We started the laboratory two years ago. One of our first investigations was on the high pesticide levels being used in cashew plantations in a village called Padre in Kerala. This was first highlighted by a local doctor who found himself dealing with a high degree of cerebral palsy, cancer and reproductive abnormality in this area. The Indian government commissioned a study by the ICMR in 2001, which confirmed our findings. When this issue hotbed up, the government wanted the Central Insecticide Board to look into this issue. Unfortunately, their findings are so non-transparent that they will make sure nothing is banned.

What do you suggest we do to tackle this whole issue of pesticide misuse?

We need to promote a safe and wise use of pesticides. Registration of pesticides must be done on the principle of register and recall. Globally we have come to learn that if groups oppose one pesticide or chemical and that is phased out, then another equally harmful one is introduced under another label. Companies must be made liable for damages. Unfortunately, so far there has been no response from the government to our findings and this is being pitted as a battle against us and the industry, which it is not.

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