

Poisoning in Yavatmal: Those affected take on pesticide conglomerate Syngenta

Plaintiff profiles

Geeta Shankar Aglawe

Geeta Shankar Aglawe used to live with her husband Shankar Nago and their two sons in a village in the Yavatmal district in central India. The family owns four acres of farmland, on which they used to grow cotton. This generated an annual income of 50,000 Indian rupees (about 582 euros).

Shankar Nago Aglawe regularly used pesticides to increase the family's yield. On 1 September 2017, he purchased the Polo pesticide from a local store. However, neither the Indian state nor Syngenta ever told Aglawe about the general dangers of pesticides, their inherent toxicity or explained the precautionary measures necessary to protect his health to him. After applying Polo to his cotton field the same day, Aglawe complained of a headache, dizziness and general fatigue. After spraying it again on 24 and 25 September, his headaches intensified and his eyes became increasingly irritated.

“He threw up and could see less and less,” Geeta Shankar Aglawe told ECCHR. “He told me that everything around him had turned dark and that he was no longer able to see.”

His family immediately took him to the hospital. On the way there, he had difficulty breathing and lost consciousness. His condition did not improve significantly, and he was transferred to a private hospital two days later, where he passed away on 30 September 2017. He was 45 years old.

“My husband worked hard to provide for our family and give our sons a good education,” said Geeta Shankar Aglawe. “His death could have been prevented. That's why I and my family demand justice.”

Geeta Bandhu Sonule

Geeta Bandhu Sonule lost her husband Late Bandhu Sonule. The couple raised two children in the Yavatmal village of Manoli Tehsil Ghatanji. Late Bandhu Sonule made a living spraying pesticides for land-owning farmers. He was the family's sole breadwinner and earned around 300 Indian rupees (3.50 euros) a day.

On 19 September 2017, he was working on a field for a farmer who gave him Polo mixed with other substances to apply on the fields. The problem: Sonule never received any training,

nor was he supplied with protective equipment. He was totally unaware of pesticides' potential dangers.

That day, Sonule sprayed from 9 am to 6 pm. In the afternoon, he already experienced the first symptoms of poisoning. After returning home, he complained of agitation, and suffered from loss of vision, vomiting and eye irritation. Since his family is extremely poor, they could not afford to travel to the hospital that night. Sonule did not receive first aid until he went to the local hospital the next day. He was taken home again later that day.

“But he only got worse,” said Geeta Bandhu Sonule. “We didn't have the money to arrange his transport to the hospital. I had to mortgage our belongings in order to take him there.” Despite being treated, Late Bandhu Sonule died on 23 September 2017 with his wife at his bedside. He was 42 years old. A doctor later told the family that Sonule had been poisoned, a fact that was included on the medical document issued by the hospital.

“Now I have to go work in the fields,” Geeta Bandhu Sonule told ECCHR. “But because I am a woman, I only earn half of what my husband used to make. The compensation we got from the government as emergency support was not nearly enough. So now I have to borrow money in order to ensure that my children can continue their education.”

Hiramam Sayam

Hiramam Sayam has worked as a farmer in Yavatmal for many years. He is married and has two children. The family owns approximately three acres of land on which they grow cotton. Sayam also works as a day laborer in other farmers' fields and in construction.

On 23 and 24 September 2017, he applied Polo to his fields. He wore a shirt and long pants, but no other protective clothing. He mixed the product with water and filled it in a battery-powered backpack sprayer with which he then applied the pesticide. Like most farm workers in the region, Sayam never received any safety instructions regarding the use of pesticides. He is illiterate, so he could not read the instructions on the packaging.

On the evening of 24 September, he began to experience the first symptoms of poisoning. His face was swollen and he had pain in his abdomen, as well as difficulty breathing. That evening, he went to a nearby hospital, but was not admitted. The next morning, the swelling on his cheeks and neck, and abdominal pain continued. He also started to feel a burning sensation in the affected areas as well as eye irritation.

A friend took him to the Yavatmal Medical College Hospital, where he was admitted. While he was being treated, his condition worsened. On 30 September, his family took him to a private hospital, where he was diagnosed with inhalation poisoning and lung failure due to contact with Polo. As a consequence, he was transferred to a specialized hospital 70 kilometers from Yavatmal. There, he spent nine days in the emergency department, where he was put on a ventilator and feeding tube.

“In total, I spent 25 days in hospitals,” recounted Sayam. “But I still feel sick. I have problems speaking and cannot work in the fields like I used to.” In addition to the physical and emotional stress he and his family suffered, they also experienced substantial financial losses due to his treatment and transportation costs, as well as lost wages.

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“We deserve to be compensated for what we have been through,” he said. “This event totally changed the course of my life. Syngenta is responsible for what my family and I had to endure.”

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