

FOREWORD

When Anil Agarwal, CSE's founding director, decided to set up a testing laboratory for toxins and environmental contaminants we could not understand his reasoning. CSE had no track record in doing analytical testing, let alone running a state-of-the-art environmental monitoring facility. We were a policy research institution, comfortable with using our information for policy change.

But Anil was convinced that this laboratory was essential. He said that we desperately needed science in the public domain that would challenge, indeed raise, critical issues of ecological security. His reasoning also stemmed from the fact that every time CSE had approached laboratories for testing contamination we had either been turned down – government and university laboratories said “this is too controversial” and private laboratories were just too expensive. As a result, even where we knew there was a problem, we could not test and therefore, could not prove that there was evidence of contamination. And so we could not successfully push for change. In 2000, the CSE Pollution Monitoring Laboratory (PML) was set up.

The first test of the laboratory came by chance. We had a letter in the post from a doctor who wrote to say that he was seeing terrible human affliction in his small village of Padre, located in the hills in Kerala. A journalist colleague was sent to investigate the issue. But this time, because we also had the facility to test the problem, we decided to get samples of blood, soil and food collected. The tests were done. The analysis showed very high levels of a pesticide called endosulfan in all samples. Why, we asked. We learnt that the cashew plantation around the village was aerially sprayed with this pesticide each year, year after year. We also learnt that the last spray was done just a few days before we collected samples.

The test result was powerful. It put information in the hands of the community. But because it was powerful, it was also contested. Indeed the powerful pesticide industry has worked overtime to dispute, discredit and dismiss this data (see page 18 to read about this vicious attack). It has taken 10 years for the pesticide to be banned in the country. I believe the ban was the result of perseverance of local groups, who have ensured that the people of Padre village get justice. But also, the ban was possible because this time there was hard data which led to change.

This is the power of information in the true sense. Since then, the laboratory has gone ahead to test pesticides in bottled water, antibiotics in honey and most recently, junk in junk food. In all the cases, the results have been received with, first, contempt and then, dismissal and nasty rebuttals. The acid test came when the laboratory tested pesticides in the cola majors – Coke and Pepsi – and was faced with powerful opponents. The Joint Parliamentary Committee – the fourth JPC of independent India and the first on health related issues – was a formidable challenge for us. The

attack was on our ability to test ‘complex’ cola problems. The slur was that we were not competent enough – the CSE laboratory had simply got it wrong. But at the end, after substantial discussion and retesting of samples by government laboratories, the JPC concluded, “the Committee finds that the CSE findings are correct on the presence of pesticide residues in carbonated water. The Committee appreciates the whistle blowing act of CSE in alerting the nation to an issue with major implications to food safety, policy formulation, regulatory framework and human and environmental health.”

This was an endorsement of our work. More importantly, it pointed to the importance of research to drive policy and practice change. There is no doubt that the CSE Pollution Monitoring Laboratory has made a huge contribution to bring issues of food safety and toxins to public knowledge in India. The challenge is massive. We need to develop, grow in productivity and economic prosperity. But how do we do this without compromising on health and nutrition security? The CSE laboratory, through each study, has shown convincingly that the options are to find leapfrog solutions – to cut the toxin treadmill and not to first contaminate our food, our environment and poison our bodies.

The laboratory is always asked two things. First, if it is certified for testing. The answer is yes – ISO 9001/2008 – for quality management systems. But the more important accreditation it has is from the public scrutiny of its research. It is clear to us that government accreditation systems are both cumbersome and open to abuse. We also know that many laboratories that have this accreditation do shoddy and compromised research. We have therefore decided that the best certification comes from putting the data in the public domain, so that it can be critiqued and checked by all. This public disclosure is our test.

Secondly, we are asked why we do not share the results of our tests with companies before release. The fact is that CSE laboratory is not in the business of consultancies, but of policy change. It is therefore, logical for us to make the research public and to use this research to demand changes in policies and practices, particularly regulatory changes.

Our work will continue. What needs to be appreciated is that a relatively small laboratory has made such an enormous difference in changing regulatory systems and food and toxin policies in the country. But equally, we need to ask why the existing paraphernalia of government laboratories and research institutions are failing to do just this. Why?

This needs to be debated and discussed. The country needs science for ecological security. It needs science for public policy. The CSE laboratory and the research it has conducted has played a seminal role in doing just this. Now we need more institutions to join: to make the future change possible.

Sunita Narain