Shree Padre takes me back to when it all started.

He is a journalist who has spent years writing about the issue of endosulfan in Kerala, and was the first one to notice deformities in cows. "Even before I went to Kasargod, I was writing about the effects of pesticides. I published a report in a local daily called Udayavani. That’s how a tall gentleman tracked me down. He asked me if I was the gentleman who had written about pesticides and I said yes. He said in that case I must come to his town.

That’s where I noticed that in his cattle shed, there were four newborn calves, all born in the last six months and they were all handicapped. Three out of four died soon. The fourth one was still alive. I did some research and found out that everyday his cattle used to be sent to the grazing lands nearby and they used to drink water from a pond, which was just touching the plantation crop, in this case cashews."

These are the same cashew plantations where endosulfan, a toxic pesticide, was sprayed for years and that led to contamination of water and soil in the area. But the fight to get the government to recognize the problem was long and tiresome.

Dr. Mohan Kumar, who wrote about the negative effects of endosulfan spraying in a journal in 1996 agrees, “At the onset, when we started, our main aim was to stop the helicopter spraying. We were not sure about the side effects. It was only later that we collected the scientific documents. The people from Thalai submitted a lot of scientific documents, but building up the case was very difficult.”

Now that endosulfan has finally been banned from use, things are starting to settle down, says Dr. Kumar, “From 2005 onwards, there have been very few cases of epilepsy. Even new neurological cases are decreasing and it’s the same with mental retardation and congenital deformities. Even fish, frogs, and other reptiles have returned. They had nearly become extinct from this place earlier.”

I leave the place with mixed feelings. Endosulfan being banned is a welcome move but we still have far to go. I can’t help but think of Shrutí, the girl whose image came to be so closely associated with the issue. Today, she has finished high school and aspires to study further.

This piece was written on the basis of the conversations Siddharth Sreenivas, a Greenpeace campaigner, had with the people mentioned above.

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