

## Where children need wheelchairs, not toys

Toxicity in Ferozepur district's groundwater is causing crippling disorders among children in several villages

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**CHANDIGARH:** The toxicity of the groundwater in over four dozen villages in the border areas of Ferozepur district of Punjab has risen to such alarming levels that an increasing number of children now requires wheelchairs more than toys, as they fall victim to crippling disorders.

The grim picture of the countryside in Punjab's backwaters was brought to the fore by comedian Bhagwant Mann, whose NGO Lok Lehar Foundation started working with these people less than

two months ago. Presenting a couple of children who had lost their eyesight to toxicity, Mr. Mann said, "This is just an effort to wake up our decision-makers to the harsh reality."

"People have often come to me to forward their request to the authorities to hand their villages over to Pakistan. Disillusioned by apathy, these people are at a loss to distinguish which is the real enemy nation," says the noted TV personality and actor.

Mr. Mann brought a group of children who lost their eyesight, school-going girls, par-

ents and teachers to the Chandigarh Press Club to focus media spotlight on the "bleak condition" of these people surviving on the fringes of what was known as "Rangla Punjab." He listed Dona Nanaka, Teja Rohella, Mahata Nagar, Jhangar Bhaini and Retewali Bhaini villages as among the most adversely affected areas. Apart from the loss of eyesight, people suffered from psoriasis, mutilation of organs, skeletal disorders, skin problems, organ failures, cancer, chronic jaundice, premature greying of the hair and

mental disorientation.

"The Sutlej river, which carries blue waters till Nangal in Ropar district, gets polluted by effluents from Ropar, Ludhiana, Jalandhar and Moga cities of Punjab as well as Kasur from Pakistan. When the water reaches the vicinity of these villages, it becomes black and carries deadly uranium, lead, mercury and other heavy metals as also heavy doses of pesticides," he said. "The same water seeped into the ground in these villages."

Mohan Singh, who farms on four 'kanals' of land on Dona Nanaka, presented his two

sons, Shankar and Basakha Singh, who are handicapped. Shankar (19) lost his eyesight 10 years ago, when he was in Class IV. His 10-year-old brother is visually challenged and developed a hearing impairment four years ago. Both were born normal.

Mr. Singh says water from the 35-foot hand pump in his house changes colours when stored for a few minutes. Apart from putting up signs that the groundwater is unfit for drinking, the authorities have done nothing so far.

Lovejeet Singh, a teacher, says that of the 180 students

in the Government Primary School, at least 110 were physically challenged.

Jasbir Lohan, a rehabilitation psychologist associated with Mr. Mann's effort, was at a loss to understand the criteria followed by the State government and the World Bank in devising projects for safe drinking water. Despite being located in the constituency represented by Deputy Chief Minister Sukhbir Singh Badal, none of the villages located along the western bank of the Sutlej had a proper drinking water supply project implemented since 1947.

Water is supposed to support life. But here in Ferozepur district which falls in RI District 3090, the toxicity of the ground water is crippling children and causing other major disorders in several villages.

We claim Indian economy is on the upswing. Worldwide nearly 900 million people do not use drinking water from safe sources. It is estimated that 2.6 billion lack access to decent sanitation facilities. Nearly a third of this population is in India. This is a huge failure on part of the government and the result has been devastating. The social costs associated with the lack of safe drinking water and basic sanitation facility is huge.

Children in many villages carry water from long distances along with their mothers. These children do not go to school and a lost childhood is often reflected when the kid grows up as an antisocial element.

The Millennium Development Goals of the United Nations emphasises on safe drinking water. To highlight the importance of this issue the 'Water for Life Decade' is being observed from 2005 to 2015 and the 'World Water Day' which is observed on March 22<sup>nd</sup> had 'Water for Cities' as the theme this year.

India is lagging in sanitation and providing safe drinking water to many villages. The grim picture is reflected in Punjab as you can see from the news published in *The Hindu* newspaper. Children have lost their eyesight as the water from the Sutlej River is contaminated and carries deadly uranium, lead, mercury and pesticides. This seeps into the ground and has made the ground water unfit for drinking. However, the government has not tried to resolve the issue and as a result the children, as the headline says, need wheelchairs not toys.

This is an area where Rotary clubs from all over India should concentrate. We cannot be condemning the authorities and allow children to be crippled. Rotary clubs can provide the dignity to life and ensure that the elementary requirements for a healthy life are met. We need to rethink the ways in which clubs can get involved in this priority area of Rotary International. This is Rotary's time to act. If we fail to take steps it will not auger well for a good future. Please remember all our polio eradication efforts are centred on proper hygiene and sanitation. The children cannot suffer for no fault of theirs.

The situation is still not hopeless and that is why successive RI Presidents have made water a priority area for action by Rotary clubs worldwide. The Future Vision Plan of TRF has included water and sanitation as one of the priority areas that can attract grants. Rotary clubs are advised to utilise the opportunity available through TRF.

In this earth life goes on mainly because of water. Water gives life to earth. In India during the early years water resources were managed by the community through collective wisdom. A daily wage earner cannot afford to buy bottled water to meet the needs of his family. The ground water has become polluted due to the greed of people. But your good deed in providing safe drinking water facility in areas that need it, can save thousands of lives.



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