

Arsenic-affected villages get access to world's cheapest potable water in West Bengal

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By Agencies

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Madhusudan Kanti (North 24 Parganas): Areas near Indo-Bangladesh border in West Bengal have witnessed a steep decline in arsenic-related diseases over a period of three years after setting up of a cheap and sustainable surface water purification plant.

“In course of periodic medical checkup of a group of patients suffering from arsenic-related diseases, it was revealed that this water purification system has become a boon for them (villagers),” sociologist and founder of Sulabh International Bindeshwar Pathak, the brain behind the water project, said.

Many of the villagers living here were forced to migrate to nearby places before they tried, in vain, every attempt to rid the water of the poison. The cost was too high. They had to pay for every drop of purified water they would fetch from distant towns or cities. Diseases related to the consumption of carcinogenic arsenic contaminated water had even claimed lives in the region.

But life started changing three years ago when Sulabh International Social Service Organisation (SISSO), in collaboration with a French company, 1001 Fontaines, installed a Rs 20-lakh pond-based water treatment plant in Madhusudan Kanti Village of North 24 Parganas district, some 100 km from Kolkata.

The cost of establishing the plant in Bangaon subdivision, that can produce 8,000 litres of potable water per day at a cost of 10-20 paise a litre, was shared between the French organisation, Sulabh and the villagers.

“The villagers and local NGOs maintain this. It is a self-sustainable project with active participation from the villagers and generate employment,” Pathak said.

“This is the first time in the world that we have succeeded in producing pure drinking water at a very nominal cost by this new technology and villagers may get direct benefits,” he added.

“It is being sold at 50 paise after including other costs like distribution, storing, etc. Even people in neighbouring villages can also safely use this water,” the Sulabh founder further said.

Sulabh and the French organisation have also established pilot projects in North 24 Parganas, Murshidabad and Nadia districts of the state, where at many places people are forced to drink arsenic-contaminated water.

Pathak believes the entire problem of arsenic-contaminated water could be solved if the West Bengal government took interest and replicated the model.

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), arsenic is a natural component of the earth's crust and is widely distributed throughout the environment — in air, water and land. It is highly toxic in its inorganic form.

Long-term exposure to inorganic arsenic, mainly by drinking contaminated water, eating food grown or even prepared with this water, can cause skin lesions and cancer.

WHO says inorganic arsenic is naturally present at high levels in the groundwater of a number of countries, including Argentina, Bangladesh, Chile, China, India, Mexico, and the United States.

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