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## Indian villagers crippled by fluoride

By Omer Farooq

BBC correspondent in Hyderabad

**This is a story of a land where excess fluoride has turned the ground water into a slow poison, crippling at least 10,000 people and leaving hundreds of thousand of others in constant misery.**

This is the story of Nalgonda, one of the poorest and most drought-prone districts of Andhra Pradesh in southern India.

The seriousness of the problem can be measured by the fact that the groundwater has 10 to 12 parts per million (ppm) of fluoride in contrast to a maximum permitted level of just 1.5 ppm.

In the dust-filled hamlets and villages hardly 100 kilometres (60 miles) from the state capital Hyderabad there are many living examples of the havoc caused by fluoride.

### Shocking

People with paralysing bone diseases, stooped backs, crooked hands and legs, deformed teeth, blindness and other handicaps are a common sight.

The most shocking and sad image of this suffering is Ramaswamy.

At 18-years of age, when other youths are full of enthusiasm for life, Ramaswamy looks to be hardly five-years-old, with a physique completely devastated by the effects of fluoride.

He is so weak that he cannot walk and weighs barely 15 kilogrammes (less than 34 lbs). He is blind and mentally challenged.

He cannot recognise his own name and he cannot even eat by himself.

"We have done all we could have done," says his father Ramalingaiah, himself a victim of fluoride in Anneparti village.

### 'Dreadful fate'

"Now it is up to the God and government to do something to relieve our sufferings," he says with misty eyes.

Komati Reddy Venkat Reddy, a member of the Andhra Pradesh legislative assembly representing Nalgonda district says: "Ramaswamy is the symbol of our dreadful fate, our horrendous sufferings.

"But the government shows no seriousness towards solving the problem".

Mr Reddy represents the opposition Congress party and succeeded in raising the profile of the problem in March when he went on a hunger strike, demanding the completion of a drinking water project.

Although his fast was forcibly broken he succeeded in stirring up public opinion.

His party also mounted pressure on the state's Telugu Desam Government by organising a march of fluoride victims to the Governor's House.

Ram Prakash Sisodia is head of the administration in Nalgonda. He denies the allegations of inaction.

"This problem has been there for ages. The typical underground rock formation with fluoride is the root cause of the problem. And there is no solution other than bringing water from other areas through a pipeline," he says.

Local people have been demanding this for 30 years and say they want a supply of water from the River Krishna, which flows about 100 kilometres (60 miles) south-east of the area.

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