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Our food and water has become poison

Sunday, October 14, 2007 04:26 IST

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For many years now, Ganpat Dodhiya Patel, former headman of Salwao village, on the outskirts of Vapi, has been doing rounds of the village on his motorcycle, talking to residents. But the recce rarely yields good news.

Some days the villagers complain about not having any water to drink or cook. Another day, it's about dying cattle. "A few years ago, one villager lost 16 cattle the same day," says Ganpat, 55. "Their skin had melted away, leaving their bones exposed after repeated dips in a nearby stream. We suspect it was the water."

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Salwao, along with another eight or 10 villages, is located on the banks of Bil Khadi, a 19-km stream into which factories of the GIDC discharge their effluents via 11 drains. Chemical engineer Magan Shah Dakhle says: "They built treatment plants, but hardly any of the units clean the water. It's too expensive, so they simply channel the effluents into streams, hoping it will flow away."

It clearly does not; the reddish-brown water of Bil Khadi was found to be laden with metals like mercury and zinc. Till a few years ago, it was the only source of water for all of Salwao. Then government officials came by and "shut down", one by one, the 28 wells. The villagers started using handpumps, but now even those give off reddish water.

"The pollutants have seeped into our fruit and vegetables through the water," says Ganpat. The Blacksmith report confirms this, saying the produce contains up to 60 times more heavy metals than non-contaminated produce.

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