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Sister Emma, left, and Sister Agnes, right, are pictured with a family from the Ranikhong Parish who received a tube well from the Sisters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, Bangladesh. (Sumon Corraya)



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The Sisters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, Bangladesh, and the local Catholic Church are making a difference by addressing the persistent challenge of access to safe drinking water. Sr. Maria Josephina, one of the leading figures behind this initiative, shared her journey with EarthBeat.

"When I first started working in the remote areas of Mymensingh, I fell ill multiple times from drinking unsafe water sourced from the hills. I contracted typhoid twice, which left me deeply worried. That's when I realized something had to be done," said Josephina, who is in charge of the Sisters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul in Bangladesh.

With its deep groundwater and hilly terrain, Mymensingh's unique landscape makes accessing clean water difficult. Josephina took it upon herself to find donors and, with their help, began installing tube wells. With the help of local priests, her congregation started installing wells in 2013. By late October 2024, they had installed 485 tube wells in predominantly Garo tribal areas, where most local Catholics reside.

She said people in the area lack the resources to install deep tube wells to access clean drinking water.

A tube well consists of an iron pipe fitted with a solid steel point and lateral perforations near the tip. The pipe is driven into the ground until it reaches a water-bearing layer, after which a suction pump is attached to the upper end to extract water.

Josephina began this initiative after noticing, during medical camps, that people were suffering due to a lack of access to clean water. This initiative benefits not only Christians but also Muslims and Hindus.

She shared that this year, tube wells were installed in several locations, including Baromari, Jalchatra, Ranikhong, Mariamnagar, Shyampur, Gazirvita, Baluchora, Pirgachha, Dhairpara, and the Dakua Parish and sub-parish areas.

Beneficiaries expressed appreciation, describing how the tube wells have transformed their daily lives. Many previously had to rely on streams or fountains for water. Some had tube wells, but the water was unsuitable for drinking due to high iron levels. Excessive iron in water poses health risks and creates practical challenges, such as staining basins, bathtubs and clothing, which makes routine tasks more difficult.



Shima Dafo, 45, a Garo Catholic woman from the Baromari Parish, uses a tube well to meet the clean water needs of her family of 10. (Sumon Corraya)

"Now, we can drink clean water," said Shima Dafo, a 45-year-old Garo Catholic woman from Khalisakura in the Baromari Parish.

Dafo pointed to the tube well provided by the nuns, expressing her gratitude. "This tube well meets the needs of all ten members of my family. We received it in December, just before Christmas, and made our Christmas so joyful."

Khakon Sangma, 50, another beneficiary from the same village, shared how the tube well has positively impacted his family's life. Their groundwater levels were normal, but excessive use of groundwater reduced the supply. In addition, the water contained too much iron.

"We were desperately looking for a solution when the nuns stepped in to help us. It is a blessing for us," explained Sangma, a father of two.

The tube well provided by the nuns now supports his family of 12 and their neighbors, who also benefit from the clean water.

"We used to have a regular tube well, but the nuns gave us a high-powered submersible pump [deep tube well], which solved our water issues," he said.

The nuns have installed two types of wells: light tube wells, which do not require electricity to draw water, and deep tube wells, equipped with high-powered submersible pumps that require electricity. Many older light tube wells no longer function, so the nuns have been providing high-powered submersible pumps to those in need.

Installing a deep tube well costs approximately 30,000 taka ($250), while a light tube well costs around 15,000 taka ($125).



Nirmol Mree, a pilgrim, drinks clean water at Mary, Queen of Fatima, a Marian pilgrimage site in Baromari. (Sumon Corraya)

In 2023, their efforts expanded with four high-powered submersible pumps throughout the Baromari Parish. Mary, Queen of Fatima, a Marian pilgrimage site in the Baromari hills that attracts tens of thousands of pilgrims annually, can now ensure a reliable supply of safe drinking water for visitors.

"Each year, I come for the pilgrimage, and for the past two years, I've seen an adequate water supply," said Ashim Mankhin, who attended the pilgrimage with his wife and two children.

Local parish priest Fr. Torun Bonwary expressed his gratitude for the initiative.

"These additional pumps have made a huge difference. Ensuring water for the thousands who come here is no longer a concern," he told EarthBeat.

He shared that during the Baromari pilgrimage on Oct. 31 and Nov. 1 this year, pilgrims were delighted to have sufficient water.

The nuns have also provided funding for six additional deep tube wells, which will further improve the water supply, Bonwary added.

Other parish priests in the region have begun adopting similar initiatives, installing tube wells to serve diocesan communities. These efforts will benefit Christians and people of other faiths living in these underserved areas.

Bonwary acknowledged the growing challenge of accessing groundwater in the Bangladesh-India border areas within his parish, explaining that groundwater levels are dropping, making it harder to access water.

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Fr. Simon Hacha, the parish priest of the Dorgachala Parish in Mymensingh, also shared his experience.

"The people in my area face severe water scarcity. We have extended our support by installing tube wells. We had arranged many tube wells earlier, but most of the old ones have stopped functioning. We urgently need to install more deep tube wells."

Due to a lack of donors, they are unable to fully support all those in need. Still, signs are encouraging.

"To see the nuns' initiative making such a meaningful difference, I personally arranged funds and provided six tube wells myself," Bonwary said.