

Water FOR THE THIRSTY

The WASH Project, an initiative of Kachhwa Christian Hospital, offers life to thirsty communities which suffer from poor sanitation and hygiene.

Clean water is necessary for good health, but 90% of villages in the North Indian region of Uttar Pradesh have poor access to safe drinking water and proper sanitation. And the cost is heavy. Diseases such as diarrhoea, cholera, malaria and typhoid are

commonplace and mortality rates are high. WASH works with churches and other Christian groups to build community health through the provision of clean water, and has already helped install pumps in over 60 villages.

Ramnarish is six years old and is one of seven children in his family. He lives in a small town in a very deprived part of Uttar Pradesh, and belongs to the Mussahar caste, one of the very lowest. Isolated from society, these people live a hand-to-mouth existence, eating leftover grain and rats.

Five years ago Ballu Singh and his wife Snigdha moved into the area to begin a community health programme from their base at Kachhwa Christian Hospital. They helped with basic health care, encouraged micro-finance projects, and started a school: Ramnarish is now enrolled there, the only child from his family. They also

introduced the WASH project, to help build good health into everyday life through Water, Sanitation and Hygiene.

The shortage of clean water for drinking, let alone for washing, meant that diarrhoea was a common child-killer in this community. So WASH built a well next to the school, with a simple hand pump, giving Ramnarish and others from his caste access to clean drinking and washing water for the first time; they had been prohibited from using the main village well because of their low caste.

The WASH team built three more wells in the community. Building them was easy – teaching sanitation and hygiene was much harder, so the team employed culturally appropriate games, visual aids and constant practice until the new habits became part of life.

The government had built toilets but no one used them, preferring instead to go to the nearest open space. After Ballu and the WASH team spent time explaining why toilets were important, one man asked them to build him one and offered to pay. He was very proud when it was opened. Others followed and now there are five.

It hasn't been easy persuading the community members to become involved in bringing change into their apparently hopeless situation – that's where trust, built through relationship, is vital. But change is happening, and Ramnarish's future will be the better for it. ☺

Robin Thomson is a partner with IS England & Wales, and works with South Asian Concern, who partner with Kachhwa Christian Hospital.

