

Coconut Milk, Drills Dig Wells In India

Kharpudi, India (KF) — The 20th century has arrived in Kharpudi — and not a moment too soon.

If a small American town had a problem that only an elephant could solve, and the elephant suddenly showed up on main street in all its oriental trappings, the

consternation would not be greater than in this North-Indian village when the well-drilling rig drove ponderously into view across their drought-parched fields.

A mundane, unlovely piece of practicality in its native environment, the rig was exotic, mys-

terious, and more than a little fearsome to the crowd of idle villagers who watched its coming. Idle they were indeed, for all activity in Kharpudi had ground to a halt for lack of water.

The village wells were shallow, hand dug. Bedrock lies close under the soil in this part of India. Shovels can reach only water above the rock. All such water sources have been exhausted in three long rainless years.

In Kharpudi, water was rationed. Each family was allowed to draw each day one pot of water from the only well remaining. In half an hour of painstaking dipping with a hand bucket, a woman could collect a pot of murky brown liquid. That must suffice her family for the day's cooking, drinking, and washing.

Kharpudi's council of elders had met, listless under their bright turbans, and agreed to let the stranger try his magic. The stranger, John McLeod, a Scotch agricultural missionary, appointed a day. And on this morning the grotesque monster was inching into Kharpudi, raising a dusty trail on the sun-baked ridge.

No road passes through Kharpudi, but there is an open space on the central high ground among the 200 or so clay-and-stone cottages of the village. Local wise men advised that a good supply of water lay under that space in a spot near the temple.

McLeod, knowing that the success of his operation depended on the good will of village leaders, went over the ground carefully and agreed to drill in the spot indicated. He would have preferred lower ground. From the rise, they might have to drill 200 feet or more to reach a good water supply.

Kharpudi was the first village in the Jalna area to which the drill rig came. It was important that this first well be achieved smoothly, so that future operations would have local cooperation. The equipment has great potential for helping in the effort to overcome India's severe and prolonged drought.

The drilling team guides the rig toward Kharpudi's clustered houses across a barren slope. Dogs bark, chickens scatter before the apparition. From windows and doorways children peer timidly. They have seen bullock carts and bicycles. But this machine is so big it must maneuver carefully to fit between the walls on the way to the drilling site.

As the crew prepares to hoist the rig and start the drill, the elders step forward with a coconut which they crack open on a rock, spilling its milk over dusty ground. They sprinkle colored powder on the well site, and burn incense to insure plentiful water.

Then the roar of the compressors begins, and the steel bit cuts into the earth, sending up a fine dust to coat the faces of the watchers.

As the day wears on the crowd thins to a few children and old

men. The rest of the village goes about the few tasks that can still be done. One of them is a daily trip by bullock cart to a well three miles away for a token supply of water, part of a hopeless effort at irrigation to produce some harvest from the withered fields.

Just before the drill enters the rock that prisons water beyond the reach of villagers' shovels, there is a brief spurt of mud. It does not last long. Through the still, parched afternoon the gigantic chatter of the pneumatic hammer hangs tensely over Kharpudi. The drill reaches 100 feet, 150. Men sit in the lengthening shadows watching the drill team move around the screaming monster that has occupied their village. It is late. The crew prepares to stop work for the day. The drill reaches 170 feet down.

Suddenly there is a rush of water shooting out around the air hammer. A brief cheer, and the drill is brought up, the hole covered. The crew leaves. Silence and doubt descend with night on the village. All day there was great magic-making. But still they have no water to drink.

Early next morning the hole is opened. The chief elder peers down into the narrow black

opening. Noncommittal, he steps back. Then there is more activity.

A charge of high explosives is lowered into the hole to enlarge the well chamber. A muffled thump announces detonation. The metal lining for the shaft is sunk, and a pump to force the water up. There is much assembling and tinkering and testing.

When the pumphead is installed, village women begin to gather, hopefully carrying water jars. A few strokes of the pump handle bring a fitful splutter, then a steady stream from the tap.

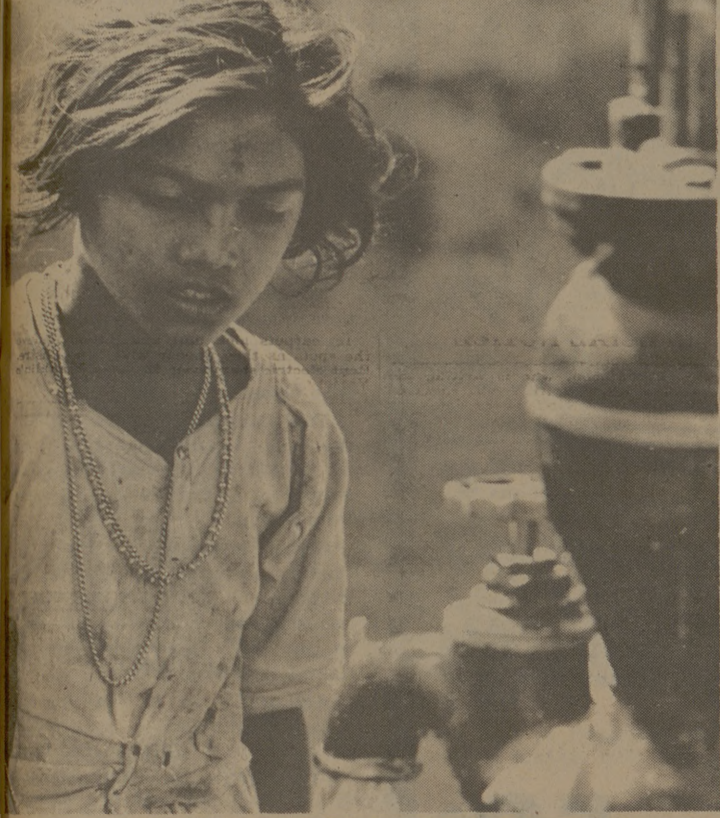
The water is very cold, very clear. The first woman touches the stream that is pouring into her jar. She has pulled water up from the earth in a bucket all of her life. Never until now has water flowed into her jar with such incredible ease.

Children crowd around for a turn at the pump handle, for a sip of the water. Parents look on in joy that has a touch of disbelief.

McLeod, however, has already gone on to visit the next village in this thirsty valley. Another council of elders is about to meet the 20th century. Coconut milk and a power drill will get you a glass of water—and hope.



DROUGHT ENDED
Suddenly water gushes out after a day of drilling. Water has been rationed in this small village in Maharashtra State, India, after three years of drought. Little more than mud is left in a single remaining well. Water may enable the farmers to harvest a crop for the first time since 1963.



CHILD TRYS TAP WATER
Amazed at the advent of water from a tap, a ten-year-old hesitates before taking a drink. Irrigation wells with power pumps to provide enough water for agricultural needs is the next step in relieving India's chronic and acute food shortage. (Photos: CORAGS)

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