



QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER

Issue 6 | July 2026



FOREWORD

Dear Readers,

Welcome to the sixth edition of Zenith's newsletter! Over the past few months, our work with the Sahariya community has gained momentum, leading us to evolve and make several crucial changes. One key change pertains to our geographic operations. In March 2026, we wound up our operations in Malanpur, via a clinic called the Samudayak Adhikar Kendra (SAK). It was a tremendously difficult decision, made to align all our efforts towards working with the Sahariya adivasi community.

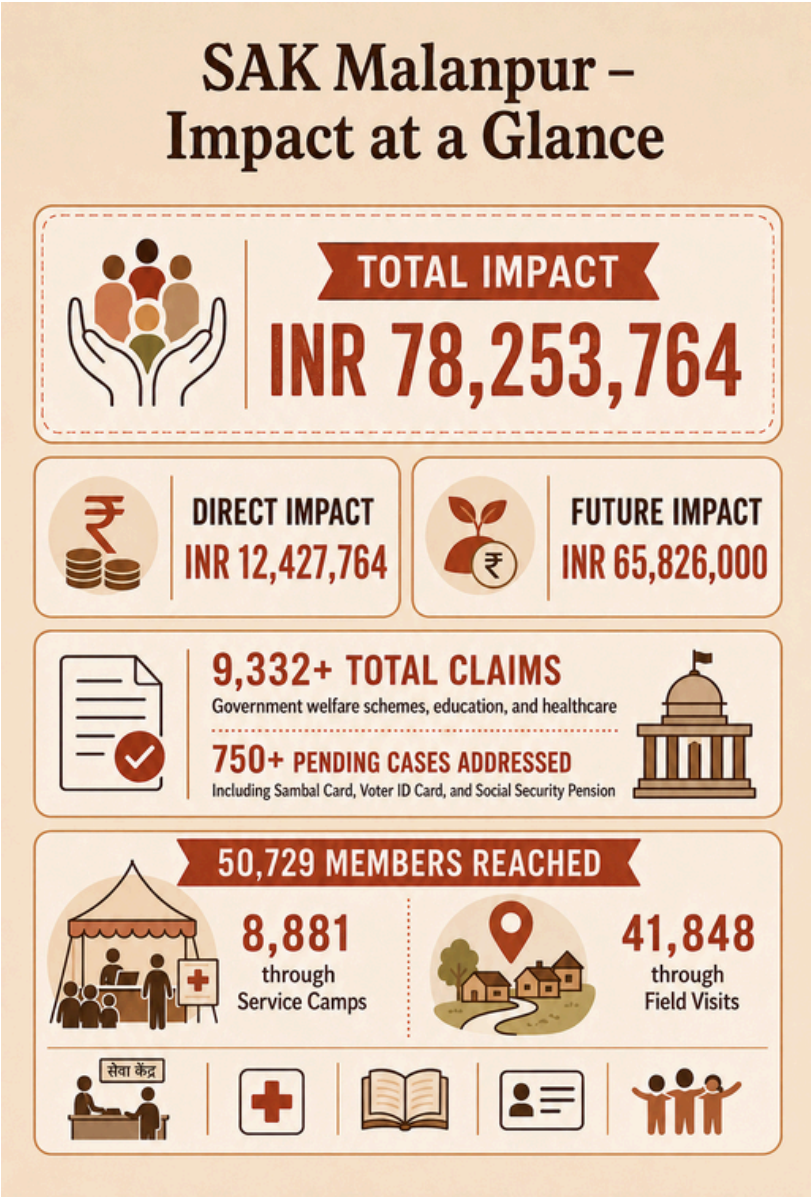
Our work in Malanpur focused on supporting disadvantaged individuals in accessing social security and public entitlements through documentation, education and advocacy. Over five years, we worked with multiple communities and resolved around 10,000 cases and claims pertaining to social entitlements. We left hoping that our work had advanced their socio-legal empowerment and equipped community members with the tools to carry it forward.

We are delighted to share that we recently commenced work in Sheopur, home to a considerable segment of Madhya Pradesh's Sahariya population. Led by lawyers and paralegals, our team will address socio-legal issues relating to land rights, essential services and forest rights. Going forward, we aim to organise our operations around the issues faced by the community, rather than the locations of our offices. In a similar vein, we are revamping our newsletter. Previously, each edition featured stories from each of our three offices. Beginning with this edition, we will share stories exploring the nuances of a specific thematic issue.

This edition presents five stories on gross violations of the Sahariyas' right to land. They show how Zenith's team helps community members obtain records, offers support when they face intimidation, and advocates before government and legal forums to remedy encroachments and secure access to land that is theirs by right. Our work is strengthened by detailed legal research on the Sahariyas' rights to *jal* (water), *jungle* (forest) and *jameen* (land).

Happy reading,
The Zenith Society Team

As Zenith Society transitions its team and presence from SAK Malanpur to a new office in Sheopur, we recall our impact in Malanpur via the figures below:





LAND, LOSS, AND THE SAHARIYA STRUGGLE

For generations, Sahariya Adivasis have lived in the forests of central India, sharing a deep relationship with *jal, jungle, jameen*- water, forests, and land respectively. Their lives were shaped by an intimate understanding of local ecology: the plants that nourished them, the animals they coexisted with, and the rhythms of nature that guided farming, gathering, and livestock rearing. Land and forest were not merely resources; they were the foundation of identity, culture, knowledge, and survival.

This relationship began to change dramatically during colonial rule. British forest laws transformed forests from living landscapes into state-controlled assets valued for timber, wildlife, and revenue. Large forest areas were declared Reserved and Protected Forests, restricting customary access and control. Many Sahariya families lost access not only to forests but also to agricultural lands located within and around these notified areas, often without rehabilitation or resettlement.

Independence did promise reform, but for many Sahariyas, the structures governing land and forests changed little. Colonial-era laws, institutions, and administrative mindsets largely remained intact. While the Constitution promised equality and justice, exclusionary systems of governance continued to marginalize tribal communities. As forests expanded under conservation regimes and development projects, displacement and insecurity persisted.

Outside forest areas, Sahariya families depended increasingly on small landholdings governed by revenue laws. Yet as land became more valuable with agricultural expansion, infrastructure development, and market growth, it also became more vulnerable to capture. Many Sahariyas, unfamiliar with complex land administration processes and lacking access to legal support, found their rights difficult to defend.

Although governments introduced protective laws, restrictions on tribal land transfers, welfare policies, and land redistribution programmes, implementation often fell short. Local governance structures frequently remained discriminatory and inaccessible. Powerful local actors, often referred to by the community as the *dabang samaaj*, encroached upon tribal lands, while exploitative moneylenders extended loans at exorbitant interest rates, using land as collateral and eventually acquiring large tracts from indebted families. Lands near roads, highways and growing markets often passed into the hands of politically influential non-tribal groups despite legal safeguards.

As one Sahariya elder recalled,

“Earlier, the forest and our land gave us abundance. Our children would dip their rotis in ghee and eat. Today, we struggle even for the roti.”

”

Even land redistribution efforts like “Bhoodan” have delivered mixed outcomes. Many families received land titles on paper but never gained effective possession due to administrative failures, disputes, or lack of support.

Today, the struggle for land remains central to the Sahariya experience. It is a key topic of historical dispossession, unequal power, and the ongoing effort to reclaim rights, dignity, and agency. In this issue, we bring you stories from the ground that illuminate the many dimensions of this struggle and the resilience with which Sahariya communities continue to defend their relationship with land.

Laborer to Landowner: Khera's Legal Path to Reclaiming Land

Khera Adivasi, 45, from Bajrangpura in Gwalior, spent decades working as a farm labourer despite his family's 18 bighas of land in Kaith village. The loss traced back to an informal loan of INR 5,000 taken by his brother from Bahadur Gurjar. When repayment failed, Gurjar took possession of the land and demanded INR 50,000 to return it. Negotiations stalled due to threats and harassment and the brothers, orphaned in the interim, left the village.



Khera Adivasi in front of his home.

The consequences extended beyond displacement. Khera and his brothers moved into stone quarry work, where prolonged exposure to dust led to lung disease. Three other co-owners named in the land records, Ratnu, Munna, and Kalla, died in their thirties. For nearly three decades, the land remained under unlawful possession. By Khera's estimate, the family lost over INR 1 lakh annually in potential agricultural income, amounting to roughly INR 30 lakh over time.

The case resurfaced in July 2024 during a field visit by the Zenith team, following a referral from a community member. Initial engagement required building confidence. Khera had seen no precedent for recovering land from entrenched local actors. Zenith's role moved quickly from outreach to case-building: verifying land records, mapping the survey details, and identifying the appropriate legal route.

Proceedings began under Section 250 of the Madhya Pradesh Land Revenue Code, 1959, which allows removal of unlawful possession by such upper caste encroachers. At the tehsil office, officials refused to register the case without a prior field investigation. Zenith coordinated the submission, pursued the Patwari (revenue officer) for a site report, and maintained follow-up through repeated visits. Each step required Khera's presence, and resulted in direct wage loss.

In September 2024, the Patwari confirmed encroachment. A formal case was filed in October. Notices were issued, followed by intimidation and attempts to influence withdrawal. The process then stalled on a technical ground. The land records listed four co-owners, but only Khera was alive. Before eviction could proceed, mutation entries had to record legal heirs of the deceased. Zenith handled the succession filings, documentation, and coordination with revenue offices, effectively shifting the case from eviction to record correction and back again.



Sunil ji from Zenith met Khera Adivasi regularly while his case was ongoing.

With mutation completed, the Tehsildar issued an order in June 2025 directing restoration of possession within seven days and imposing a penalty of INR 5,000 on the accused. However, the order did not translate into immediate enforcement. Responsibility was deflected between departments, with revenue authorities citing police jurisdiction.

Zenith escalated through formal complaints to the Sub-Divisional Officer and the District Collector. Following administrative direction, a joint task group was constituted. Its role was not merely operational. It aligned revenue records, ensured police presence to prevent confrontation, and executed the order on site. The encroachment was cleared in a supervised process, and possession was formally handed back.

The case turns on procedure rather than exception. Informal transactions, outdated records, and unexecuted orders can stall ownership indefinitely. Recovery depends on sequencing the system correctly: verification, mutation, adjudication, and enforcement. Without sustained and committed intervention, each stage becomes a stopping point rather than a pathway.

Munnibai's Long Road to Legal Ownership

Munnibai's land purchase in Panihar village, Ghatigaon tehsil, Gwalior Madhya Pradesh, illustrates how routine property transactions can become legally complex when documentation, classification, and procedure intersect.

For decades, Munnibai sustained her household of nine children, supplementing her husband's income by labouring in farms, collecting firewood and juggling household chores. Her spouse, Banshiram Adiwas, began his government service with a salary of INR 250. Stability came only after his retirement,

“Khera's assessment is direct: **“We lost the land over INR 5,000. Getting it back took years of effort and navigating offices, but without that, it would never return.”**



when a pension of INR 30,000 enabled the family to consider purchasing land as a long-term safeguard. The transaction, however, began informally. The full payment was made to a relative (seller) without a written agreement, leaving the family legally exposed.

Under Section 54 of the Transfer of Property Act, 1882, any sale of immovable property above INR 100 must be completed through a registered instrument. Until registration, no legal interest is created. This risk materialized when external parties encouraged the seller to reconsider the deal and seek additional payment. Without documentation, Banshiram and Munnibai had limited recourse. They approached the Zenith team via Harendra Khandel, one of Zenith's Sahariya youth leaders.

The case escalated into a procedural challenge once formal registration was initiated. As per Section 17(1)(b) of the Registration Act, 1908, a sale deed must be registered to confer legal title, and Section 49 renders unregistered documents unenforceable. Registration, however, depends on accurate land records.

Here, discrepancies in the survey number were discovered. This created uncertainty about the land's identity and classification.

The issue fell under Section 115 of the Madhya Pradesh Land Revenue Code, 1959, which governs correction of land records. The recorded survey number did not align with current entries, and the land appeared, in official records, to overlap with the Son Chiriya Wildlife Sanctuary in Ghatigaon. This triggered additional scrutiny under Section 29 of the Indian Forest Act, 1927, and Section 2 of the Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980. Authorities required confirmation that the land was not protected forest, necessitating a No Objection Certificate from the Forest Department.

The procedural burden and time pressure were significant. Registration attempts were delayed by repeated technical failures in the online portal, unnecessary travel costs, and fluctuating demands from intermediaries. Each delay meant Banshiram had to again coordinate the availability and transport of the seller, registration agents, and his spouse. Nearly INR 2 lakh was already committed as stamp duty when the Registrar halted the process, granting three months to secure the No Objection Certificate or forfeit the amount.

For illiterate applicants, navigating revenue corrections, inter-departmental verification, and statutory compliance was not feasible without support. Zenith's intervention involved clarifying old and new survey numbers, filing formal applications, and sustained follow-up with revenue and forest authorities. Officials required documentary consistency across departments before certifying that the land no longer fell within protected forest boundaries.

Only after these corrections and verifications were completed within the tight timeframe, did the Forest Department issue the No Objection Certificate. Registration then proceeded, legally vesting ownership in Munnibai's name.

The outcome appears straightforward, a completed land purchase, but the process underscores a broader reality. Legal ownership in such contexts is not secured by payment alone. It requires alignment with multiple statutory frameworks, accurate public records, and procedural persistence. For families like Munnibai's, the gap between informal transactions and formal legal recognition remains the most significant barrier to securing property rights.

From the Field to the Record Room: The Long Road to a Land Record

Every land dispute begins with a story. But before that story can become a legal case, it needs something much less visible, a government record.

For nearly seven years, Zenith has worked with Adivasi communities across northern Madhya Pradesh on land-related issues, including demarcation, mutation, correction of land records, partition, and illegal encroachment.

The team's work begins in villages, where people share the challenges they face. Those conversations are carefully documented, understood, and gradually shaped into legal cases. Before any petition can be filed, however, one question must be answered: can the necessary government records be found?

On paper, obtaining these records should be straightforward. Citizens can apply through Lok Seva Kendras, access district record rooms by paying a prescribed fee, or seek information under the Right to Information Act. In practice, accessing a single document often becomes the first and most difficult battle.

The search usually starts with identifying where a record is held, a challenge in itself.

"To obtain old khasra records, officials do not provide clear and correct information about which office holds the record." - Raja Adiwas, Community Worker at Zenith

”



Sahariyas and Ramlakhan from Zenith's team wait long hours at various government offices to secure paperwork.



Records are often lost or destroyed in record rooms.

Even after the right office is identified, the process rarely moves smoothly. Applications submitted through Lok Seva Kendras are acknowledged with receipts that specify a deadline for providing the records. Yet applications sometimes never reach the concerned department. In other cases, they arrive but remain unattended, delaying the process without explanation.

Poor record management creates another layer of difficulty. Files may be misplaced, unavailable, or stored in poorly maintained record rooms. Sometimes even government officials are unsure which office is responsible for a particular record. Incorrect or incomplete reference numbers make locating documents even harder, and in disputed matters, records may be deliberately withheld.

For the team, obtaining records often means repeated journeys between government offices.

"To obtain records, we often have to make multiple visits to the record branch, and every time the concerned official asks us to come again the next day." - Akanksha, Paralegal at Zenith

As these experiences accumulated, the team learned that persistence is as important as legal knowledge. They rarely stop after the first refusal. When records are not provided within the prescribed time, Zenith files first and second appeals through the Public Service Guarantee framework. The team also submits applications and representations before Collectors, Sub-Divisional Officers, and Tehsildars, follows up regularly, and, where necessary, invokes the Right to Information Act. Depending on the circumstances, informal approaches are also used to trace missing records and move stalled applications forward.



Damaged records

"Often, correct information about the tracking or case number of a record is not available, which causes delays, and sometimes officials take advantage of this to mislead us." - Sana, Paralegal at Zenith

These efforts are not simply about obtaining paperwork for a single case. Each application, appeal, or RTI asks the government to follow its own procedures and explain its actions. The process creates accountability, requiring officials either to provide the requested records or justify why they cannot.

As Riya, an advocate from Zenith points out, many delays stem from weaknesses in the system itself.

“For the physical preservation of government records, the government has created record rooms in every department, but these are not operated properly. One major reason for delays in obtaining records is poor record management, which defeats the very purpose of this arrangement.”



Inside a government record room.

Over time, Zenith has learned that obtaining a government record is about far more than collecting documents. Every application reminds public authorities that government records ultimately belong to citizens. Every appeal reinforces the principle that people have the right to see, read, and understand the documents that shape their lives.

Whether a record is eventually obtained or not, the process strengthens people's awareness of their rights and challenges arbitrary governance. If trained legal workers struggle to access these records, the barriers facing ordinary citizens are even greater. The journey from the field to the record room reveals that, for many communities, access to justice begins long before anyone enters a courtroom.



Zenith's team seeking advice from the Registrar

SAHARIYA SPOTLIGHT

The Sahariya Spotlight is a dedicated section of this newsletter that offers readers a deeper understanding of the diverse cultural practices of the communities supported by Zenith Society. It is divided into two sections: one that highlights the community as a whole, and another that presents a year-in-the-life narrative following an individual member across seasons, offering a first-hand glimpse into their daily life and experiences.

Land as Mother: The Sahariya Understanding of Belonging

In much of urban India, land is discussed in terms of ownership, market value and development potential. For the Sahariya Adivasi community, however, land carries a profoundly different meaning. It is not simply a productive asset or a commodity to be traded. It is ancestry, livelihood, spirituality and identity woven into a living relationship with the earth.

Across Sahariya villages, people speak of land not as property but as *Dharti Maa*, Mother Earth. This worldview shapes every aspect of community life, from farming and family to ritual and memory. As one elder explains, *"Our ancestors considered land our greatest mother because it gives us the grain, vegetables and food that sustain our lives."*



This relationship extends far beyond cultivation. Land provides food, homes, fodder and livelihoods, but it also offers something less tangible, belonging. Sahariya families with land are able to remain rooted in their villages, while its loss often brings forced migration, economic insecurity and the erosion of community ties. Land also carries social significance, influencing marriage prospects and reflecting a household's ability to sustain future generations.

The sacredness of land is expressed through everyday practices. Before a house is built or seeds are sown, Sahariya families perform rituals that acknowledge the earth beneath them. Rather than treating farming as an act of extraction, these ceremonies recognise it as a partnership with nature, grounded in gratitude and responsibility.

The agricultural calendar is equally a cultural one. Festivals such as Makar Sankranti, Holi, Hal Hariyali Amavasya and Diwali mark the cycles of sowing and harvest while reinforcing collective values. Newly harvested crops are first offered to family deities before being shared with neighbours. During Holi, villagers contribute fresh produce to the communal celebration regardless of whose field it came from, reflecting the belief that harvest is sustained by community as much as individual effort.

Sahariya women play a central role in preserving traditions, leading songs, art, preparing offerings and passing ritual knowledge across generations. Elders, meanwhile, keep alive stories of how their ancestors acquired land, reinforcing its place in the community's shared memory.



Livestock are precious to Sahariya farmers



Sahariyas surveying their land.

Today, migration, economic pressures and changing social norms are reshaping Sahariya life. Festivals are quieter, rituals are shortening, and younger generations face increasing distance from traditional practices. Yet many families continue to uphold these customs with pride.

As one villager reflects,

"A person without land feels like a stray animal with no place to belong."

”

For the Sahariya community, land remains far more than a resource. It is Mother Earth, a source of nourishment, dignity, cultural memory and collective responsibility that continues to shape life across generations.



Harendra Khandel at his farm

Surviving Summer: Small Land, High Stakes

Harendra, a Sahariya adivasi farmer whose year Zenith's team has been following closely, cultivates about 7.5 bighas, roughly 1.9 hectares of land. This is around three football fields' worth of farmland, on the outskirts of Gwalior. His experience reflects a broader reality across central India: winter offers relative stability, while summer brings uncertainty that shapes the fortunes of the entire agricultural year.

Winter is Harendra's productive season. His fields yield wheat, sweet peas and other crops, encouraging him to expand cultivation through sharecropping arrangements with neighbouring farmers. Water is more readily available, labour is easier to organise, and the risks are comparatively lower. During this season, he can irrigate and cultivate up to 10–15 bighas of land.

Summer tells a different story. As temperatures rise, wells begin to dry up, motor pumps fail, and groundwater becomes increasingly unreliable. Water availability determines how much land Harendra can cultivate. Although he farms around 7.5 bighas on average, in summer he can cultivate only a fraction of that area. Accessing water from another farmer's borewell costs around INR 5,000 each time, while installing his own borewell would require an investment of around INR 1.5 lakh, far beyond his reach.

Harendra may not describe it as climate change, but he has noticed its effects. Crops are ripening weeks earlier than they once did. Moong, a lentil, for example, now matures significantly faster than expected. A hybrid variety that should mature around 60 days is often ready in just 45 days, while traditional varieties that normally take 90 days can mature in barely 65 days. Faster ripening may sound beneficial, but it often means crops

have less time to develop fully, reducing yields and affecting quality.

The economic consequences are stark. Summer crop production is roughly half of what Harendra harvests during winter. Water scarcity, electricity disruptions, pump failures, irregular rainfall, hailstorms and untimely rain all contribute to lower yields and higher risks.

To manage these conditions, Harendra focuses on crops that can withstand heat, including coriander, okra, pumpkin, tomatoes and moong. Yet many of these crops are highly perishable. Once harvested, they must be sold quickly. Any delay can lead to spoilage and lost income. Sometimes the cost of harvesting and transporting greens such as coriander exceeds the price buyers are willing to pay.

For coriander cultivation alone, irrigation costs reach around INR 5,000 per bigha during the summer season. Harendra cultivates only two bighas because of the risks involved, spending roughly INR 10,000 on water before accounting for seeds, labour and transport. Even when harvests are successful, market prices can fluctuate sharply from one day to the next.

Summer farming also demands relentless labour. Irrigation is often carried out at night to reduce water loss through evaporation. Harendra stays awake to operate pumps and monitor his fields. It is not only urban professionals or call-centre employees who work night shifts. Farmers do as well, often without the predictability, safety, or compensation associated with formal employment. The idea of a work-life balance has little meaning when crops require constant attention and the margin for error is so small.

Even with careful management, risks remain high. Heat stress, pests, diseases, hailstorms and unexpected rainfall can wipe out months of effort. Government surveys of crop damage are sometimes conducted, but compensation remains uncertain. In practice, effective crop insurance is difficult to access when losses occur. Like many small farmers, Harendra often relies on loans from local moneylenders to recover from bad seasons, increasing his debt burden.

The impact extends beyond the farm with women in the household contributing to agricultural work while also collecting firewood,



A temporary shelter

fetching water and managing domestic responsibilities. During the hottest months, Harendra shares that water shortages increase the physical burden on women and contribute to dehydration and heat-related illnesses.

Once harvested, Harendra takes his produce to the vegetable market in Gwalior, where prices are determined through daily auctions. There is no guaranteed minimum price for most vegetables. A good day helps him repay part of his debt. A bad day pushes him further into it.

Government support exists, but important gaps remain. Harendra receives benefits through several schemes, including subsidised electricity, a government-supported communal irrigation pump, a plough provided four years ago, support for potato cultivation, and annual payments through PM-Kisan Samman Nidhi scheme. Fertilisers such as urea and DAP are available through government programmes. However, summer-season seeds are often not provided, water security remains unresolved, and affordable protection against crop losses is limited. The result is that support often helps farmers produce crops but does not adequately protect them from the growing risks of producing them.



Harendra on field visits

For Harendra, summer is not simply another season. It is a period where effort, cost and uncertainty converge. Yet each March he prepares his fields again. The decision to continue farming is not only economic. It is rooted in the belief that better access to water, fairer prices and more reliable support systems could gradually change the outcome. Harendra's story of hope and resilience will continue through the monsoon.

Please click here to [subscribe](#) to our quarterly newsletter—or here to [unsubscribe](#).

For more information about Zenith's work, including contact details, career and volunteer opportunities, and ways to support through donations, please visit our website by scanning the QR code.



Scan me