



## FOREWORD

Dear Readers,

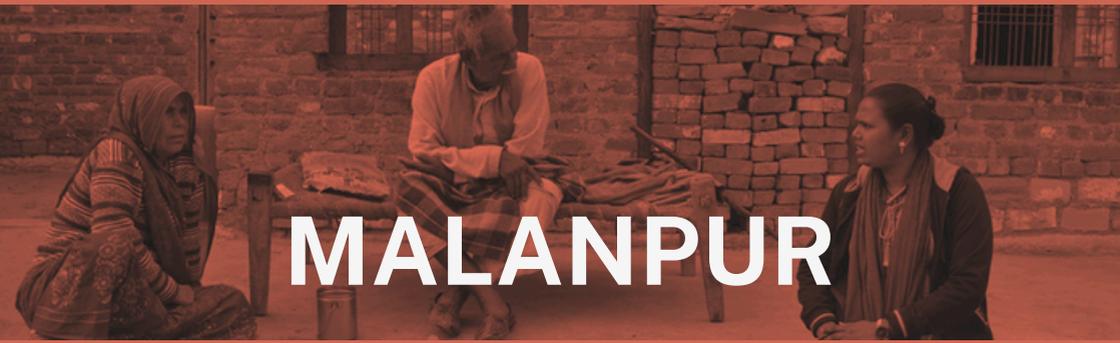
We are happy and proud to celebrate one successful year of our newsletter! It has become a space to reflect on our work, share learnings, stay accountable to the communities we work with and the people and organisations that support us.

As our work with the Sahariya community has deepened, so has our understanding of the realities they navigate around land, forests, labour, and access to rights. Sustained listening has brought greater clarity on where change is most needed and how it can be pursued. With clearer direction, we have focused on deeper, more patient, and long-term work grounded in the lived experiences of the Sahariyas. This marks a refinement of our purpose, from dispersed efforts to more focused and strategic engagements that address structural issues more meaningfully. We continue to move with intention, guided by reflection and a commitment to systemic change, and remain firmly committed to strengthening community agency, access to justice, and local leadership.

In this edition of the newsletter, we bring you stories that examine the diverse and monumental challenges faced by the Sahariyas, while also highlighting their tenacity and fortitude. Through Nikhil's story, we witness the transformative power of access to information and the resilience of a family navigating the realities of significant disability. The Pardhi and Mogiya communities' continued struggle for their right to water, along with the Shankapura Adivasi Basti's fight for electricity, underscores the indomitability of the human spirit. This edition's spotlight follows Harendra Khandel's perseverance in farming and the obstacles he faces in earning a livelihood. Finally, we draw attention to the Sahariyas' rapidly diminishing indigenous dispute resolution system, now at risk of fading away.

Looking ahead to 2026, we are encouraged by the growth of leadership within the organisation, especially the emerging second line of leaders, with Raju Ram and Sunil Kumar stepping into stronger roles. We seek to begin new programmes responding to the Sahariyas' challenges around income, assets, culture, and dignity, while continuing our efforts to combat administrative failures and strengthen judicial accountability.

The Zenith Team



# MALANPUR

## OUR IMPACT THIS QUARTER



**477 claims addressed**, helping individuals access their rightful entitlements & scheme benefits.



**13 community meetings** held to raise awareness about rights and mobilize action.



**IINR 2,07,460 in direct monetary relief** secured for community members.



**10 service camps organized**, reaching **278 community members** with critical support.



**INR 58,41,000 in future benefits** unlocked, ensuring long-term security for families.



**84 field visits conducted**, directly engaging with **2,465 community members** on the ground.



**3 RTI (Right to Information) applications filed**, promoting transparency and accountability.

### One Intervention That Paved the Way to Lasting Normalcy: Nikhil's Story

In large cities and in many Western countries, systems for inclusion are visible and structured. Ramps, certificates, helplines, counsellors, and welfare offices exist, and information is often just a click away on the internet. In interior India's towns, while systems may exist on paper, accessing them depends almost entirely on awareness. Without information, rights remain invisible.

Nikhil Gupta's life in Malanpur, a small town in the Bhind district of Madhya Pradesh, reflects this gap clearly. This 18 year old has lived with a mental disability since birth. Doctors

confirmed early on that his condition would not improve and advised institutional care. His family refused. Instead, Nikhil grew up at home, surrounded by care. He helps his father at a small electronics shop and attends a government primary school, where he is presently enrolled in Class IV. Some children tease him, but teachers remain supportive, and his family ensures he is treated with dignity.

What Nikhil's family lacked was not commitment or love, but information. For years, they did not know that government welfare schemes could even be accessed by differently abled children. Common documents and schemes such as disability



certificates, pensions, scholarships, travel concessions, and identity documents were not part of their world. These systems existed, but no one had told them where to find the door.

That changed in 2022, when a field team from Zenith's Samudayik Adhikar Kendra (SAK) met Nikhil during a visit to Malanpur. In conversation with his father, the team realised that the family was completely unaware of disability-related entitlements. The intervention that followed was not extraordinary; it was procedural. But in such contexts, procedure itself can be transformative.

With the support of his family and Zenith's team, Nikhil underwent medical assessment at the district hospital, and a Unique Disability ID card was issued to him, certifying eighty percent mental disability. Applications were filed, documents updated, and verifications completed. Within weeks, Nikhil began receiving a cumulative monthly disability pension of INR 1200 from both the State and Central Governments. Soon after, he was sanctioned an education scholarship of INR 7200 a year. Later, with guidance from Zenith's team, Nikhil also received a railway travel pass

allowing him and one accompanying person to travel with fare concessions.

The government benefits may be modest, but their impact has been substantial. Nikhil's family now has a measure of financial relief, and predictability. Just as importantly, the support affirms that they matter and have not been forgotten. While Nikhil's life has not changed dramatically, it has gained stability.

Nikhil's family now speaks to other families in Malanpur, encouraging them to seek information and approach organizations like Zenith. Their message is simple,

**“The system will not come to you.  
You have to know where to go.”**



Nikhil's situation is common. But what makes it noteworthy is the transformative power of access to information. Zenith's work lies precisely here- bridging the gap between existing rights and the people who are meant to benefit from them. In most parts of India, inclusion does not begin with infrastructure. It begins with awareness and support.

# GWALIOR

## OUR IMPACT THIS QUARTER



**9 new legal cases registered**, ensuring critical legal and social support reaches those in need.



**3,707 people reached** through on-site engagement, extending our impact beyond the office.



**175 consultations provided**, offering guidance and advocacy to empower the community.



**17 Service camps organized** assisting Sahariyas in making/updating documents such as Aadhar, Pan Card, Ayushman Card, Samagra ID KYC etc.



**7 RTI (Right to Information) applications filed**, promoting transparency and accountability.



**12 CM helpline complaints filed** for raising concerns and complaints regarding various issues including mutation, demarcation, basic facilities etc.



**26 Jan Sunwais (public hearings)** facilitated participation to amplify grassroots concerns.



**14 Individual Forest Rights (IFR) claims filed** under the Forest Rights Act (FRA).



**110 Field visits** conducted, taking our work directly into communities.



**147 Appearances** made in ongoing cases.

## A Struggle for Water and Dignity

A neighborhood in Gwalior has existed for nearly two decades without a fundamental necessity: water. The Pardhi and Mogiya communities (historically, both have been nomadic, forest dwelling hunters) have had settlements here since inception, yet no public arrangement for drinking or daily-use water had ever been made. Their exclusion was not accidental; it was enforced.

Adjacent to their settlement, live the Kanjar (historically, a semi nomadic hunter-gatherer community who also weave baskets and work as folk entertainers and labourers) and Lohapita (historically, blacksmiths) communities, themselves marginalised groups. Handpumps exist in their settlements. But Pardhi and Mogiya residents were barred from using them. When women or children tried to fetch water, their vessels were thrown away. What emerges is an uncomfortable truth:

communities that face discrimination are often forced into hierarchies where they, in turn, discriminate against those even further down the perceived social order. In this case, water became the instrument through which this control was exercised.

Denied access nearby, Pardhi and Mogiya families were compelled to walk nearly two kilometres to a highway-side dhaba to collect water. This daily task fell largely on women and children. Hours were lost each day, safety was compromised, and livelihoods suffered. Time that could have been spent working, studying, or resting was instead consumed by the sheer effort of survival.

Zenith began working with the communities in May 2023. At first, the problem appeared administratively simple. The Ward Councillor, when approached for a new hand pump, instructed neighbouring communities to “allow” access, a solution that collapsed immediately. When conflict followed, the Councillor sided openly against the Pardhi and Mogiya residents who were accused of being quarrelsome.

What followed was a long, grinding engagement with the state. In August 2023, 40 residents, accompanied by the Zenith team, submitted representations to the Collector and Municipal Corporation. Despite assurances and surveys, nothing changed. Officials cited forest land restrictions, even though handpumps already existed on similar land nearby. The truth surfaced slowly that infrastructure had been installed elsewhere not through rules, but through political interventions.

The struggle escalated with public hearings and repeated visits, finally reaching a Minister. A directive was issued: if the basti lay on forest land, borewells would be installed at the boundary and water piped in. The community waited months despite being promised results in days.



*Collecting water: a daily chore.*

Nearly a year later, borewells were drilled, pipelines laid, and household connections established. For the first time, water flowed freely into the settlement. The impact was immediate and profound. Children stopped walking to the highway and women reclaimed hours of their day. Work became possible, safety improved and dignity returned.

This was not just a victory over scarcity, but over exclusion. The struggle showed that collective action matters, persistence matters, and that even a slow, resistant state can be made to move. Most importantly, it proved that when communities fight together, they can force systems to recognise their right to exist and progress.



# SHIVPURI

## OUR IMPACT THIS QUARTER



**12 new legal cases registered**, ensuring critical legal and social support reaches those in need.



**90 consultations provided**, offering guidance and advocacy to empower the community.



**15 RTI (Right to Information) applications filed**, promoting transparency and accountability.



**6 Jan Sunwais (public hearings)** facilitated participation to amplify grassroots concerns.



**38 Field visits** conducted, taking our work directly into communities.



**1,190 people reached** through on-site engagement, extending our impact beyond the office.



**50 Appearance** made in pending cases.



**4 Service camps organized** assisting Sahariyas in filing Individual Forest Rights (IFR) claims under the Forest Rights Act (FRA).



**35 Individual Forest Rights(IFR) claims filed** under the Forest Rights Act (FRA).

### Shankarpura's Fight for Electricity

Shankarpura Adiwasi Basti in Shivpuri is home to 25 Sahariya families who relocated here in the mid-1990s. They originally lived in Bilukho, a village seven kilometers away. When Sahariyas resisted forced labour in Bilukho, they faced sustained harassment from the dominant Gurjar community. Their huts were damaged, livestock was captured, and they were subjected to caste-based slurs. Unable to bear this harassment, the elders of the tribal families decided to relocate and settle in Shankarpura, on forest land near a stream.

Here, the community built huts and began living peacefully. However, in 2021, sudden heavy rainfall led to flooding that destroyed many huts and swept away domestic animals. After this disaster, though the residents rebuilt and established the present Shankarpura Adiwasi Basti, they could not restore the electricity infrastructure that was lost.

In July 2025, the Zenith team visited the basti and spoke with the residents. Several issues were discussed, including schooling, housing, water, and electricity. Amongst these, the lack of electricity emerged as the most pressing

concern. Mukesh Adivasi, a resident of the basti, explained,

**“Without electricity, we couldn’t charge our mobile phones. Children were constantly afraid of injuries from insects and animals at night. There is always a threat of theft, robbery, and wild animals. During summer, the heat and mosquitoes make life unbearable, and small children are constantly at risk of dengue. Homes remain dark, and women find it difficult to cook or do household chores.”**

To address this, the residents submitted several applications to the District Collector during Jan Sunvais. Eventually, a distribution point was installed in the basti, but power supply did not begin. Later, during a field visit, residents shared,

**“It has been four months since the facilities were installed, but there is still no electricity supply.”**

When no action followed, the team and residents submitted another detailed application with GPS photographs of the distribution point. It was also highlighted that development work in villages is often deprioritized, complaints do not always reach higher officials, and as Sahariya community members are frequently away at work during the day, regular follow-ups with the authorities become difficult. Mindful of these nuances, the Collector called in Electricity Board officials again and issued strict instructions: *“Electricity must reach the homes in the Basti within this week, or action will be taken against the responsible officers.”*

Soon after, officials connected the distribution point to the main power line, and homes with installed meters finally received electricity.

One resident noted, “After getting electricity, there has been a significant improvement in our daily lives.”

**“We are now receiving sufficient power to have light, women at home are able to do their chores easily at dusk and use toilets at night. Our families can enjoy entertainment from TV and mobile phones. We are also benefiting from the government’s free electricity scheme of up to 200 units. We don’t have to be afraid of insects and animals anymore.”**

Children still lack access to a safe school route, and livelihoods remain fragile. But one critical gap has been filled. For Shankarpura, electricity was not about comfort. It was about dignity, safety, and time. Its absence made every task harder. Its arrival shows how much effort marginalized communities must invest to secure what India’s city dwellers take for granted.



*Bird’s-eye view of Shankarpura basti.*



# 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.

## Winter: A Sahariya Farmer's Longest Season

From October to March, winter settles heavily over Harendra Khandel's life. For him, this is not just a season; it is the backbone of survival. As a young Sahariya Adivasi farmer from a small village in Madhya Pradesh, Harendra grew up watching his parents work as agricultural labourers, never certain of wages or food. Today, after years of struggle, he owns six and a half bighas of land (1 bigha = 2500 m<sup>2</sup>) and cultivates two more on *batai*, a sharecropping arrangement, where the landowner takes half the produce without sharing costs.

Winter crops are crucial. Wheat, mustard, peas, and seasonal vegetables fill his fields, located a kilometre from his home. Harendra walks there daily as a part of his relentless routine. During the day he works as a Zenith Sahariya Youth Leader, and after dinner, at dusk, he heads to his fields. Nights are spent

guarding crops from animals, and mornings begin with a quick bath at the field's well before he returns home and heads back to work.

This winter tested him hard. In October 2025, Harendra borrowed INR 75,000 from relatives to sow peas. Three days of unseasonal rain destroyed the crop. When he approached the village Panchayat Secretary for compensation, he was turned away. Officials claimed there was no widespread damage. Harendra refused to accept that. He pushed for a survey and managed to initiate the compensation process, even though he knew the odds. His family has received compensation only once, back in 2018. The process itself takes six to eight months. Yet, in November 2025, he borrowed a similar amount and resowed peas and wheat, hoping for a March 2026 harvest.

For Harendra, farming is not just income; it is culture. During Diwali, his family worships their fields, praying for protection from pests and disasters. That faith is tested nightly. Nilgai, deer, wild boar, sambhar, and rabbits regularly raid crops. Armed with a torch, sticks, and stones, Harendra spends long nights chasing them away. Winter is also the wedding season, but celebrations are short for him. He eats quickly and returns to guard the fields.

Irrigation of crops depends on a community borewell. When it broke down, Harendra spent over INR 30,000 of his own money to repair it, knowing other farmers relied on it too. State subsidised fertilisers help, but often do not arrive on time. The INR 12,000 annual farmer assistance he is entitled to has not been credited for months and he has no crop insurance, thereby exacerbating the unpredictability that already plagues farming returns.

Harendra acknowledges that women in his family carry much of the agricultural load. His mother, sister, and wife weed, water, and harvest produce and also bring him food. After harvest, tradition dictates that a portion of the crop is gifted to a sister or daughter acknowledging their centrality to its growth.

When it comes time to sell, Harendra faces another set of calculations. Government



*Harendra sharing his story with us.*

procurement offers better prices and subsidies, but payments arrive late. Private traders pay around 20% less but offer instant cash. Many farmers, already operating on loans are forced to accept the instant payment option though waiting is more economically viable. To strike a balance, if Harendra is unable to get a fair price at the mandi (wholesale market) auction with private traders, vegetables are sold directly in the nearest towns, but it is additional work.

Winter ends in March, but the strain does not. Harendra's story is not one of comfort or security. It is one of persistence, of borrowing, resisting, re-sowing, and standing guard through the night, season after season, trusting on land that gives only if you refuse to give up.



*Harendra Khandel in his fields.*



Sahariya elders sharing their dispute settlement recollections with Zenith Society's Abhay Jain.

### Dispute Resolution by the Sahariyas: A Fading Framework

In Sahariya settlements, justice once sat in the open. Elders gathered on the *chabootara*, a raised platform in the public square, to listen, weigh accounts, and steer disputes toward consensus. Each *basti* maintained its own forum, informal and fluid, and distinct from the state recognised village panchayats with state grants and governed by rules on representation, tenure, and jurisdiction. This was governance without files or funds, rooted instead in proximity and mutual dependence.

Such informality reflected a way of life in which permanence itself was rare. Until recently, conflict with neighbouring communities often prompted communal relocation rather than confrontation. Families packed up and moved on. Only now, with agriculture on government-allotted land, and scheme-built housing, many Sahariyas are settling in fixed locations. Even so, the infrastructure associated with recognised villages, including water, electricity, roads and schools, remain largely out of reach.

Within this context, the Sahariya panchayat addressed everyday disputes. Delayed loan

repayments, encroachment on land, wandering or captured livestock, and other disagreements were discussed collectively. Serious crimes such as rape or murder fell outside its scope and were handled through formal state channels once reported. Family separations followed customary norms as there is no formal concept of divorce. Separations were public, and new partnerships accepted. Children stayed with whichever parent or relative was best placed to care for them.

The Sahariya panchayat system was designed around the rhythms of daily wage labour. Meetings took place in the evenings, once work was done, allowing broad participation. Decisions were reached quickly and collectively. Though informal, the panchayat carried weight, drawing legitimacy through respect and compliance was a matter of social honour and belonging. The primary sanction was social exclusion. In a community frequently exposed to discrimination and harassment, belonging offered protection. Therefore, to be excluded was a serious deterrent.

Today, in one basti, elders struggle to recall the last time such a panchayat was convened. Nearly a decade has passed, they recall. The decline is tied to broader change. Settlement brought new forms of mobility, including migrant labour, exposure to towns, and access to information. Younger Sahariyas increasingly recognise that life continues beyond the community, in spaces where communal sanction holds little sway. Formal legal systems, however distant or imperfect, sometimes appear to offer better outcomes. At the same time, the community's ability to enforce decisions has weakened as state institutions have expanded.

The Sahariya panchayat has not faded by decree but disuse. Its decline reflects a shift from collective resolution to individual calculation, and from negotiated consensus to procedural law. What is being lost is not merely an institution, but a way of holding a vulnerable community together.

Zenith's field experience, however, paints a more complex picture. For tribals from the Baiga, Gond, Sahariya, Bhil and Bharia communities, informal panchayats, despite decline, still remain the primary forum for dispute resolution. An overwhelming majority of conflicts never reach the police, and many families have never entered a courtroom. Even younger generations, despite greater exposure to state institutions, retain a deep mistrust of them. Police interactions are often associated with humiliation or extortion, while courts are viewed as slow, costly and alien.



*Gathering of Sahariya elders in a chaupal.*

The result is a widening gap. Indigenous systems are weakening just as formal ones fail to gain legitimacy. Zenith's team sees that reinvigorating informal panchayats is therefore not an exercise in nostalgia, but a practical response. Its work includes reminding communities to take pride in the mechanisms they already possess and encouraging renewed collective engagement with a system that is theirs, shaped by them, and sustained from within.

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