



QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER

Issue 4 | Q3 2025



FOREWORD

Welcome to the fourth issue of the Zenith Society's quarterly newsletter. With every edition, we strive not only to share updates from the ground but also to reflect on how our collective journey is evolving. This time, the newsletter process has been enriched by contributions from more voices within the organisation. Team members from different verticals have begun experimenting with broader writing styles, allowing this platform to reflect the diversity of thought and experience that shapes our work.

Over the past year, our storytelling programme has become deeply woven into Zenith. What began as an initiative to capture narratives from the communities we serve has gradually reached every part of our work. Through regular sessions, colleagues across roles have learned, shared, and built capacity in storytelling. As a result, we have been documenting and sharing more stories, which highlight systemic challenges and in parallel, underscore the resilience, creativity, and leadership of the Sahariya community. This growing collection of narratives strengthens our advocacy and informs our work on the ground.

In line with objectives set at the start of 2025, Zenith has onboarded six community leaders from the Sahariya youth. Working with Zenith enables these young leaders to engage with their communities in a structured, professional and consistent manner, bridging gaps in access to justice. Zenith helps them build their capacity overtime to address complex issues and offers them expert advice when needed. This enables them to pursue their passion for serving their community while also being financially empowered. In this issue, we bring you the journey of one such community youth leader, Harendra.

This issue will also be the last to feature the personal journey of Ramlakhan Sahariya. From the next edition, we look forward to presenting yet another incredible journey, bringing more lived experiences of the Sahariyas to the fore. In this issue, we also help you explore a Sahariya home, highlighting its architecture, construction, and usage by families.

We would love to bring you closer to the realities of Sahariya life covering traditions, livelihoods, struggles, or celebrations. If there are aspects you would like us to explore in greater depth, please write to us at zenithsle.communications@gmail.com.



MALANPUR

OUR IMPACT THIS QUARTER



545 claims processed, enabling access to entitlements & scheme benefits.



19 community meetings were held to raise awareness and mobilize action.



INR 1.64 lakh in direct monetary relief secured for community members.



11 service camps organized, reaching **302 community members** with critical support.



INR 50 lakh in future benefits unlocked, ensuring long-term security for families.



76 field visits conducted, directly engaging with **2,037 community members** on the ground.

Closing the Last-Mile Gap: Badami Bai's Story

Across rural Madhya Pradesh, many elderly women lose access to pensions and benefit transfers which they rely heavily on. Sometimes, it is their only steady source of income. Often, it is due to small administrative errors or outdated records. Without this support, they struggle to buy food, pay for supplies, or cover basic needs for themselves or dependent family members. This story follows Badami Bai, whose pension stopped unexpectedly, and how Zenith's team worked with her to restore not just her pension, but also her hope to live with dignity.

It was July 2024 and the weather was unpredictable. At times, a fresh drizzle alternated with scorching heat that made even

stepping outside feel like a challenge. Nonetheless, I (narrator) set off from our office for a field visit to Singhwari village, Malanpur.

During this visit, I saw an elderly lady sitting on the doorstep of her house. She was muttering something while leaning on her walking stick and gazing at the sky. When I approached her and introduced myself, and Zenith's work, she fell silent for a moment, then began speaking in a soft, emotional voice:

"Beti (daughter), my pension has stopped. Please help me get it restarted. I am very troubled."

”

As she said this, tears rolled down in her eyes. I comforted her and asked her to share her story.

She told me her name is Badami Bai Sisodiya, and that she is around 60 years old. She used to live happily with her husband, son, daughter-in-law, and her grandchildren. Her only son handled the household responsibilities diligently and worked hard. The family was small but self-reliant and she recalled them being content.

One day, her son shot himself. There was no known reason, no suicide note, and no clue as to why he did it. This tragedy cast a deep darkness over the family, but the bad times didn't end there. Within a few months of son's death, her husband also passed away, perhaps unable to bear the grief of losing a son, leaving the family in a pitiable state.

Badami Bai was left with her daughter-in-law and three young grandchildren. The responsibility of the household and the children now fell on Badami Bai and her daughter-in-law.

They had two small houses, so they lived in one and rented out the other. The meagre income from rent was barely enough to run the house. But expenses were rising as the children grew up. Therefore, her old-age pension was no less than a lifeline. However, that too had stopped for the past three months. She had gone to the panchayat and to the bank on multiple occasions, but without any avail. The bank said, "KYC is incomplete." The panchayat said, "You've been removed from the system." But they did not give her a reason for removal from the system. Badami Bai was left to fend for herself.

Gradually, the ration started running out at home, and even buying milk for the children became difficult. Her eldest granddaughter, who went to a government school, couldn't buy notebooks anymore as there was no money left. Their financial situation had become dire.



Badami Bai and her family members

After listening to her concerns, I empathized and assured her that Zenith's team would help restart her pension. Hearing those words, a small yet visible smile appeared on her face.

Her documents such as her Samagra ID, Aadhaar, and bank passbook were checked and the very next day, she was accompanied to the Malanapur Municipal Council's office. There, Zenith's team introduced her to the concerned officials, who told us that there were two bank accounts in Badami Bai's name, one was closed and the other is active. But her pension was linked to the old closed account, which had caused the pension to stop.

Zenith's team accompanied Badami Bai to the bank, helped update and activate her Direct Benefit Transfers (DBT) in the active account, and permanently closed the old one. A fresh application was submitted to link the active account with the pension system at the municipal office. The team had to stand in line for hours on multiple occasions as someday the officer was on leave, another day the bank server was down, but we didn't give up. Eventually, with consistent follow-up, the pension reactivation process was completed.

A week later, we visited her house again and asked, "*Mataji*, (mother) have you been to the bank?"

She replied, “*Beti*, the sun was too harsh, so, I couldn’t go.” So we requested her daughter-in-law to accompany us to the bank. There, we got her passbook updated, and as soon as we saw that three months’ worth of pension had been credited, we returned immediately and informed her: “*Mataji*, your pension has been deposited.”

She fell silent for a moment, her eyes filled with tears, and she folded her hands and said:

“*Beti*, this pension may be small, but right now, it is a precious treasure for me. It’s my support system. There’s no one in the family who earns. The responsibility of raising these little children is all mine now. At this age, I can’t work, but through this pension, at least I can manage the household a little.”

Badami Bai was heartfelt in her appreciation. Her story is not just about restarting a pension transfer. It is a story of hope and a reminder that sometimes, in life, we must turn our rights and entitlements into strength to face adversity head-on. This pension was her right, one that supported her in becoming self-reliant.

At Zenith Society, our mission is to ensure that women like Badami Bai, who are often excluded from pensions and other welfare schemes due to minor administrative hurdles, can access the benefits they are entitled to and move towards self-reliance.

At Zenith, through our work, we not only resolve individual cases but also identify systemic gaps in policy implementation at the grassroots. We take these insights to local government bodies and advocate for changes that make welfare delivery more efficient, inclusive, and responsive to the communities it is meant to serve.



Badami Bai with her family members and Anjani Dubey (Community Worker at Zenith) in the frame

SHIVPURI

OUR IMPACT THIS QUARTER



33 new legal cases were registered, ensuring critical legal and social support reaches those in need.



10 Jansunwais (public hearings) facilitated participation to amplify grassroots concerns.



75 consultations were provided, offering guidance and advocacy to empower the community.



21 field visits conducted, taking our work directly into communities.



4 RTI (Right to Information) applications were filed, promoting transparency and accountability.



630 people reached through on-site engagement, extending our impact beyond the office.

Hope returns to Kherpura's fields

Kherpura is a small village 35 kilometers from Shivpuri, Madhya Pradesh and feels like stepping back in time. Only 60-70 Adivasi families live here. While people in cities talk about high-speed internet, big malls, metros and flyovers, the reality of Kherpura is very different with limited paved roads, after which it is just a rough, uneven dirt track.

Despite these limitations, Kherpura residents worry more about their right and access to land. In 2001–2002, the Madhya Pradesh government announced the distribution of pieces of land to landless Dalit and Adivasi families to cultivate food, build homes and maintain sustainable livelihoods for their families. On paper, Kherpura's families were included, but the land was never identified, demarcated, or handed over.

For the past two decades, the Sahariyas of Kherpura have been making endless rounds to government offices for the enforcement of their rights. Countless applications were submitted, followed by multiple appeals made to *patwaris* (state employee in charge of maintaining revenue records). Yet, each time, the only result was disappointment. Gradually, hope began to fade away.

In spring 2025, Zenith's team organised a *chaupal* (community meeting) in Kherpura as a part of their community outreach. When they spoke to the villagers, numerous problems came to light. Residents bemoaned the lack of basic facilities such as roads, water, understaffed schools and *anganwadis* (rural childcare centres). However, the greatest pain was not knowing and having the possession of their own land.



Kherpura's residents engage with Arvind Kumar from Zenith's team at a service camp

Narayan Adivasi, a young man, mentioned that

“daily-wage labour and farming are the only livelihoods most people see before them. Women have the same options, in addition to household work. Schools exist only up to the 5th standard, after which children join their families in working.”

Parimal Adivasi, an eighteen year old, shares that he farms mustard with his family on their land. But given that it is seasonal, they look for labour work, including on other people's farms at other times. He also noted that the schools were understaffed and that teachers and staff do not always attend as expected.

Given that land rights was the most pressing concern articulated by the community, Zenith decided to support their efforts and followed up with a service camp. Applications were prepared for the demarcation of land belonging to 22 Adivasi families, documents were collected, and KYC procedures were completed. Following this, in May, the cases of 15 families were formally filed at the relevant Revenue Court. So far, the land of 4 families has been demarcated.

This court order has rekindled hope in the others. The spirit that had broken after years of futile visits to government offices began to return. The process did not just demarcate the land allocations, but it brought back to reality the rights that had been lost in papers for so many years.

The remaining Adivasi families are reinvigorated, organized, and standing strong inspired by this momentum. Section 129 of the Madhya Pradesh Land Revenue Code addresses demarcations and the procedures to be followed. This provision has revived the hopes of many families showing them there is light at the end of the tunnel.

Kherpura's story mirrors that of countless communities where people struggle with rights they cannot enforce, land they cannot access, and dreams hindered by the lack of basic facilities.

Even when this struggle for possession ends, Kherpura's fight for a school, an anganwadi, drinking water, and a proper road will remain. But securing access to their land will give them the strength to fight for the rest. With the support of its network, Zenith will continue to stand with them, paving the road to a better future, one step at a time.



Arvind Kumar from Zenith helping people at a service camp



GWALIOR

OUR IMPACT THIS QUARTER



38 Land Revenue cases & 3 High Court cases are being litigated.



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



4 CM Helpline complaints registered regarding grievances of community members.



1 RTI application filed.



12 Jansunwais (public hearings) facilitated participation amplifying grassroots concerns.



3 Service Camps organized to help vulnerable communities connecting them to government schemes and entitlements



114 Field visits conducted, taking our work directly into communities.

From Struggle to Success: The Journey of Harendra Khandel

Harendra's story is not just one of hardship, but of resilience, hope, and the unyielding spirit of a young Sahariya Adivasi boy who changed his fate through determination.

Born in the small rustic village of Gandhipura near Gwalior, Harendra grew up in a mud house with his parents, daily wage agricultural laborers, and his younger brother, Bhura. Though life was hard, the family's close bond kept them strong. He began his education at the government school, dressed in just a pair of shorts, carrying a bowl from home for a mid-day meal of *dalia* (porridge).

Early Struggles and Family Responsibility

In 2009, at 13, Harendra's father was diagnosed with tuberculosis. Harendra then took on family responsibilities, working part-time in agriculture, plucking peas for INR 30 a day, then harvesting mustard for INR 120 a day while juggling studying at night. By 2012, he reached the 10th standard despite worsening hardships.

In 2017, his father passed away. Harendra had to discontinue his education beyond matriculation and moved to Gwalior, working 13-hour days at a construction site, carrying sand, gravel, and cement for INR 170 a day. Despite personal sacrifices, he ensured his

brother's education continued, who later completed his B.Sc. and now runs a general store in Gandhipura.

Turning Hardship into Opportunity

The pandemic marked a turning point. Harendra leased farmland for INR 75,000 for three years, planted peas, and earned INR 3,50,000 from the harvest. With his savings, he opened a small store in Gandhipura and supported his brother's college education.

He gradually became a landowner, starting with cultivating mortgaged land from a local farmer, and expanded his agricultural enterprise. Two annual harvests of pulses and mustard or wheat now bring him about INR 1 lakh annually, securing his family's future.

Giving Back and Inspiring the Community

As his financial stability grew, Harendra began assisting villagers in obtaining essential documents like caste certificates, ration cards, and Aadhaar cards, which connected him to community issues. He now works with local social organizations, and recently joined Zenith as a community worker to help empower people in his village.



Harendra Khandel (right)



Harendra (to the left) along with Ramlakhani (to the right) at the tribal welfare department

In the summer of 2024, he married Kajli Adivasi, funding the wedding entirely from his savings. Once working on building the homes of others, today, he is building a new home for his family and now dreams of arranging a beautiful wedding for his brother.

Harendra's life has been a long journey through hardship. But in every moment of despair, he chose determination, discipline, and his family's future. He responded with hard work to every challenge. He never let poverty or fate define him.

Harendra's life demonstrates that success is earned through determination, discipline, and hard work. His message is simple yet powerful:

"No matter how difficult life gets, if you move forward with sincerity and courage, no goal is unreachable. Never give up; struggle is the first step to success."

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SAHARIYA SPOTLIGHT

The "Sahariya Spotlight" is a dedicated section of this newsletter designed to offer readers a deeper understanding of the diverse cultural practices of the communities supported by Zenith Society. Through this feature, we also present a unique, Anne Frank-style narrative, sharing the daily life and personal experiences of a member of the Sahariya community, offering a first-hand glimpse into their world.

Ramlakhan: Adulthood and beyond

The Sahariya Spotlight has been following Ramlakhan's life journey over the past year, and this chapter brings us to the present and final part of his story published here. You can revisit the earlier segments [here](#).

Our own Home

Around 2017-2018, as Gwalior city expanded towards our village, the value of land in Gokulpur began to rise. The families living in our *sahrana* (settlement) started selling their land to people from other communities, lured by higher land prices. Gradually, all the families sold their land and moved to a new settlement elsewhere in the village. This created problems for our family, as our access routes were blocked, and we faced difficulties in daily movement. Eventually, we had no choice but to move to the new settlement. However, we did not sell our land.

In 2019, a house under the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana was sanctioned in my father's name. This turned our dream of building a home into reality.

Seeking a stable future

Once I realized that good education was the only way to secure a government job, achieve financial stability, and support my family. I decided to continue my studies. In 2018, I completed a B.A. from MLB College, Gwalior. In 2022, I obtained a B.Ed. from SR College and in 2023, I enrolled in an M.A. program at MLB College, which I am currently pursuing.

Around this time, I met Sunil Kumar from the Zenith Society in our Adivasi Basti of Gokulpur. He was gathering information about the Basti, such as the number of families living there, whether they were receiving government benefits, and if our documents were in order.

At first, I felt skeptical because many people had visited our settlement before, talked about our issues, made grand promises, and even collected money from us under the pretense of helping with document processing, only to disappear forever. I assumed Sunil Ji might do the same.

However, Sunil Ji kept visiting the settlement regularly, interacting with the residents. He began by helping the community obtain birth certificates for their children. Slowly, the community started to connect with him, and people began sharing their problems openly. My perspective also changed, and I realized that Zenith Society was genuinely working for our welfare, at the ground level.

Whenever Sunil Ji came to the Basti, he would visit my house to meet me, but I rarely got the chance to speak with him because of my household responsibilities, which required me to work as a laborer. Deep down, I always wanted to strengthen my community and work on its issues, but I couldn't afford to leave my labor work. I never told Sunil Ji that despite being educated, I was compelled to work as a laborer. At that time, I earned INR 500 per day.

One day, Sunil Ji found out about my situation and asked,

“Why don't you try for a job since you're educated?”

I explained that I had tried many times but couldn't secure one and that my family responsibilities forced me to continue as a laborer.

Sunil Ji promised to help me find employment and I secured a job at a local call centre. It was a desk job with security and comfort, but entailed longer hours than the labor work and paid 20% less too. Feeling underwhelmed, I decided to quit.



I shared my thoughts with Sunil Ji and expressed my desire to work with Zenith instead. The day I joined Zenith was incredibly special to me because I no longer needed to work as a laborer and could do something engaging and impactful using my education. I was given the chance to work with my community and contribute to meaningful change.

Currently, I assist tribal people in realising their constitutional rights, preparing documents, participating in public hearings, and addressing issues like land-related disputes. I take these cases to the tehsil office to help secure justice for them.

Whenever incidents of oppression or exploitation by other communities occur with Adivasis, I visit the affected families and guide them through the legal process with the help of Zenith's team to ensure justice is served by organizing them at the grassroots level.

Family life

There are 10 members in my family, and we live together as a joint family, caring for our dependant parents. They had an arranged marriage when my mother was 18 years old and my father was 21. I have an elder brother whose marriage was arranged at the age of 19. He now has three children.

I had an arranged marriage in May 2023. I knew my wife before marriage because our respective fathers are friends and our families frequently visited each other. My wife takes care of all the household chores. My life did not change significantly after marriage. But, ever since we had a child, I have become deeply attached to him. I want to provide my child with a good education so he can secure a government job. No one from my village's Adivasi Basti has ever secured a government job, and I would like my child to be the first.



Ramlakhan checking documents at a field visit

My family's financial conditions

My brother and I are the two breadwinners earning between INR 12,000-15,000 each. In my view, an ideal monthly salary for me would be around INR 20,000. Over time we own a TV, two fans, a bike, and a loading taxi.



Ramlakhan presenting at a training event organised by Azim Premji University

The biggest financial concern for my family is the debt incurred from buying our vehicles. A fifth of our income goes towards grocery and a majority of the rest goes towards paying loan installments for our vehicles. The repayment is especially important as my brother drives the loading vehicle for a living.

Our family benefits from some government schemes, including:

1. A house built under the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana.
2. Zero electricity bill.
3. A total of 65 kg of rice under the Public Distribution System.

My aspirations and options ahead

My foremost priority is to secure a government teaching job because it offers a good salary, job security, and pension benefits after retirement.

Frequently, I also consider pursuing a law degree and continue working with Zenith or independently serve my community. Politics also interests me as there is currently no one from my community in politics, nor is anyone highly educated to seek solutions to our issues.

Any of these choices would give me scope to focus on education for children and advocate for Adivasis' rights or shape laws affecting us. Such social and economic progress will help us Sahariyas break free of our current constraints.



The structure is a *Chaupal*, a community space central to Sahariya communities and those seeking to meet with them en masse

The Making of a Sahariya Home: From Design to Daily Use

Deep in the forests of Madhya Pradesh, lives a community that, for centuries, had never even heard the name of a city, nor had the opportunity to connect with mainstream society. Completely dependent on the forest to fulfill their needs, it served as their workplace, market, hospital, and home. Their life was simple and straightforward, including hunting animals, gathering fruits, vegetables, and grains from the forest for food; seeking ponds, rivers, and waterfalls for water; and sourcing medicinal herbs for treatment when ill. Children played along the banks of rivers, and at sunset families would sit around a wooden bonfire, sharing the stories of the day.

The Sahariya Adivasis believe in collective living. The community is often found in settlements of around 50-80 or more families called *Saharanas*. Usually, there is only one pathway to enter a *Saharana*, and in the middle, there is a *Chaupal* (Community Meeting Platform), where people gather for meetings and to spend time together. On this *Chaupal*, there is often a temple dedicated to the clan deity of the community.

At the heart of their existence was the *Madhaiya*, the mud hut. These humble structures were more than shelter, they were shields against wild animals and the elements. Families carefully chose hills, high ground or open plains with water nearby. Sharpened wooden poles were driven into the ground, walls of mud and stone carefully molded, and roofs tied firmly with the roots of *Chirol* (*Holoptelea integrifolia* or jungle cork tree) and *Chele* (*Butea Monosperma* or Flame of the forest) plants. Women plastered the walls with fine white *Chhui* clay, and *Gairu*, an ochre or yellow clay, decorating them with intricate motifs called *Mandanas*, marking celebrations and daily rituals alike. Small windows offered light and watchfulness, while fires at night warded off the cold and lurking wildlife.

Sahariya houses often do not have strong doors, a simple barrier of sticks or wood is used to block the entrance.



A traditional Madaiya shelter

Yet life in the forest demanded flexibility. When they ventured into fields or forests for days, the Sahariya built temporary shelters called *Tapariya/Chhappra*. Four pointed wooden poles were anchored into the ground while thin sticks, and grass roofs created a small refuge from sun, rain, or prowling animals. Sometimes tarpaulin sheets were tied atop for extra protection, a practical testament to the community's resourcefulness and adaptation.

As time passed, the need for permanence led to the construction of Pator houses. High stone walls, clay or cement roofs, and sturdy wooden beams tied with strong roots from traditional plants offered comfort and security. These homes stayed cool under the summer sun and warm during winter nights, marking a slow but steady shift from temporary forest shelters to enduring dwellings.

Homes of Sahariyas, housing 5 to 10 people can range from 10 feet by 10 feet one room units with some housing larger families running 25 feet in length. Here, privacy is ensured by often using old clothes like curtains. Wooden stick partitions called *tatiya* or *kiwai* are also used. There is minimal furniture. Clothes are hung on clothes lines and money is generally hidden inside flour containers while jewelry, if any, is buried in the floor which is covered with cow dung mixed with sand. Kitchen items are stored on the floor in natural fibre baskets called *cheenka*, while grain is stored in earthen bins. Some houses have improvised, with self-made cots and mattresses. Lacking sanitation facilities, many still defecate in open fields or have a toilet built 30-50 meters away from the house to avoid odours and sanitation issues close to the house. Houses sometimes have sheds made with barriers of sticks and stone slabs to house livestock or chickens. Animals are anchored to a stick tied into the ground called a *khoonta* to ensure they remain safe at night.

When young Sahariya adults marry, they move into a separate dwelling unit.

However, food is prepared for all members of the family in one kitchen, even if they live separately.



A traditional Sahariya home



This only stops if there is any dispute or conflict. Supporting family, including siblings and parents, is common. Their spirit of collective living is particularly helpful as their houses are often damaged or destroyed during heavy rains and require frequent repairs or rebuilding. Electricity is still rare though most families have access to kerosene or solar lamps.



Many Sahariyas rely on government housing schemes, from **Indira Awas Yojana** to the **Pradhan Mantri Jan Man Awas Yojana**. These schemes have further shaped their homes, often providing one room and kitchen homes, supplemented sanitation facilities via schemes like **Pradhan Mantri Swachh Bharat Yojana** helping families transition into the modern era.

Through mud, stone, and now brick, Sahariya homes tell a story of resilience, adaptation, and continuity. Each generation has left its mark, from the earliest Madhaiya to today's permanent houses. But some things remain unchanged: the collective spirit of the community, the warmth of shared life, and a deep, enduring bond with the natural world. Their homes are not just buildings, they are living witnesses to a people who have journeyed from the heart of the forest into a world of stability, while keeping their culture and traditions alive.

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