



QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER

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FOREWORD

In 2024, Zenith Society deepened its commitment to solve justice issues affecting marginalized communities, with a special focus on empowering the Sahariya adivasi community in Northern Madhya Pradesh. The year marked significant strides in identifying local leadership and strategically engaging in key geographies like Ghatigaon (near Gwalior) to address pressing land rights issues. An immersive collaboration with the community helped us gain deeper insights into the systemic challenges faced by the Sahariyas. Consequently, the team focused on strengthening its capacity to advocate for their rights. The first issue of this newsletter was launched simultaneously to voice their stories to Zenith's broader audience.

The organization's leadership team expanded, with the addition of Raju Ram who joined as the Director of Access to Justice and Shailendra Singh as a lawyer, both bringing with them valuable legal expertise. Meanwhile, Sunil Kumar, our Community Engagement Lead, graduated successfully from law school, and was joined by Ramlakhan Sahariya to take on pivotal roles at the grassroots. Our storytelling initiative further enriched advocacy efforts, while collaboration with law students in the region saw the formation of dedicated legal aid teams across five law schools.

Looking ahead to 2025, Zenith Society will continue its deep engagement with the Sahariya Adivasis in Gwalior and Shivpuri, tackling land disputes, criminal cases, and access to basic facilities & entitlements. The work of Samudayik Adhikar Kendra - the labour center in Malanpur continues to have significant impact. A strong response mechanism is in the works, alongside efforts to integrate community leaders into the team. With a renewed focus on Clinical Legal Education and grassroots storytelling, Zenith Society continues to reimagine justice from the ground up.



MALANPUR

2024 Impact Numbers

2024 was a year of significant impact for the Samudayik Adhikar Kendra in Malanpur, Blind (Zenith's labour pillar). The team continued supporting the labourers in getting connected to entitlements and schemes while they also dealt with other systemic issues around workers rights. The work was strengthened by the invaluable support of the Anil B. Divan Foundation. This partnership has enabled the team to expand its reach and efforts.



Total Claims Processed:

Over **2,540** claims handled throughout the year.



Direct Monetary Impact:

A significant **₹34.35** lakhs worth of savings made by beneficiaries.



Future Monetary Impact:

Leading to longer term benefits to the tune of **₹1.68 crores** for the beneficiaries.



Community Engagement:

27 community meetings were conducted to identify claims and provide support.



Service Initiatives:

A total of **56 service camps** organized to assist and uplift communities.

The Inspiring Journey of Sukumari Ji: Breaking Barriers in Malanpur

Courage knows no bounds, and learning has no age limit. Sukumari Ji, a middle-aged woman from Ghirongi village near Malanpur, has proven this to be true. In a community where women are rarely allowed to step out of their homes, she has shattered societal barriers to become an agent of change.

Ghirongi's deep-rooted traditions have kept women in the shadows, with few opportunities for education or financial independence. Most organizations hesitate to work in the area due to its rigid mindset. However, a few years ago, Sangeeta Bhadauria from Zenith Society's Samudayik Adhikar Kendra (SAK), Malanpur, took on the challenge. She observed the alarming levels of illiteracy among women and initiated a program to teach them basic literacy and numeracy skills.

Initially, interest was low. Many women believed education was unnecessary, given their household responsibilities. Undeterred, Sangeeta Ji persisted, finding a few willing learners—including Sukumari Ji, then 35 and a mother of three. Having been denied schooling due to the distance and co-educational setup, she saw this as a second chance.

Determined to make the most of it, Sukumari Ji embraced learning. While her husband, a driver in Gujarat, and her brothers had completed their matriculation, she had always been left behind. Not anymore! She not only mastered reading, writing, and basic mathematics but also began helping others. Her newfound confidence allowed her to manage her own paperwork, banking tasks, and even guide fellow villagers. She was also able to voice her opinion confidently in public gatherings, a rare feat for women in Ghirongi village.

Her journey was not without resistance. Relatives and neighbors criticized her, accusing her of corrupting young girls by encouraging them to step outside their homes. She faced thefts when she was away and relentless gossip followed her. With her husband working far from home and no in-laws to support her, she stood alone against societal pressure and remained undeterred.

Her efforts bore fruit. Sukumari Ji became a key contact for organizations aiming to uplift the region. She travelled to Delhi for training with NABARD and Surya Foundation, learning detergent-making, in addition to earlier courses

in sewing, and machine operation. Today, she imparts these skills to other women, empowering them to become self-reliant.

“Organizations pay me for training others. An eight-day session earns me five to six thousand rupees, allowing me to take care of my children without depending on anyone,” she shares proudly.

Her wage is on par with that of male workers in the region, another glass ceiling she has managed to break.

Her impact extends beyond financial independence. She has become a role model, proving that education transforms entire families and communities. Even her husband, initially sceptical, now supports her endeavours after witnessing her success and recognition. "At first, he didn't understand why I wanted this. But when I won awards and started contributing financially, he began to trust me. Now, he doesn't refuse when I ask to attend training. I told him—I won't just work with your approval; I will make you proud."



Sukumari Ji conducting a detergent powder making class

Sukumari Ji continues to uplift others, teaching women in her village and even mentoring them over the phone.

“There are still many women who want to learn but need guidance. I will keep helping them as I have been helped.”



She views Sangeeta ji from Zenith Society's SAK Malanpur office as an inspiration to unleash the potential of more women like herself.

Her story is one of resilience, determination, and the power of education. Sukumari Ji is not just changing her own life but is lighting the way for many others to follow.

Unlocking Digital Storytelling: Insights from Aikyam's Residency

Zenith Society's Swapnil Shukla (Co-Founder) and Adithi Koushik (Consultant) attended Aikyam's Tools for Storytelling Residency, in Kochi, gaining hands-on experience in impactful digital communication. The workshop focused on discoverability, engagement, and audience connection while balancing power and impact in decision-making.

Tools like Ghost for website building, Plausible Analytics for metrics, and Hemingway Editor for clarity were explored. Aikyam Fellows emphasized NGO ownership of digital platforms and sustainable writing habits. The residency provided practical skills and renewed purpose, equipping attendees to amplify their work through structured, effective storytelling. [Read more here](#).



Sukumari Ji receiving recognition for her work



GWALIOR

Gwalior SSK team showcases its 2024 impact

Zenith Society's work in Gwalior, via the Samvidhi Sashaktikaran Kendra (SSK) this year has been driven by legal action, advocacy, and direct community support. Here's what we've achieved:



57 cases filed, including:

- **25 land revenue cases** ensuring land rights and justice.
- **17 district court cases** addressing critical legal disputes.
- **15 high court cases** advocating for systemic change.



61 consultations providing legal guidance to those in need.



20 RTIs filed to demand transparency and accountability.



21 cases escalated through the CM Helpline for government intervention.



74 field visits for on-ground assessment and support.



2,427 individuals engaged, empowering communities through direct action.

Justice for Ratan Sahariya: A Triumph Over Adversity

In April 2023, Zenith Society's Community Engagement Lead, Sunil Kumar chanced upon a Sahariya Adivasi settlement (basti) in Gwalior District. The basti residents were living in extreme poverty, lacking basic facilities such as housing, electricity and clean water. Motivated to establish contact, raise awareness about their rights, and encourage them to reach out to Zenith's team, Sunil ji visited the settlement regularly to gain their trust. His efforts took a serious turn when he learned that Ratan Sahariya, a young man from the tribe, had been shot during a petty altercation with a member of a powerful community shortly thereafter. Shocked by the violence, Sunil ji and Zenith Society's legal team committed to fighting for justice on Ratan's behalf.

Zenith's Society's team closely monitored the case – ensuring the charges were correctly framed and successfully opposed bail applications of the accused and his driver. Sunil ji informed Ratan about the government's financial relief under the SC/ST Act, which included ₹2 lakhs upon registering the FIR, ₹1 lakh when the case went for trial, and ₹1 lakh upon case resolution. However, another challenge emerged. Ratan did not possess a caste certificate or a bank account to claim the compensation. Zenith Society supported him to open a bank account and

secure a caste certificate through proper channels. The team also ensured he received medical support through the Ayushman Bharat scheme, which provided up to ₹5 lakh for medical treatment.

To the team's surprise, no compensation under the Act was provided as the department kept stalling the request citing a lack of funds. Meanwhile, Ratan - his family's sole breadwinner, could not work due to injuries and consequently the family suffered each day, barely managing food expenses.

One day, Ratan called the team to the basti with a request that he no longer wishes to pursue the legal battle. He feared that being hopeful to get justice from the system will not yield any benefit.



Sunil ji persisted and advised that Ratan continue the legal battle but he stood firm.

“Right now I want to save my family from hunger - justice for me is not punishment for the accused but financial aid.”

Eventually, Ratan decided to settle the matter.

There were two options before him: securing punishment for the accused or negotiating a settlement that would improve his family's future. Ratan chose the latter, believing it to be the true justice he sought. He used the funds to reconstruct his house which was destroyed during the monsoon when the case was under trial and buy an e-rickshaw to ferry the children of the settlement to school as his new livelihood.

“Hamari na hi kisi ne suni hai, na hi koi sunega” (Neither has anyone listened to us, nor will anyone listen in future).



Ratan surveying his destroyed home amidst fighting a legal battle and recovering from a bullet wound.



This case has left a lasting imprint on the team with many larger questions:

- Was Ratan right in choosing what he chose? What is justice after all?
- Should external individuals be allowed to define justice for a community?



We invite you, the reader to share your thoughts with our team at zenithssle.communications@gmail.com

Clinical Legal Education as a Catalyst for Leadership and Change

The establishment of the first National Law School, in 1987 marked a pivotal moment, introducing the five-year integrated law course with an emphasis on hands-on training.

The Bar Council of India (BCI) issued directives in 1997 to revise curricula accordingly, incorporating compulsory practical papers to institutionalize Clinical Legal Education nationwide. Despite these advancements, challenges persist. Many students, especially those from grassroots, miss out on crucial learning opportunities due to a lack of exposure to clinical programs. Zenith Society has been working towards bridging this gap: our Clinical Legal Education Program aims to foster a community of passionate, socially conscious law students who can work for the rights of the marginalized.

With this vision, we began our journey by advocating for the establishment of legal aid clinics in five law colleges in Gwalior. We didn't expect that the path would be so challenging. We persisted despite facing bureaucratic roadblocks, and hurdles at each stage. Nonetheless, we managed to successfully establish functional clinics in these law colleges. Numerous workshops, field visits, camps, training were organised to expose students to the ground realities and equipping them with the tools of law to support the individuals and communities in need.



Students being trained in legal aid workshop



Yog, a law student in Gwalior had reached out to us, expressing discontentment with the lack of opportunities and quality education in law colleges in smaller towns.

He had heard of our legal aid collaboration with a private law university and was inspired to do similar kind of work in his college.

Yog's energy motivated us throughout - it seemed as if he had found a new purpose in discovering clinical legal education. All he wanted was his college to also provide similar opportunities, and when he didn't find any, he started making his own. As Zenith engaged with the students, a team was formed and we could immediately see the transformation in the students. Our experiences working with these local law colleges were quite valuable and students like Yog played a key role in incentivising their college administrations to bring the required changes.

It's a long road ahead to transform clinical legal education. Did our work in Gwalior bring the impact we hoped for? What is that macro level shift which will bring systemic change? As we answer these questions and reflect on our approach, we see an opportunity to create avenues to include students/colleges all across India in social justice work- especially by collaborating with those who show intention and interest to adapt and experiment. We facilitated a session with Darshana Mitra, Director Clinics, NLSIU, Bengaluru at the Agami Mela 2024 to realise this potential. We need all your support as we enter a new phase of work and look forward to keeping you, our readers, updated.



Students during a legal aid camp



If your college requires similar CLE support, reach out to us at zenithssle.communications@gmail.com



SHIVPURI

Shivpuri team reviews 2024 achievements

Zenith Society's efforts in Shivpuri this past year have been marked by dedicated advocacy and community engagement. Here's a snapshot of our impact:



16 cases filed to address critical issues.



450 consultations were held to provide legal and social support.



85 RTIs submitted to seeking transparency and accountability.



4 camps conducted to raise awareness and empower communities.



47 Jansunwais (public hearings) to voice citizen concerns saw Zenith's participation.



12 field visits were conducted to ensure regular grassroots level engagement.

Through these initiatives, we continue to push for systemic change and better living conditions for marginalized communities in and around Shivpuri.

Amdar Colony: A Struggle for Survival

Amdar Colony (an adivasi hamlet), in Majhera Panchayat, Shivpuri, Madhya Pradesh, was established in 2016 to provide a new beginning for 25 displaced Sahariya Adivasi families. However, since their relocation, they have faced severe hardships, including the absence of safe drinking water, healthcare, education, and livelihood opportunities.

Before relocation, villagers had access to clean water through hand pumps, but in Amdar Colony, the only installed pump produced contaminated water—red in color, turning blue when boiled. Residents were forced to walk 2-3 kilometers daily to collect water from unsafe sources. Despite multiple appeals, authorities failed to act, leaving the community struggling for survival.





Zenith Society's Co-Founder, Abhay Jain, with residents of Aamdar Colony



The sole, contaminated water source for 25 families

Zenith Society's team has been engaging with and supporting the community since 2018. The community made persistent efforts, such as participating jan sunwais (public hearings) 25 kilometers away, dozens of times, foregoing daily wages. When this yielded limited results, the team escalated the matter, filing complaints with the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), Public Utility Services (PUS) Court, and the National Green Tribunal (NGT) on themes such as illegal mining, lack of basic facilities and violence by neighbouring communities. Only under pressure, the local administration installed two new hand pumps, but water samples revealed dangerously high iron content. Additionally, illegal mining in the eco-sensitive zone of Madhav National Park further polluted the air and underground water. Although mining was eventually halted through an NGT order, the water crisis remained unresolved. A temporary water supply from a nearby eatery proved unreliable due to frequent breakdowns and official negligence.

Years of persistent advocacy led to a breakthrough, and the construction of a large water tank is now underway, promising to be a sustainable water source for Amdar Colony and nearby villages. However, the broader struggle continues, as residents still lack proper healthcare, basic infrastructure, and employment opportunities.

Amdar Colony's story is one of both resilience and systemic failure. It highlights the urgent need for accountability, and comprehensive support for marginalized communities. It's hard to believe that communities in this digital modern age have to struggle so much to get basic necessities like safe drinking water. Even with lawyers, this fight took so many years - imagine fighting the system without any support. The residents of Amdar Colony understood their constraints, took agency and coordinated with available support systems to make themselves heard, one issue at a time.

Shivpuri Youth Forum: Continuing Zenith's Spirit of Change

In its early years, Zenith Society engaged in a broad spectrum of social impact initiatives across its operational regions, spanning access to justice, environmental advocacy, and youth engagement. A key outcome of this collective action was the creation of the Shivpuri Youth Forum (SYF), a youth collective in Shivpuri town. More than just an organization, SYF has grown into a dynamic movement—led by young people, for young people.

The collective's journey began in 2014 under the banner of Zenith Society. However, as Zenith expanded, establishing multiple branch offices and focused on niche areas such as access to justice, advocacy for marginalized groups, and clinical legal education, the need for a dedicated youth engagement platform in Shivpuri became clear. In 2021, this vision materialized with the formation of Shivpuri Youth Forum as an independent entity, committed to fostering youth-driven community initiatives.

Core team members of the Shivpuri Youth Forum (SYF)



SYF was founded to address a pressing challenge as young people in small tier III towns often struggle to find spaces that nurture their growth and foster active social participation. To bridge this gap, SYF created a platform where youth could come together, share knowledge, and drive meaningful change. The forum's first initiative in 2014-15 was a series of counselling sessions and the creation of a co-learning reading space. This set the foundation for a thriving community of changemakers.

Over the years, SYF has expanded its footprint with impactful projects. The Shivpuri Jalashay Initiative promotes water conservation and restoration of local waterbodies, while the School Ambassador Program nurtures student leadership. The Startup Culture Development project empowers young entrepreneurs, and the Kalam Learning Centre serves as a dedicated space for education and collaboration. Additionally, SYF is expanding learning spaces to create safe, interactive environments where youth can engage, learn, and grow. The collective has also been instrumental in preserving the traditional and cultural heritage of Shivpuri including but not limited to books, about local musicians, artists and writers, native herbs, stones and other artifacts. It has organised exhibitions to display the same, further contributing to the organisation of cultural events including music festivals, painting competitions and more.



Library operated by the Shivpuri Youth Forum

SYF operates through a participatory leadership model, with a core group of 6-7 dedicated volunteers driving its mission. With a fluid volunteer base, the forum thrives on community involvement. As it continues to evolve, SYF remains committed to fostering a strong, supportive network where young individuals can connect, collaborate, and contribute to societal progress. The Zenith Society team is honoured to have been part of SYF's journey and is one of its most enthusiastic champions.



Volunteers from the art festival (Kala Mela) hosted by SYF in December 2024



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.

Swang: A Dance of Tradition, Freedom, and Fading Glory

Swang is a vibrant dance form from the Sahariya Adivasi tribe, celebrated with much fervor during the Holi and Navratri festivals. It is a dynamic mix of storytelling, rhythmic free flowing movement, and colorful costumes that bring to life popular folk tales, including

incidents from the Ramayana, and more recently, social messages. With its infectious energy, it invites spectators to experience a cultural celebration that is as much about the performers as it is about the community's shared history and stories.



Swang dancer,
Image by Tiwaribharat, licensed under
CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons

Zenith Society incorporates Sahariya motifs in its design for this section of the newsletter.

Storming into the crowd, a group of tall, strikingly painted characters take the floor, their peacock feather headdresses swaying as they move. Dressed in fringed skirts, they are joined by dancers in animal costumes and ladies in flowing skirts and veils. A small band plays an energetic beat, its melodies rising from harmoniums and traditional instruments. The air is filled with the sound of the dancers' ululations, and the crowd responds with cheers, fueling the dancers' movements as they begin to narrate the Ramayana and other folk tales through song and dance.



Swang performance
Photo by: Cora Unk Photo



Swang dancer, photo by: Cora Unk Photo

As the performance unfolds, dancers mimic animals and birds with exaggerated, playful gestures, their facial expressions full of whimsy. Pairs of dancers interact, adding acrobatic flips and quirky formations to their routine. The mischievous animal-costumed dancers engage with the audience, teasing children and filling the space with laughter. Most Sahariya settlements boast their own swang troupe, who perform passionately, bringing joy and vibrant tradition to their communities and nearby villages.

The art form, however, is threatened by the tides of urbanization, which tends to sweep the Sahariyas into other forms of employment, often forcing them to migrate from their familiar lands and community.



Ramlakhan Sahariya, a member of the Sahariya community, joined Zenith Society in 2024. He was introduced in the previous issue of this newsletter which outlined his background, community service and aspirations. In this edition, he shares a personal account of his childhood. His story offers a rare glimpse into the lives of Sahariya children. The article has been translated into English and edited by the Zenith team for this series.

A Glimpse into My Childhood: Life in Gokulpur

I was born in 1997 in the village of Gokulpur. When I was around 3 or 4 years old, my joint family of twenty, including my grandmother, siblings, parents, uncle, and aunt and their children, lived on a Pandit's farm. My grandmother used to collect cow dung to make dung cakes, and my father worked as a tractor driver. There wasn't much money, so we all worked there to get by.

I remember the days spent running around the farm and playing with other kids. We played many games together including piggyback rides, Ram-Lakshman (a game based on the Ramayan), Gilli Danda, Kabaddi, and the Parrot Fly (Tota Udd) game and more.

Sometimes, my parents had to travel for work. Once, our family went to Kachanpura to transplant paddy for a month. But my grandmother, my uncle's children, and I stayed behind on the farm. When my parents came back, they brought a bicycle for me and my brother. I was happy about the bicycle, but around that time, I got sick with a skin disease. My father spent some of the money he had earned on my treatment with a private doctor. While I recall this now with a tinge of sadness, I got better and was back to playing with my friends in no time.

As my grandfather passed away and my grandmother grew older, she stopped working on the farm, and our family went back to our native village. With so many people in the family, it was tricky to fit everyone into the small hut owned by my grandfather. My father and uncles moved out to find work as laborers, moving from one relative's house to another, staying for a few days or weeks at a time.

Later, my father started working in the stone quarries at Bohadapur, about 30 kilometers away. I don't know how he managed, travelling the distance by bicycle followed by hard labour, but he always made sure we had enough for the day. My mother worked at a stone crusher, too. It wasn't easy, but it was what we had to do. Our family then moved to Bohadapur itself to live there for a few years. During this time, my grandmother passed away. We returned to our native village with enough savings to build a pathor (thatched hut).

Ramlakhhan's family and friends



Studio photos, a luxury, were the only access to a camera



One day, my father visited my maternal uncle's village and saw him reading verses from the Ramayana. My uncle was a teacher, and I could tell he loved what he did. He also wrote songs for our community and was always helping others. I thought that if I studied well, I could help my people too. That's when I decided I wanted to learn more and my family committed themselves to supporting me with everything they had.

I started going to a small private school located at the temple in the village when I was 7 years old. It was a privilege as most children I knew went to a government school. The school was simple, with children sitting on gunny sacks and had no bathrooms or mid-day meals. But we learned the basics such as counting, letters, and tables. The teacher was kind, and I enjoyed learning. Soon enough, when my father's health started getting worse, and we could not afford the fees, I had to leave the private school and join the government school. It was a bigger school, and I made new friends. There, we got a mid-day meal of dal, soybean chunks and undercooked rotis. The school was very simple,

with just two teachers and we sat on mats. I remember it was difficult to study after school due to lack of electricity and a space to study but we always finished our homework to avoid being punished in school. I looked forward to learning every day, maintained regular attendance and enjoyed a good relationship with my teachers who were from my village nearby. I knew that one day, if I studied hard enough, I could do something good for my community, just like my uncle.

With such high hopes of education, destiny had a different path for me. While I wanted to become a teacher or a government officer, I ended up as a manual labourer in my adult life, even getting caught in bonded labour at one point. I don't like going back to that time in my life, but I will share with you my story of breaking free from bonded labour to becoming a leader in my community hereafter.

Stay tuned to hear more about Ramlakhhan's inspiring story in our next issue.

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