

Empowering communities to access justice



QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER

Issue 3 | May 2025



FOREWORD

Welcome to the third issue of Zenith's quarterly newsletter. While we strive to bring you our most compelling stories, the richness of our work often exceeds the space here. Therefore, we invite you to explore more on Sahr, our regularly updated blog on Medium.

There, you'll find moving journeys from our team, including the stories of [Shailendra](#), a grassroots lawyer and [Anjani ji](#), a community worker, who overcame immense odds to find purpose in their careers dedicated to justice and social change. Their stories shine a light on the personal sacrifices made by Zenith's team members to uplift marginalized communities and the deep impact one can have through commitment and compassion.

This issue's Sahariya Spotlight offers a glimpse into the vibrant life of the Sahariya tribe. We're excited to introduce [Chapar](#), a beloved traditional board game from the community embodying its simple living and contentment. Strategic, engaging, and delightfully minimal, it reconnects us with our roots while being easy on the pocket and light on resources.

At Zenith, we are constantly learning from the communities we serve and discovering joy in the little things and strength in shared stories. We hope this issue inspires you, and we invite you to stay connected through Sahr for more throughout the year.

Please scan this QR code to access our blog, Sahr, on Medium:



MALANPUR

OUR IMPACT THIS QUARTER



1,238 claims filed, helping individuals access their rightful entitlements & scheme benefits.



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



₹5.7 lakh in direct monetary relief secured for community members.



23 service camps organized, reaching **1,264 people** with critical support.



₹52 lakh in future benefits unlocked, ensuring long-term security for families.



78 field visits conducted, directly engaging with **3,134 community members** on the ground.

Persistence in the Face of Prejudice

Sudha, a resident of Malanpur, was coerced into marriage while still in high school. Today, she lives with her husband, in-laws, and two children, and works as a community worker with Zenith's Samudayik Adhikar Kendra.

Growing up, Sudha recalls subtle but persistent caste discrimination. At school, she had to sit on her own mat, bring separate utensils for the mid-day meal, and wait to use the water tap until others were done. Teachers rarely acknowledged her efforts, and classmates treated her differently, sprinkling water to purify items, including books, shared with her. Despite this, she completed her education and resolved to become independent.





Sudha ji, (left) helping women during a field visit

After marriage, her marital family, none of whom had received any formal education, pressured her into caste-based work like manual scavenging and sweeping. Determined to work with dignity, she took up sewing, encouraged by women in the village. She began earning a modest income stitching clothing for women in her community.

Wanting to do more, in 2021 Sudha joined Zenith. Even now, some people avoid her during field visits due to her caste. But many trust her guidance. Her calm, persistent approach, sharing information respectfully and accepting people's boundaries, has gradually shifted attitudes. Slowly people changed their attitudes when they noticed her leadership, expertise and knowledge about various government schemes and entitlements, leading to more mindful and considerate interactions.

Sudha often encounters reluctance from community members to engage with government schemes due to either lack of awareness or frustration with bureaucracy. Still, she supports them, bridging the gap between policy and access, gaining trust where she succeeds.

Determined to broaden avenues for her community, Sudha helped her aunt-in-law leave caste-based labour for animal husbandry. She is relieved to see that her children do not face the discrimination she once did. Sudha believes the future lies in education and unity, where caste does not define anyone's role, and every person is treated with respect.

SHIVPURI

OUR IMPACT THIS QUARTER



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



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



31 ongoing cases were actively followed up, reflecting our sustained commitment.



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



10 Jansunwais (public hearings) organized, amplifying grassroots voices.



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



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

Still Waiting: 25 Years of Promises in Naya Balarpur

In 2000, 100 Sahariya Adivasi families were relocated from Balarpur village, inside what is now Madhav National Park, to Naya Balarpur under a government relocation and rehabilitation scheme. These families, who had lived sustainably with forest resources, were promised land and basic amenities to resettle and find new livelihoods.

Each family was to receive a pucca house, water, electricity, two hectares of farmland and a village school. However, after relocation

authorities discovered the new site was also reserved forest land, not revenue land as assumed. This halted further land allotments.

Today, 25 years later, only 61 families have land. The remaining 39 families were told to wait and adjust with others. Deprived of farmland and livelihood, many were forced to labour at hazardous stone mines nearby. Several men developed tuberculosis, silicosis and other ailments and died young. Their families received only meagre widow pensions pushing them further into poverty.

In 2016, following media attention, the Madhya Pradesh Human Rights Commission recommended compensation of Rs 3 lakhs per affected family and an additional Rs 2 lakhs for widows of those who died due to hazardous work. Implementation stalled and in 2021, a Tehsildar's letter cited arbitrary reasons for land denial, including that some were now too old to farm, had died, or had migrated.

Zenith responded with awareness drives, complaints, and legal action, securing drinking water for the village via the Court of Public Utility Services. Efforts for compensation and land through the High Court and National Commission for Scheduled Tribes remain unresolved. Zenith's public interest litigation

was dismissed, with the court suggesting affected individuals file cases themselves.

The 39 families of Naya Balarpur still await justice, land, and dignity. Their trust in the government has eroded. As one elderly woman said,

यहाँ कुछ अच्छा नहीं है लेकिन सरकार ने फेंक दिया है यहाँ तो झोल रहे हैं। कल कहीं और फेंक देंगे कोई भरोसा नहीं सरकार का।

"There is nothing here, but the government has thrown us here. We are suffering here. Tomorrow, they might throw us somewhere else — you can't trust the government."



Zenith continues to fight, but we need your support to push for long-overdue rights for these families.



Reach out to our team at
zenithssle.communications@gmail.com



OUR IMPACT THIS QUARTER

Court proceedings:

- 44 Land Revenue cases.
- 6 High Court cases.
- 5 District Court cases.



8 Service Camps organized to help vulnerable communities



89 Field visits conducted reaching 1900 people.



10 Jansunwai sessions facilitated.



120 Public consultations held.



15 CM Helpline cases addressed.

Sapna's Rescue: A Family's Fight for Freedom

In late 2024, when Sapna's family of four, including the 11 year old girl, migrated from Banda, U.P., in search of work, they were hoping for a better life. Instead, they were trapped.

Lured by a middleman promising the parents good wages, the family was taken to a brick kiln in Gwalior. The kiln owner forced the entire family to work 12 to 14 hours a day under harsh conditions resulting in verbal abuse and assault when they resisted. Sapna was also made to do household chores at the owner's home, which left burn marks on her hands.



An emotional reunion

Wages of only INR 1000 were paid per week for subsistence, a small fraction of what the middleman promised them. Only one member of the family was allowed to leave the site at a time to prevent escape. When her parents couldn't take it anymore, they sought to leave. They were told they owed INR 57,000 in debt, though they had borrowed nothing. The owner refused to release anyone until the amount was paid. In desperation, Sapna's family fled one night, leaving her behind when the owner caught her during the escape.

When Zenith learned of this, in January 2025, we acted quickly. Though her parents were

too afraid to go to the police, our team coordinated with the Child Helpline and local authorities to ensure Sapna's rescue. She was finally reunited with her family, shaken but safe.

Zenith's team is now pursuing legal action to hold the kiln owner and middleman accountable. We are also addressing questions of due process, which was not followed as the family had to record their statements in the presence of the kiln owner they were terrified of. This fight isn't over, but with your support, we can see it through.

We call our readers to action: speak to persons around you to ascertain if they or anyone they know has found themselves in a similar situation of bonded labour. Here are some steps that can be taken in such cases.



Ask : Develop trust and ask discreet, respectful questions to understand the person's working and living conditions: hours, freedom of movement, and fair pay conditions.



Document Evidence: Note down names, addresses, and any details of the employer or worksite. Photos (if safe) and testimonies can also be crucial.



Contact Authorities: Call the *National Helpline for Bonded Labour* (1800-345-5500) or the *Childline* (1098) for urgent responses.



Report Locally: Inform the nearest police station, Sub-District Magistrate (SDM), or Labour Department: they are legally required to act under the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act. If the authorities don't take action, writing an official complaint through email to the SDM and other authorities with all the specific details is recommended. This makes the complaint official and obliges the authorities to take action.



Seek NGO Support: Connect with local workers' rights groups or legal aid organizations to ensure follow-up and protection for victims.

However, sometimes it takes more to do just this. These are tricky situations where lives are at stake. Rescues should always be done with the police for your own safety with the procedures deemed necessary by law. Cases of bonded labour are often an embarrassment for the authorities and are therefore downplayed, necessitating professional help.

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.

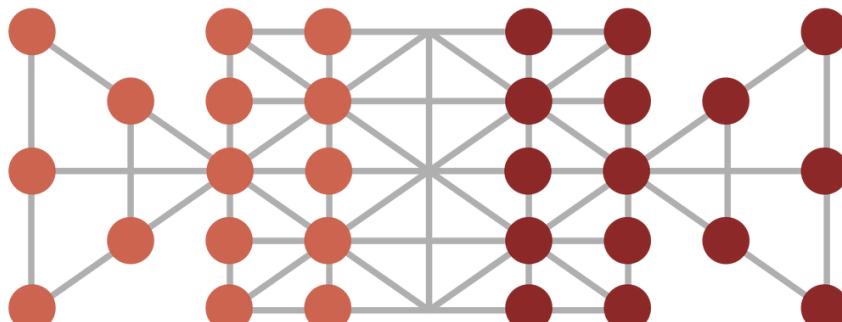
Chaupar: The Quiet Strength of Sahariya Boardgames

In the tranquil courtyards (called Chaupals) and sun-dappled clearings of the forest, members of the Sahariya community gather, not around a screen or a scoreboard, but around a game drawn into the earth itself.

Chaupar, one of their most beloved traditional games, is as lightweight in materials as it is rich in strategy. All it takes is a bit of space, a stick to draw the board, and whatever is at hand.

Stones, seeds, shells, or wood become pieces in a battle of wits. Pawns or Gotis move along gridlines straight, sideways, diagonally and backwards to capture the opponents pieces and reach the other side of the board.

Often played during pastoral breaks, when elders and children rest while grazing goats or cattle, Chaupar transforms everyday moments into thoughtful play. At first glance, it may





Children gather around for a game of Chaupar

appear simple. You move your pieces across the board, capture your opponent's, and block their path. But beneath the surface lies a world of tactics. Players must anticipate moves, control space, and master patience. Community elders say the game sharpens the mind and strengthens resolve. To them, it is not just play but holds life lessons.

Known by many names such as "16 Goti," "16 Sipahi," or "Chaupar," this game endures even as mobile screens become more common. The community also engages in Ashta Changa, a lively board game akin to Ludo, where four players take turns moving their pieces home, based on the roll of dice or cowrie shells. They also play Nakdua, another four-player strategy game involving 32 pieces, rich in tactics and tradition. Chava Cheat, is another resource light, playful coin game favoured by children. In Sahariya villages and forest paths, such games live on, carried in memory, drawn in dust, and played with joy.

Zenith's team attempts to give you, our readers, a taste of Chaupar with the rules detailed on our blog, Sehr. It is accompanied by a tutorial where Ramlakhan Sahariya from Zenith teaches our team how to play this game.

Labour and Learning: A Balancing Act

We continue the story of Ramlakhan Sahariya, whose journey mirrors that of many Sahariya adivasi youngsters walking a tightrope between education, work, and family duties. Responsibility comes from an early age as seen in the case of Ramlakhan.

I had discovered that education has the power to change my life. However, after Class 10, financial constraints pushed me into labour at brick kilns, construction sites, and farms. I managed to attend school whenever I could. In Class 12, I stayed at a government hostel, where I also took care of younger Adivasi students, handling admissions and some tutoring as the staff left those duties to senior students.

After school, I couldn't afford college. That's when I got trapped in bonded labour. A contractor offered me and 25 others a small advance, promising INR 9,000 monthly wages, daytime shifts, decent food, medical care, and to facilitate remittances home. We left for Gujarat where they split us into small groups and sent us to harsh worksites laying pipelines. Our food was basic, consisting of dal (lentils) and potatoes, and our work was relentless. One day, during tunnelling, we lost a machine's pilot rod. The supervisor made us dig 20 feet for three days without food or proper tools. A vendor later suggested checking the drainage. Then four of us, including me, were forced into a filthy underground drain, where we finally found it.

After two unpaid months, we demanded our wages. The supervisor refused. Six of us including my brother Ramveer, cousins Rajkumar and Ajay, and two others escaped. With no money, we walked around to the station, boarded a train without tickets, and reached Makshi, Madhya Pradesh, where kind strangers bought us breakfast and bus tickets home to Gwalior.



Ramlakhan's brother operating his loading vehicle in Gwalior

Only workers who stayed until the end of the project received full payment before returning home. Those who visited during festivals had wages held back to ensure their return. Many of the workers continue working there. However, the six of us who escaped never sought manual labour work again, choosing instead to remain in our villages seeking whatever jobs we can find in an environment we understand and close to our families.

This experience made me realize that my life had no value to such exploitative contractors. I was determined to stop wasting my life in this work and instead pursue further education to secure a better job. Of the six of us who escaped together, four continue

labouring in construction or agriculture nearby and my elder brother now drives a loading vehicle in Gwalior's vegetable market. Despite these hardships, my family's sacrifices and hope kept me going, as I believe education was the only path to a better future and dignified working conditions. I completed my degree and currently work with Zenith as community worker.

Working with strangers under inhumane conditions has left many young people in our community traumatised and reluctant to interact with outsiders. Yet, when seeking basic necessities, we often succumb to the oppressive cycle where we are bound to lose.



Ramlakhan revisits his youth hostel

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

Support Zenith Society's work, especially with the Sahariya Adivasi community. Reach out to us at zenithsle.communications@gmail.com

