



MAHILA JAGAT LIHAAZ SAMITI

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Forging Ahead Regardless – Annual Report of Mahila Jagat Lihaaz Samiti 2021-22

The Mahila Jagat Lihaaz Samiti (MAJLIS) is a unique organisation, that while being formally registered as a charitable society, is actually a community-based organisation that addresses the issues facing its members with regard to their equitable and sustainable development. This is done through active community participation in both design and implementation of its programmes which include positing a decentralised alternative to the present unsustainable and inequitable centralised development. Over the last year the organisation has recovered from the COVID 19 pandemic and carried out some very impactful work overcoming the many obstacles that it has faced.

1. Tackling the Second Wave of the COVID 19 Pandemic

The second wave of COVID 19 that spread in India due to the variant B.1.617 wreaked havoc across the country. Not only was this new variant more infectious it was also more fatal. Once it affected the lungs in the second stage then it became difficult for the patient to recover despite getting the best of medical treatment. The problem was compounded by the fact that in addition to oxygen, ventilators became necessary along with anti-viral drugs. Under the circumstances, once the virus spread to rural areas there were huge problems given that none of the crucial aids - oxygen, anti-viral drugs, ventilators and qualified doctors and hospitals, were available there. The ratio of qualified doctors to the population in India is very low and most of them are located in urban areas. So rural people have to rely on quacks who give them intravenous drips of saline and antibiotics for treatment.



Given their low nutritional levels one would have expected the Bhil Adivasis to be particularly vulnerable to this dangerous virus. However, while quite a few did fall ill with fever and cough, fortunately, very few in the villages died. Since there were no testing facilities for COVID 19 in rural areas and even in small towns, it was not known whether this fever and cough were due to the virus or not. However, from the fact that the incidence of fever and cough was much more than what normally happens, it was inferred that this morbidity was due to COVID 19. As the Adivasis mostly visited the quacks and were being administered intravenous drips of saline and antibiotics and recovering from that without any hospitalisation, the organisation provided cash support for the Adivasi families to be able to do so. In most villages there were no deaths whatsoever. As opposed to this, from among those Adivasis who are in government employment as teachers, engineers and the like, who stay in the towns and cities, some died after being infected by the virus.

The bigger problem for the Adivasis was the loss of earnings. Most Bhils have to depend on migratory labour to supplement their meagre farm incomes which are not enough to sustain them. Normally they work in nearby towns and cities during the summer months to accumulate money to finance the sowing operations at the start of the Kharif season and obviate the need to borrow from traders at usurious rates to buy seeds and other material. So, the organisation provided food and cash support to several of the more needy families.

2. Reproductive Health Programme

The holding of reproductive camps for women is a flagship programme of the organisation but this could not be done due to the COVID 19 restrictions on congregation of people. Moreover, the doctors too were not keen on participating in camps for fear of contracting the virus. Under the circumstances, no camps were held and so as in the previous year only medicines were distributed to women, who faced serious problems, after tele-medicine consultation with doctors.

3. Education Programme

The government has a school system in place in Alirajpur district but it is woefully inappropriate. The syllabi and teaching methods of the education system are totally alien to the culture of the Bhils. There is insufficient staff in these schools, which are mostly multi-grade single teacher schools. The teachers prefer to stay in the towns and market villages and only visit the schools occasionally. Very few Bhil children get educated as a result of this mismatch. Those that do, treat their own culture as something primitive and sub-human in accordance with the prevailing modernist assumptions and distance themselves from it and their own community. This has resulted in the vast majority of Bhils remaining unequipped to participate effectively in the modern economy into which state policies have been relentlessly pushing them. This lack of a modern education has also meant that the awareness of their rights and enabling laws has been low among the Adivasis.

The Khedut Mazdoor Chetna Sangath, the mass organisation of the Bhil Adivasis in Alirajpur, first began experimenting with alternative schooling as early as 1987 and developed texts in Bhili and Bhilali for teaching literacy and numeracy and also local geography and history. Later on it was felt that children needed more attention than was possible in a day school and so a decision was taken to start a residential school. A review of the functioning of the day schools had shown that effective teaching of Adivasi children of illiterate parents required that they be coached even after regular schooling hours. Since this was not possible with day scholars, it was decided to run a residential school. One such school, Rani Kajal Jeevan Shala, was set up in the village Kakrana on the banks of the Narmada River and is currently administered by MAJLIS.



The school has been named after a Bhil Goddess, Rani Kajal, who in their mythology rescued them from trouble in a time of pestilence. Thus, the name symbolises the main aim of the school, which is to revive the traditional culture of the Bhils and establish a strong identity for them. Secondly, it was decided, as far as possible, to make the parents pay in cash and kind for the education of their children so as to try and make the day to day running of the school financially self-sustaining. This, in turn, means that the school has to make the children proficient enough to perform well in the mainstream school system to accord with the expectations of the parents, most of whom naturally are paying for an education that can get their children jobs later on. Thus, the syllabus and teaching take care of both the needs of inculcating a critical attitude towards modern development in the children as well as providing them with the skills to make it good in the modern sector. Obviously, this is a tall order and requires a lot of hard and committed innovative work on the part of the teachers. So, funds have to be collected from various external sources, both institutional and individual, for the costs of curriculum development, teaching aids and infrastructure development.

The school started from scratch without textbooks and the language used was Bhilali a dialect of Bhili. The conduct of surveys and writing down of the rich oral literature of the Bhili creation myths was used to acquaint the children with the basics of language and arithmetic and in the process create primers. One such survey, which was both entertaining and educative, was conducted to find out how, if at all, the teachers were teaching in the government schools and then comparing the results with the procedures being followed in the Rani Kajal School. The local environment provided the material for scientific learning through observation and analysis and local history as related by the elders was recorded to prepare the history lessons. Later, only as the children become proficient in studying, are the standard Hindi texts, conforming to the syllabus of the Board of Education, introduced. In addition to their studies the children have to put in two hours of labour every day on the three-acre farm of the school growing vegetables, so as to ensure that they do not lose touch with their peasant farmer roots. Possibly, for the first time, academic learning has become fun for Bhil children in a systematically run school environment. The students of the school have consistently topped from Sondwa Block in the board examinations. The biggest compliment to the school is that Adivasi parents who migrate seasonally for labouring have put their children in this school totally under the guardianship of its teachers while they spend their time in distant work places in Gujarat. For the first time girls from the villages on the banks of the Narmada have got education and one of them has even become a teacher.

4. The Programme of Sustainable Agriculture

MAJLIS is engaged in organic farming on its farm in Pandutalab village in Dewas district of Madhya Pradesh since 2015. Even though this farm is now fully organic and produces over thirty different varieties of crops over the three seasons, these are mainly for conserving the seeds of these indigenous varieties and selling them to other organic farmers who may want to sow them. The common farmers around the farm of the organisation are not interested in doing organic farming. Primarily because preparing organic manure is time consuming and therefore expensive as compared to the subsidised chemical fertilisers. Also, the organic produce sells at the same low price as the chemical produce in the local markets and so the farmers lose out economically when they do organic farming. The only way to make organic farming economically viable is to sell the produce to relatively affluent people in the cities who are prepared to pay a premium for the organic produce. In that also there is a problem as most of the produce going under the rubric of organic is of dubious quality. So, the consumers also are sceptical. On the supply side it is very difficult to ensure that the farmers do not cheat and apply chemical fertilisers on the sly.

Finally, last year two farmers in Bisali village were convinced to try organic farming by telling them that we would finance the cost of preparing organic manure and also buy their produce at a higher price to compensate them for the labour they put in at the statutory minimum wage which was Rs 200 at that time. Normally with chemical farming in the Adivasi areas of Western Madhya Pradesh the farmers earn only Rs 100 per day from the work they do on their own farms. So, there was about 2400 kilograms of the Lok 1 variety of wheat, which is a well-established hybrid variety, available for sale at in April. Local varieties of wheat were not used because their yields are less and their taste is a little different and has to be acquired and so everyone may not like them.

The cost of the wheat, graded and cleaned of all dirt and chaff, after paying for the organic manure and paying the farmers the statutory minimum wages for their labour turned out to be Rs 35 per kilogram. Whereas graded and cleaned chemical wheat was available in the market at Rs 25 per kilogram. So obviously this wheat would not sell in the local market and urban customers had to be found for it.

A commercial entity <https://kansariorganics.in/> was set up to market the wheat and also some other produce like Sorghum, Maize and Pearl Millets from our farm and an online store launched for this. The first problem encountered was that of the last mile delivery to the consumer. Searching the internet showed that this was very expensive. Even Amazon with its economies of scale charged Rs 50 a kilogram for home delivery. After many enquiries we found that delivery by registered parcel post service provided by India Post was the cheapest option with the cost coming to Rs 40 a kilogram inclusive of packaging charges. Thus, the cost of the wheat, home delivered in distant locations would be Rs 75 a kilogram which was a substantial premium over the chemical wheat. Initial testing of this delivery system revealed that the relatively affluent people would like flour instead of wheat as they do not have the time to go to the miller to grind the wheat. So, the online store was launched with Lok 1 wheat flour at Rs 80 per kilogram. Even though this was quite competitive with other such flour available on the internet, nevertheless it was quite expensive.

Initially, there were a spate of orders and 150 kilograms or so of wheat were sold by the end of April after which lockdown was imposed in Indore due to the COVID 19 second phase pandemic. India Post also stopped taking parcels of goods other than medicine. So, the marketing operations came to a halt. In the same time about 250 kilograms of wheat was sold in Indore as the price was much less at Rs 35 a kilogram. Considerable amount of publicity was done through social media but it had little

impact. it was argued that it was advantageous to eat organic wheat flour, that does not have chemicals and so being healthy far outweighs the extra cost of Rs 10 per kilogram, but that did not cut much ice.

Eventually, only about 800 kilograms were sold. Storing of wheat is a big problem as they get attacked by pests. This is even more of a problem for organic wheat, which being nutritious is attacked more and chemicals cannot be used to preserve it. The only feasible way is to dry the wheat in the sun from time to time which is a very labour intensive and so costly process. So, it was decided to keep only about 200 kilograms as seed for the next year and the rest was distributed to needy Adivasi families in Alirajpur as COVID relief. MAJLIS bought the wheat from KANSARI ORGANICS and transported it to Alirajpur for distribution there. The photo below shows the teachers of the RANI KAJAL JEEVAN SHALA in Kakrana taking the wheat to Alirajpur.



So, the economic viability of organic farming is problematical. Even when the produce is sold without any profits and only the costs incurred are charged from the customer. In fact, let alone earning profits, the costs of setting up the website and online store and the work put in by the staff of MAJLIS, who are playing an important mediatory role in connecting the farmers to the consumers had not been factored in to keep the price as low as possible. Under the circumstances, the only way ahead is to gradually shift the whole nation from chemical to organic agriculture over a period of years. For this a huge amount of awareness building has to be done among the policy makers, farmers and consumers. MAJLIS meanwhile is continuing to run its sustainable agriculture programme on a pilot basis.

5. Ecosystem Restoration Project in Alirajpur District of Madhya Pradesh

The vitality and diversity of Earth's ecosystems are the basis of human prosperity and well-being whether they are forests, farmlands, freshwater sources, oceans or coasts. Humans have been degrading these precious resources in various ways for over two centuries now but the situation has become alarming currently. Apart from the direct adverse consequences of this degradation, in the case of forest degradation, it is also resulting in the destruction of carbon sinks and aggravation of the problem of global warming. The UN has declared the decade from 2021 – 2030 as the Decade on Ecosystem Restoration to help turn the tide and give people and nature a sustainable future.

The Mahila Jagat Lihaaz Samiti has been working to preserve and restore ecosystems in Western Madhya Pradesh for close to four decades now. The main methodology has been to use the power of communitarian cooperation to pool labour to protect forests and carry out soil and water conservation work both on forest and farm land. Given below is a picture of one such earthen bund constructed to conserve soil and water along with the couple who have built it on their farm.



The villages along the Narmada River in Alirajpur district have been affected by the submergence due to the construction of the Sardar Sarovar Dam on the river in Gujarat. The Adivasi people of these villages after having lost their lands in the submergence have climbed up on to the hills and are living

there. This has led to deforestation and also their new farms are prone to soil erosion being on slopes. Therefore, there is a need to carry out afforestation and soil and water conservation work in these villages on a priority basis. However, since their economic condition has deteriorated after their displacement from their lands, they are no longer able to engage in communitarian ecosystem restoration work as they used to do earlier and so their labour pooling customs are falling into disarray jeopardising their future.

MAJLIS has initiated a project to revive these labour pooling customs by injecting small sums of money into the community that will catalyse them into working together again and also help them to leverage the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme. Soil, water and forest conservation work has been done in these villages on the farm lands and the adjoining forests. The villages in which this work has been done are – Anjanwara, Bada Amba, Kakarsela, Khodamba, Jalsindhi and Chilakda which are all near the River Narmada in Alirajpur district as shown in the map below.



The village of Anjanwara is in particularly dire straits. The land atop the hill is of poor quality as compared to the land that has been submerged and so the people are in great difficulties. Moreover, the village does not have road connectivity and lacks electricity and so life is so much harder. The biggest problem in the village of Anjanwara is the lack of potable water. The people have dug a few wells but these are underlaid with hard rock and so the water dries up in summer. Even in winter the water availability is very low as shown in the picture below where a woman has to painstakingly fill water from a shallow spring. In summer the people have no recourse but to descend all the way to the river Narmada below to fetch water which is a very tiring exercise.



The people are trying to make the most of a bad situation by undertaking soil and forest conservation work to improve artificial and natural recharge as shown in the picture below of a stone bund in one of the farms with custard apple trees planted below it to hold the soil in place and also reduce runoff.



Below is the picture of a dense mixed forest with considerable amount of bamboo which increases the natural recharge and also provides fodder for the livestock.



However, over all the situation is very bad and life is extremely hard for these people. There is a school with only one temporary teacher in the village and the nearest hospital is all of 50 kms away. It is indeed tragic that after having fought so hard against the dam they should now have to go through so much difficulty to live on top of these hills without the basic amenities of a modern civilisation. MAJLIS conducted a campaign with the rural development bureaucracy and got two dug wells sanctioned under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme and so now the villagers are working to get these wells dug and constructed before the monsoons.

6. Future Plans

The reproductive health programme which had been in abeyance mostly due to the COVID pandemic will be restarted this year as it provides major relief to women who otherwise cannot access quality gynaecological treatment. A substantial refurbishing of the infrastructure at the Rani Kajal Jeevan Shala in Kakrana is envisaged to help it recover from the COVID set back and achieve new heights as follows –

1. Five classrooms built in a low-cost model. The construction will be with mud mostly and some burnt bricks using the minimum of cement and sand. This construction thus will be low cost both in the financial and ecological senses. All construction hence forward in the campus will be in this low-cost model. At the moment the existing 7 classrooms double up as the hostels for the boys and girls during the night where the students have to sleep on the floor and there are no desks.
2. A hostel for the boys as they are now sleeping in the existing classrooms. Once the additional classrooms are built, two of the existing classrooms will be converted into a hostel for the girls. This will also be built in the same low-cost model as the computer centre.
3. A few toilets near the new hostel and computer centre.

4. 80 Beds for the boys and girls as they are now sleeping on the floor which is dangerous in the rainy season when snakes and scorpions abound in the campus. Desks for the classrooms.

5. A play ground on the hilltop at the highest point in the campus. Preliminary levelling of the ground has been done. Some more levelling and soil deposition has to be done to make it into a proper playground.

6. The construction of a computer centre with a toilet next to the playground where good internet connectivity is available as the main campus below is blocked off by the hill and has no internet or mobile connectivity.

7. Computers and a printer and furniture for the computer centre along with electrical wiring.

8. Plantation of saplings is to be done on all the barren hillocks in the campus and a drip irrigation system is to be installed to water all the plants. The aim is to have enough growing forests in the campus for it to be able to run a gasifier and generator and make the campus self-sufficient in energy.

A campaign for cultural renewal has been initiated by MAJLIS and regular meetings are held in villages once every month to take forward the work of establishing an independent Bhil identity. The centre in Pandutalab village acts as the hub of these activities which are carried out all over Western Madhya Pradesh.

Apart from this the ongoing ecosystem restoration and sustainable agriculture programmes will also continue as before.

MAJLIS finances its activities through crowd funding. There are very few institutional donors who too contribute small amounts only like the individual donors. This ensures both the independence of the organisation and imbues it with a sense of responsibility towards both the communities it works with and the donors who fund its programmes.

