



# MAHILA JAGAT LIHAAZ SAMITI

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## Making Giant Strides – Annual Report of Mahila Jagat Lihaaz Samiti (MAJLIS) 2022-23

The organisation made great strides during this working year by increasing the depth and width of its activities. Major new work was done in the spheres of Education, Sustainable Agriculture, Eco-system Restoration and Bhil cultural rejuvenation in newer geographies. The details of this are as follows –

### 1. Sustainable Agriculture

The sustainable agriculture programme was started in 2016 and was the raison d'être of the organisation – to give women farmers greater control over the seeds, farm produce through indigenous farming techniques which are less market dependent. Initially, the seeds of indigenous landraces were sourced from interior villages where they were still being cultivated and then grown on the experimental farm of the organisation at Pandutalab village. The seeds were then sold to farmers across the country who wanted them. However, over time, while the seeds were propagated across the country, they went out of cultivation in the very villages from where they had been sourced. This was because the productivity and market prices of these seeds are low and so farmers have abandoned them for hybrid varieties which are more in demand.

Therefore, the organisation has initiated a campaign to get farmers to grow their own seeds once again with seeds from the farm of the organisation. For this a second experimental seed farm has been established in Alirajpur district in the campus of the school run by the organisation in Kakrana village – Rani Kajal Jeevan Shala.

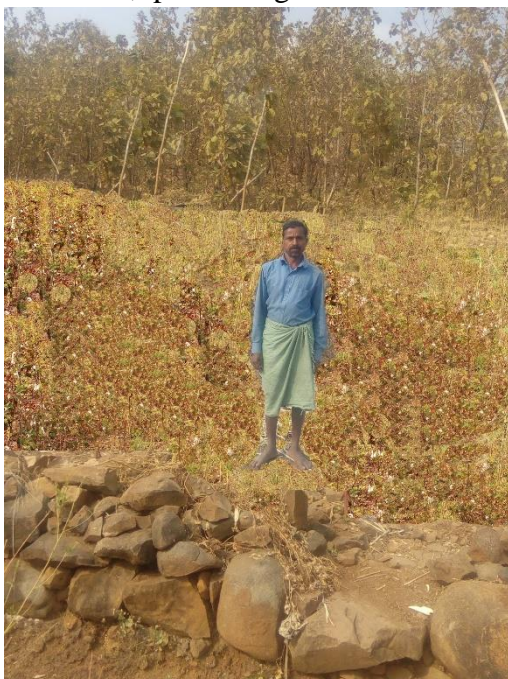
Teams from the organisation have attended several seed and agricultural fairs and meetings across the country to propagate the indigenous land races and this has enhanced cultivation of these seeds. One major such meeting was the national organic farming meet organised by the Association for Sustainable and Holistic Agriculture in Mysuru in which the organisation team was very popular.



Millets have now become the toast of the nation ever since 2023 was announced to be the year of millets. There is very little production of millets in western Madhya Pradesh and MAJLIS is the main organisation involved in this. Consequently, the Dean of the Agriculture Department of a local private university in Indore got in touch for millet seeds from MAJLIS and these were sown by them in a few small plots. These are all primarily monsoon season crops but they are doing well in the spring and summer also under the guidance of the members of the organisation. Thus, this is a case of a land to lab programme where agricultural colleges are getting germ plasm from the farms for their study and propagation.



The major challenge of millet production is to convince people other than farmers to consume them. Primarily because once processed into edible form, millets have a low shelf life. Therefore, processing of millets in large quantities and then transporting them to urban



centres for consumption is a big marketing challenge. This is made more difficult by the fact that due to their lower productivity their price too is higher. The organisation has begun a consumer education programme to increase the demand for millets among urban consumers and this has resulted in greater consumption of millets in the city of Indore. Subhadra Khaperde also participated in the “Poushtik Rasoi” competition hosted by the Glenmark Foundation for promoting nutritious indigenous food. Her recipe with Dang Kanda, a form of tuber called air potato (*Dioscorea bulbifera*) and millets won the second prize.

The organisation has a few motivated farmers like Pavlia of Vakner village shown along side who are diligently pursuing sustainable agriculture against all odds and keeping the light burning.



## 2. Ecosystem Restoration

The United Nations has declared 2021-30 as the decade of ecosystem restoration as it is the best way to combat climate change by increasing the forest cover, soil depth and water level in aquifers. The Bhil Adivasis associated with the organisation have been preserving and restoring the ecosystem from much before this jargon was created and have conserved soil, water and forests over thousands of hectares. The organisation is now implementing the new root-feast technology of irrigating saplings which is very effective in ensuring survival and growth of plants. This is an innovative method in which sugar solution is put into a one litre plastic bottle which has a plastic pipe with a wick inside attached to it which in turn goes to the root of the plant one foot below the ground.



The science behind this is that there are fungi in the root zone which transport nutrients from the soil to the roots in exchange for sugar under what is known as mycorrhizal symbiosis. About 20% of the total sugar produced by the plant through photosynthesis is transferred to the fungi in exchange for nutrients such as nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium. The root-feast method just enhances this process by supplying extra sugar near the roots and attracting more fungi with nutrients. Another advantage is that very little water is required as a result because it obviates the need for greater water dosage on the surface which is the characteristic of normal drip irrigation which has to account for the evaporation at the surface. In fact the evaporation process draws up water from six inches below the surface through capillary action. However, in the root-feast method the water is applied one foot or more below the ground and so capillary action does not take place. Consequently, one litre of water serves a small sapling for over two months on an average.

The project was begun first in the Rani Kajal Jeevan Shala school run by the organisation where



an elaborate exercise was conducted with the students to have them list the plant species that are there in their villages and then it was explained to them at length as to what is biodiversity and why conserving it and ecosystem restoration are important. The children have listed more than three hundred different species of plants in their villages. They now keep a vigil on the plants in the school campus and inform the team when any particular bottle has less water. Some species draw more water than the rest. The results are impressive. As a control we had kept some plants un-irrigated. With the rising temperatures in February in Kakrana the un-irrigated plants have wilted and some have died whereas those given the root-feast treatment are thriving as is evident from pictures of the same.



Apart from this the forest protection and soil and water conservation work are going on apace in as many as forty villages associated with the organisation. Consequently, in the Kara River watershed spanning the Gendra, Mankhada and Attha villages, which are all densely forested as the people have protected them through communitarian conservation efforts, despite hundreds of farmers having drawn water from the river for their winter crop, it is still flowing with water.

### 3. Reproductive Health

The programme of reproductive health surveys and clinics in villages and urban slums has been started again as doctors and nurses have overcome their Covid 19 induced reluctance and begun going for these visits again. 12 such camps were held during the year generating awareness and providing treatment in reproductive health to hitherto unserved habitations. Every time a new habitation is chosen for this programme.





#### 4. Education

The education programme of the organisation has expanded considerably. The Rani Kajal Jeevan Shala in Kakrana (<https://www.facebook.com/ranikajaljeevanshala.shala>) is running well after having picked up from the two years of lockdowns due to Covid 19 with a student strength of 150 which is less than the capacity of 220 but much better than during Covid 19. Moreover, the organisation has started supporting another school run by Adivasi youth in Pandutalab village. The expenses of one teacher and teaching and learning materials is provided to this school, Swastik Vidya Niketan, by the organisation. This school too like the Rani Kajal Jeevan Shala provides quality education to economically deprived Adivasi children in the absence of good education in the government schools. It is to be noted that in both these schools a substantial number of students who sit for the entrance examinations at the end of class five to the Navodaya and Eklavya Vidyalayas, which are elite government schools run for the talented few, succeed in getting entrance to these elite government schools because of the quality of education provided by the organisation schools.



There is a dearth of infrastructure at the Rani Kajal Jeevan Shala in Kakrana, which is a residential school, resulting in the students having to study and live in the same rooms on the floor. So, there were no desks and benches to study on and beds to sleep on for the students and this was a major handicap. Therefore, over the past year a massive infrastructure development programme has been implemented at the school to build a new academic block, benches, desks and cots for the students, augment the water supply with a new borewell and augment the electric supply with a dedicated transformer within the campus. Extensive soil and water conservation and plantation work has been carried out to restore the ecosystem of the campus. A cowshed has also been built so that it will be possible to rear cows in the campus and provide milk to the students to improve their diet.

The school charges very nominal fees from the students but the parents being from weak economic backgrounds find it difficult to pay even these small fees. Therefore, there is always a financial deficit as far as operating expenditures are concerned. These are met by the organisation from external funding. The Government provides less than what it should as support under the Right to Education Act and what it does give comes a year or more late.

## 5. Bhil Cultural Rejuvenation

The United Nations General Assembly has proclaimed the period between 2022 and 2032 as the International Decade of Indigenous Languages, to “draw global attention to the critical situation of many indigenous languages and to mobilize stakeholders and resources for their preservation, revitalization, and promotion.”

MAJLIS has, in accordance with this, begun a programme for rejuvenating the traditional richness of the culture of the Bhils focusing on their dialects which are without a script. To this end apart from imparting education in the Bhili language to early learners it has launched an internet radio ([https://aurora.shoutca.st/public/bheel\\_voice](https://aurora.shoutca.st/public/bheel_voice)) and a video channel ([https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCndkAYBLF\\_2ZWRPHZRJglaw](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCndkAYBLF_2ZWRPHZRJglaw)) called Bheel Voice in association with the Arizona State University of the United States of America. The development of a community is not possible without their being able to articulate their problems. This is where the vast majority of Bhils have been hamstrung by the lack of a literate language and a codified culture. Even though this has had its advantages in terms of keeping the Adivasis free from various social problems, given the complex systems of commerce, industry and governance, this has led to the Bhils' aspirations being consistently marginalised for the fulfilment of the desires of the more articulate sections of society.

The Bheel Voice studio has an independent recording facility and young people are being trained to become proficient in media production. Their culture, customs, and worldview are expressed in Bhili language. The valuable indigenous knowledge can be preserved only if the language is preserved. When a language is not preserved then it dies and with it dies the culture and livelihoods associated with it too die. The human values associated with this culture are also devastated along with the language. This is the reason why this initiative has been launched.

Presently, the debate surrounding the idea of development and its implementation is taking place in languages that are alien to the Bhils and so they are not contributing to it. Indeed, the Bhili dialects do not have the wherewithal to address these ideas at all. MAJLIS has tried to correct this lacuna and literally given the Bhils a say in the affairs of the region and the nation by facilitating the creation of a rich new written language and literature and by promoting its traditional music and dance. The experience of using the traditional myths and tunes in conveying modern developmental and cultural messages has shown that they are extremely effective for this purpose. Apart from this, the history of Bhil Adivasi rebellion against oppression right from the British times too is very inspiring and has been relied upon by MAJLIS to enthuse the Bhil youth. So far this kind of innovation has been done in a haphazard manner by various social and political developmental organisations in the western Madhya Pradesh region.

MAJLIS has motivated many other Adivasi mass organisations of the region to initiate the celebration of the anniversaries of Adivasi martyrs and helped in publishing many works in Hindi on Adivasi history and culture and it has become clear that transcription of the whole of the folklore would also allow a systematic study of it and thus offer many more opportunities for innovation. The folklore is amenable to creative interpretation and copious material in support of the theory and practice of alternative, communitarian and sustainable development can be culled from it. There is, for example, the creation myth sung in the villages near the River Narmada which detail how God was suddenly beset with the idea to build the universe and he looked towards Relu Kabadi the woodsman to go into the jungle

and fetch him wood. Thus starts the whole story of how slowly all the animals and plants are created and finally the rivers Narmada and Tapti. These rivers finally meet up with the ocean Dudu Hamad in marriage and in the process of their journey all the various villages, hills, and valleys are created. The whole song gives a sense of the vastness of nature and the strength of natural processes and inculcates respect in the listener for these. This is in direct contrast to the hubris of modern man who has tried to subordinate nature to his own ends and given rise to the serious environmental problems that face him today. The Adivasis have been sufferers of this process. Thus, popularising their creation myth and emphasising that their worldview is much more “rational” in the present context of serious ecological degradation will considerably increase their self-esteem.

Similarly, there is another story in one of the epic songs about a woman who has to answer for having questioned the authority of her husband. She is brought before the panchayat which is the traditional all-male dispute resolution forum. There the panches, the male members of the panchayat, decree that she be punished for her disobedience and ordered that her tongue be cut off and given to the husband to swallow. The tongue then gets stuck in the throat of the husband where it has remained ever since. This story has been picked up to depict the extent to which the Bhil society is patriarchally oppressive of women. At the same time, the fact that the tongue has got stuck in the husband’s throat offers the chance to the woman to recover it and so establish her right to speak out for her needs. This is the motif that has been used to organise the Bhil women to fight against diverse patriarchies inside the home and outside through their organisation Kansari nu Vadavno.

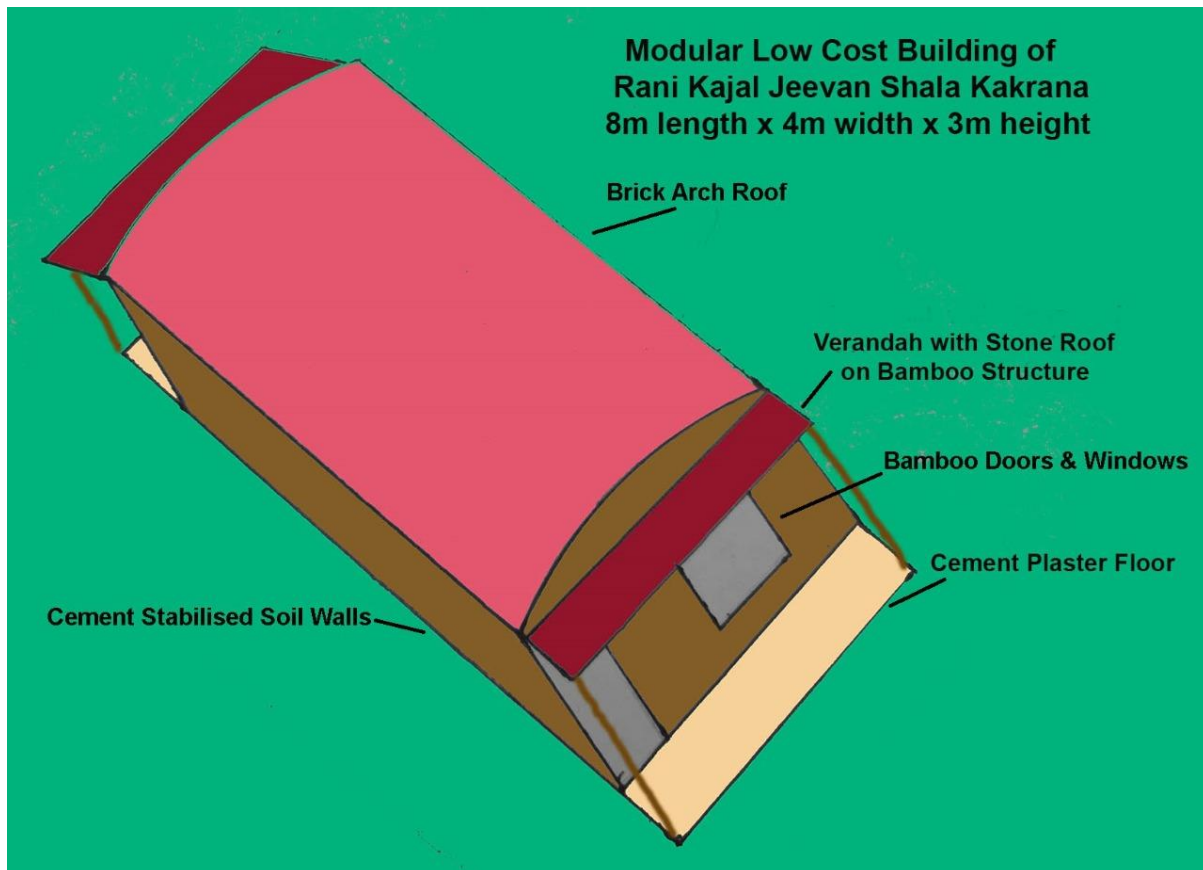
Literature, especially religious literature of an allegorical character has tremendous power to motivate people to act to change their socioeconomic condition. Unfortunately for Adivasis in the central Indian region in general and the Bhils in particular there has not been any significant effort to transcribe and use their rich oral literature. Now the efforts of MAJLIS have got a big boost as the Arizona State University, USA, has provided technical support. A modern recording studio has been set up at the Rani Kajal Jeevan Shala, where lectures and musical performances are recorded and then uploaded onto the internet radio and YouTube channels. The studio has been built in the traditional architectural style of the Bhil Adivasis. The performances and the production are done by the Bhil Adivasis from across the four western Indian states of Rajasthan, Gujarat, Maharashtra, and Madhya Pradesh and the studio also serves as a training facility for the young boys and girls of the school who are becoming proficient in media production. The YouTube channel has already garnered thousands of views since its inauguration on July 1, 2022, and this will increase over time as the cultural rejuvenation process gains in strength.





## 6. Low Cost Building Construction

There was a huge shortage of buildings in the Rani Kajal Jeevan Shala as dormitories, classrooms, laboratories and staff quarters needed to be built in large numbers. The standard modes of building construction are extremely costly both in economic and ecological terms. Therefore, to reduce the burden of fund raising and also the burden on nature, a low cost model of construction was decided on using stone, soil, minimal cement, steel and sand and bamboo and brick arch roofs. The modular room that was replicated is shown in the diagram.



Economically low cost and ecologically sustainable, this construction exercise of the new academic block had the following important learnings to offer –

1. Cement stabilised rammed earth construction of walls that had been planned initially is relatively costly because the walls have to be at least 30 cms thick and this requires considerable amount of cement at 7% volume by volume to stabilise the soil. Moreover, robust formwork has to be set up to hold the soil and take the impact of the ramming. The time required to construct these walls is also long as a result.
2. Consequently, a better option is to use stones and mud mortar with cement and sand pointing in the foundations up to plinth level and then build single brick walls interspersed with double brick pillars in soil and cement mortar finished with soil and cement plaster. This is the cheapest option both economically and ecologically. The time required for such construction is also less. Moreover, it is more durable than reinforced cement column and beam construction since in the latter, the steel reinforcement rusts after some time.



3. Roofing with flat brick arches of 1:12 rise to span ratio could not be done because the bricks could be made to stick only with pure cement which is a costly proposition both economically and ecologically. So, roofing has been done with bamboo trusses supporting steel sheets. A false ceiling of bamboo and ply has been put to reduce temperatures in summer. This is the cheapest roofing solution currently both economically and ecologically. Bamboo has been used extensively for making doors and windows and furniture also. The bamboo has been first treated in a solution of borax and boric acid to make it insect resistant and sturdy.
4. Roads have been built with stones and cement sand mortar. Once again this is the cheapest solution both economically and ecologically.
5. Traditional Bhil painters and wood craftsmen were employed to provide an exquisitely crafted front elevation of the building in traditional Bhil Adivasi style.
6. The whole work of building the new academic block of 400 square metres was completed in just three and a half months.
7. The complete building construction economic cost inclusive of painting and electric fittings is Rs 3500 per square metre. This is more than the initially estimated Rs 2200 per square metre as the labour component was underestimated and the costs of building materials have gone up. However, it is still much less than the Rs 12,000 per square metre required for standard cement, steel and sand construction with similar roof. Therefore, each class room of 32 square metres has cost Rs 1,12,000 as opposed to the initially estimated Rs 70,000.
8. This type of construction leads to a saving of carbon emissions from lesser use of steel and cement of 35 kgs per square metre of construction and a saving of 0.15 cubic metres of sand per square metre of construction.
9. The local labour component of this type of construction is high at more than 50 percent. Also, the process has resulted in upskilling of the local labour with new techniques.
10. The road cost is Rs 250 per square metre whereas for construction with concrete pavers it is Rs 700 per square metre and once again there is a saving of carbon emissions of 15 kgs per square meter.



Thus, durable building construction has been accomplished at a considerable saving in economic and ecological costs, while providing more employment locally. In future it is proposed to make the burnt bricks also locally thus increasing the local labour component even further. Moreover, the sourcing of soil, bamboo and stones locally too has benefited the local economy immensely. A video detailing this unique construction effort has been posted in the Bheel Voice Channel. The video is in Bhili language so as to benefit Adivasi viewers but it also has English subtitles for the understanding of a larger audience - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-ynLWtKG3fi>



## 7. Future Plans

A lot of work still remains to be done in the future to bring about widespread sustainable and equitable development and this is going to be as follows –

1. The infrastructure development at the school will continue as laboratories and a computer room and a few more staff quarters need to be built. The water supply system needs to be repaired and augmented further.
2. A bio-gas plant is proposed to be built at the school to generate gas for the kitchen and manure for the experimental seed farm.
3. The ongoing education and reproductive health activities are to be extended to Bhopal also to work with the women and children living in slums in that city. While one centre for children and women from the waste recycling community will be run by the organisation itself, another proposal is to associate with the organisation OASIS which is already running the famous Parvarish Museum School for children from slums (<http://parvarish.weebly.com/>) and ensure its continuation and enhancement.



4. The long-standing proposal of running a girl's hostel in the Pandutalab centre is to be finally implemented in association with the Swastik Vidya Niketan.
5. The Reproductive Health, Ecosystem Restoration and Sustainable Agriculture programmes will be made more broad based so as to build up critical mass in them.
6. The Bhil Cultural Rejuvenation Programme will be strengthened considerably with the organisation of special conventions and initiation of the transcription of the vast Bhili oral literature.
7. The Panchayat Rules have been amended in Madhya Pradesh to make it possible for small Adivasi hamlets to register themselves as independent Gram Sabhas or village councils. This will considerably enhance the powers of small communities to manage their affairs independently. So a programme is to be launched to complete the legal process for registering these independent Gram Sabhas.

MAJLIS finances its activities through crowd funding. There are a few institutional donors who too contribute but the majority of the funds come from individual donors big and small. This ensures both the independence of the organisation and imbues it with a sense of responsibility towards the communities it works with and the donors who fund its development programmes. The expectation is that this donor base which has increased considerably over the past year will continue to support the activities of the organization so that it can work for socio-economic development even better in the future.

