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Pursuing Sustainability with Equity – Annual Report 2023-24

The organisation (acronym MAJLIS) has now set up five distinct verticals – Sustainable Agriculture, Ecosystem Restoration, Renewable Energy, Gender and Gynaecological Health and Education and Culture which are all interlinked with each other so as to pursue sustainability with equity in a holistic manner. There are three centres from which the organisation operates –

- The office in the city of Indore which is the research and documentation hub also.
- The Climate Change Mitigation Centre in Pandutalab village in Dewas district which combines sustainable agriculture, ecosystem restoration and distributed renewable energy generation to act against climate change.
- The Education and Cultural Rejuvenation Centre in Kakrana village in Alirajpur district.

The work done in these spheres over the past year is as follows –

1. Sustainable Agriculture

The main objective of the sustainable agriculture intervention is to spread the seeds of indigenous varieties conserved on its organic farm in Pandutalab village to Adivasi farmers in Western Madhya Pradesh to increase their cultivation.

The modus operandi to get the intervention off the ground for this was to hold meetings in the month of June 2023 in ten villages specially chosen for this campaign which are – Kakrana, Attha, Gendra, Wakner, Khodamba and Jalsindhi in Alirajpur district, Pandutalab and Jamasingh in Dewas district and Katkut and Akya in Khargone district.



The indigenous seeds have gradually lost ground due to the following reasons –

1. The productivity of indigenous millets is less than that of the hybrid varieties of corn and so they have slowly been replaced by the latter.
2. Processing of the barnyard and foxtail millets to the cookable form is a laborious process done with hand pounds. This work has to be done by women. They had to grind the flour of corn in hand mills also. However, with the spread of motorised flour mills throughout the rural areas, women have not only stopped grinding flour with hand mills but they have also stopped hand pounding millets. Since there are no de-husking machines for processing the millets into rice, their production also began to go down.
3. Once the production begins going down, the proportion per each field of the number of birds invading the few fields that still have millets goes up and so it becomes extremely difficult to save them once they ripen.
4. Once the millets are processed, they have a very short shelf life and must be cooked and eaten soon. That is why marketing them is difficult because the consumers will not buy unprocessed millets as they are difficult to process and processed millets get infested by pests very soon.

The vanishing of millets has adversely affected the quality of food intake as the nutritional value of hybrid corn, wheat and rice is much less. Therefore, a programme of sowing of these seeds on small plots for home consumption initially has been initiated. The following seeds were distributed in the above-mentioned villages –

1. Chikni Jowar (Sorghum variety whose flour is very malleable and tasty)
2. Malwi Jowar (Sorghum variety which is white in colour and both nutritious and tasty)
3. Kantoli Jowar (Sorghum variety whose flour is very malleable and tasty)
4. Motli Jowar (Sorghum variety which provides good fodder in addition to quality grain)
5. Rala (A variety of foxtail millet that ripens in just 45 days and can grow on less fertile soils)
6. Bhadi (A variety of foxtail that takes about 60 days to ripen)
7. Batti (Barnyard millet)
8. Sangri (A variety of small millet)
9. Varikanda (A tuber also known as Air Potato that grows both underground and on the creepers above ground)
10. Sathdini Makka (A maize variety that ripens in just 60 days and is very tasty).
11. Cherry Chillies (A small sized chilli variety)
12. Red Gram (Indigenous varieties of both red and white colour)

Apart from these seeds the women farmers themselves procured indigenous varieties of udad (black gram), ballar (beans), chawla (another bean which is eaten as a lentil also) and kulath (horse gram).

Cumulatively, about a hundred women across these ten villages have grown these crops successfully. A second seed bank has been developed by growing these crops on a farm plot on the campus of the residential school for Adivasi children run by the organisation in Kakrana village. This too has been very successful. Thus, there is now a substantial number

of seed banks spread across the ten project villages that can be used to diversify the production base of these indigenous seeds not only in these villages but also in neighbouring villages.



An area of concern that has emerged is the lack of availability of organic manure in adequate quantities. Livestock dung alone is not sufficient. MAJLIS has developed two solutions for this on its farm in Pandutalab. The first is to mix dung with agri and forest biomass in the ratio of 1:9 and compost it in aerobic pits, thus increasing both the nutrient content and quantity of manure available. The second method is to prepare a bio-culture by fermenting a mixture of dung, jaggery, gram flower and livestock urine. This culture is not only rich in nutrients but also the sugar from the jaggery attracts the mycorrhizal fungi near the roots of the crops which bring the nutrients from the soil to them. The diluted bio-culture is then sprayed near the roots of the crops. The farmers have been told about this and they will be provided with support to implement this on their farms for the forthcoming Rabi season.



Farmers, especially women, from other villages nearby have also taken the seeds and sown them resulting in a wider spread of the programme than initially planned. These villages are – Baldala, Barda, Amba and Temla in Alirajpur district, Semli, Tiwria and Mehendikhera in Dewas district and Chainpura in Khargone district. The farmers themselves sought out some heirloom seeds that are still being sown in their villages and have grown them in addition to the seeds supplied to them by MAJLIS so as to increase the seed availability as follows –

1. Udad (Black Gram)
2. Moong (Green Gram)
3. Dhani Jowar (Sorghum variety that can be roasted and popped)
4. Sunghedar Bajra (Pearl millet with awns that help in keeping away birds)
5. Ground nuts
6. Sesame
7. Ramtil (A special form of sesame that is more nutritious)
8. San (Hemp which is a very good fibre)
9. Gongura (A plant that gives leaves and flowers as vegetables, the stem for fibre and fuel and the seed gives oil)
10. Rice (A local variety of rice that ripens in just 80 days)

A team of women farmers participated in the national convention of the Organic Farming Association of India (OFAI) in Aluva in Kerala in the last week of December 2023. It was an enormous success for the team which presented itself under the banner of the Madhya Pradesh Chapter of OFAI – Madhyanchal Organic Farming Development Society. The team reached Aluva on 27th December 2023 and set up the stall that day itself well in time for the inauguration of the convention on 28th December 2023. So, sale of seeds started right from the word go.



The stall was very popular and registered heavy sales of seeds. Farmers from Bengal, Bihar, Odisha, Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Goa, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Kerala and Telengana all came to the stall in large

numbers and bought seeds. Our policy is to sell seeds in small ten gram packets and encourage the farmers to grow their own seeds from these. In this way as many as 523 farmers bought our seeds over the three days of the convention which will now spread to all these states. Some farmers who had purchased seeds from us at the earlier OFAI convention in Udaipur three years ago too came to the stall and expressed happiness that they had multiplied the seeds they had bought there. Especially popular were the hemp seeds which were exhausted mostly by purchase by farmers in Haryana and Punjab who said that this seed has vanished from those states and was available only with us at this convention.



The Chairperson of IFOAM Organics International, Karen Mapusua, also visited the stall and appreciated the great diversity of seeds on display. She had a long discussion with the team regarding the challenges of indigenous seed conservation.



Subhadra Khaperde conducted as many as five discussion groups with farmers and activists on various aspects of organic farming during the convention in which there were participants from across the country providing a national perspective on these issues.



Subhadra also addressed the convention presenting her experience in rejuvenating the heirloom seeds in the Western Madhya Pradesh region. A video based on her lecture has been uploaded on to Youtube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wMVJ27qy6U4>.



This presentation called “Return of the Native Seeds” presented in a systematic way the challenges facing organic biodiverse agriculture as follows -

1. The Cultivation, weeding, chasing away of birds, harvesting, composting and post harvest processing are labour Intensive processes mostly done by women but are not adequately compensated by the market.
2. The individual varieties of seeds being conserved were described.
3. The difficulties in the storage of seeds which involves more labour were explained.
4. Revival of millet cultivation involves meetings with women to inspire them to adopt organic farming.
5. Finally, marketing of the seeds is an essential part of the dissemination strategy and this has to be undertaken when the sowing season starts.

The stall and the workshops conducted by Subhadra were covered widely in the local Malayalam press. The Mathrubhumi paper did a detailed report on the OFAI convention in which Subhadra and the women farmers from our team were featured.

Kerala within five years



Biokarshak Mela concludes today

Will switch to organic



● Aluva UC Farmers from different states share their farming experiences at the National Convention of Organic Farming Association of India held at the college.

Aluva. Agriculture Minister P. said that steps will be taken to switch to organic agriculture in Kerala in the next five years. Pra Saad said. Aluva UC He was attending the 8th National Convention of Organic Farming Association of India being held in the college. He reached the stage on Friday morning. He interacted with the farmers who came from different states. Meet the farmers and their food

Taste the products. It was informed that the problems of the farmers are being heard and necessary measures are being taken. Organic Farming Association of India founder Dr. Claude Al Waris told the minister. When conventions were organized in other states, the respective state governments provided assistance in bringing farmers and setting up stalls.

However, a complaint was raised regarding the non-existence of stalls of the Kerala agricultural shop or the agricultural college. Organization president K.P. said that he had met all the authorities concerned six months ago and had informed them several times. Ilyas Mantrio said.

Crowded at the fair

Aluva Organic Farming Association of India



Aluva UC Karoli and her daughter Ginda, organic farmers from Indore, Madhya Pradesh, exhibited the seeds they had brought from their home during the National Conference of Organic Farmers being held in the college.

The agricultural fair held in connection with the organic farmer's fair will conclude on Saturday. More than 2000 farmers from different parts of the country are participating in the fair. About 14,000 organic seeds are on display. There are 260 stalls in the fair. An organic cotton alternative native fashion show will be staged at the fair on Friday. Muttum Vali, a cultural event, was held on the stage. About organic farming Dr.

Sultan Ahmed conducted the semi-narr. Seminars on agricultural practices, crops and fertilizers were conducted in several languages. Food in North Indian traditional flavors is also served. Tamil Nadu crops and farmers' doubts were held separately. Minister P. Rajiv will inaugurate. Harita Kerala Mission State Coordinator T.N. Seema will deliver the keynote address.

The work of the organisation has been covered in the press also. An article in Hindi has been published on the Vikalp Sangam website - <https://vikalpsangam.org/article/paushtik-kheti-ki-or-laut-rahi-hain-bheeli-kisaan-in-hindi/>

2. Ecosystem Restoration

Climate Change Mitigation is the most important challenge facing humanity. One major way to offset carbon emissions is through ecosystem restoration involving afforestation and soil and water conservation. Majlis has encouraged the people of seventy villages in Alirajpur district to conserve the forests, soil and water through communitarian cooperation.

The Bhil Adivasis rightly believe that it is better to protect and regenerate forests instead of planting saplings from nurseries. In the high summer heat of the Narmada valley where they reside, small saplings mostly die due to the heat and lack of water for their tender roots. However, shoots coming out from the deep roots of existing trees are far hardier and easily survive. So, the people associated with MAJLIS first began protecting forests through collective action in the mid-1980s in the villages of Attha and Gendra. Women took the lead in this work forming protective groups. Grazing was prevented and the grass so grown was harvested in winter for the livestock. The forests were sustainably harvested and the wood used for construction purposes. In this way there was a growing forest which is the best way to sequester carbon. Later this communitarian practice was adopted by other villages with

encouragement from MAJLIS and so currently there are seventy villages where thirteen thousand hectares of forest land are under active protection. This massive communitarian effort has leveraged the traditional labour pooling custom of the Bhils called Dhas. The most crucial factor in saving forests is that the community must have control over their area and be able to regulate natural resource use by preventing both the forest department and outside citizens from exploiting them unsustainably. The people have fought hard to do this and are now masters of their forests. One village Amba on the banks of the River Narmada having as much as 60 percent of its total land under forests.



The Bhils use their labour pooling customs very effectively to do soil and water conservation work on their hilly farms and surrounding hill sides also. They mainly use stones to do bunding work on their farms and for plugging the gullies that border their farms. They have done this on thousands of hectares of land.



3. Renewable Energy

The need to keep global warming down to less than 1.5 degrees centigrade above pre-industrial levels has put the focus on transitioning away from the use of fossil fuels as soon as is possible. MAJLIS has a robust programme of solar photovoltaic energy generation in all its centres with the office in Indore having grid connected solar plant while the other two centres have off grid solar plants. Now a new project has also been started for biomass gasification which is a source of reliable power and can ideally be implemented in a distributed manner in rural areas. It involves the growing of energy plantations of trees and their sustainable harvest followed by gasification in anaerobic incinerators. The gas can be used to drive engines or electric turbines. Moreover, growing and then sustainable harvesting of trees leads to enhanced carbon sequestration as does the by-product of biochar from gasification which can be mixed with soil to increase its organic content. This year an energy plantation of 1500 teak saplings has been started on a plot of 1000 square metres at the [Rani Kajal Jeevan Shala](#), the residential school run by MAJLIS for Adivasi children in Kakrana village in Alirajpur district of Madhya Pradesh. Teak is indigenous to this region and grows very fast. The saplings will be irrigated through drips and fertilised with compost to enable them to grow even more quickly. Once they reach a height of 3 metres in about two years or so they will be sustainably harvested to yield biomass that will be anaerobically incinerated in a gasifier to yield electrical energy through a generator and biochar which will be ploughed back into the soil to increase its organic content.



4. Gender and Gynaecological Health

Majlis has been conducting gynaecological health camps for women in the slums of Indore and in the villages for close to eight years now with a hiatus of three years in between due to Covid 19. Extensive research has been conducted based on this programme, which has provided gender rights and gynaecological health awareness trainings to over 1500 women and the main learnings from it are as follows –

1. The beneficiary women lead a marginal existence and this is further reinforced by the patriarchal nature of society which results in their suffering from domestic violence and being unable to control their bodies compounded by adverse impact on menstrual hygiene. The proportion of women who have not suffered any form of domestic violence is a low 1.3 percent while none of them are able to decide when to have sex or babies. Domestic violence and coercion are the main complaints of the women.
2. The women, consequently, suffer from reproductive and gynaecological health problems which they are unable to treat on their own with on an average each respondent suffering from three reproductive health problems.
3. The government health services are inadequate and especially so in the case of gynaecological problems. The women have to access private health services as a result adding to their costs of living. Since private qualified gynaecological health services are very costly, the women cannot access them at all and have to suffer in silence from various problems of the reproductive tract.
4. The clinical camps that were conducted established that the women were more mal-nourished than they were aware of and also suffered from anaemia and blood pressure problems. The proportion of women who are malnourished is 27 percent and those who are anaemic is 76 percent.
5. The clinical camps also established the severe adverse gynaecological health situation of the respondents which is much worse than what they had reported in the survey. Clinical testing revealed that 19.7 percent of the women were suffering from some menstrual disorder or other which is a very high proportion and cervical erosion, hypertrophy, cysts etc affected cumulatively 81.1 percent of the women. Similarly, 75.7 percent of the women cumulatively suffered from various vaginal disorders like discharges, itches etc.
6. The clinical camps through diagnosis, testing and medication were able to successfully treat the gynaecological problems being faced by the respondents over a period of two weeks to three months.

We can conclude that due to patriarchy, the beneficiaries, who are economically deprived women, are suffering from gynaecological problems which is being solved by MAJLIS through a well-designed combination of empowerment training and clinical diagnosis and treatment. Scaling this model does not require a very big allocation of resources but only a policy decision on the part of the government to provide gynaecological services to economically deprived women and a proper implementation of the existing laws and schemes that are already there for the empowerment of women. The problem spans the realms of public health and gender equity and the solution too, has to come through a multi-disciplinary approach as follows.

The efficacy of public health systems are analysed by a parameter based framework developed by the Indian Institute of Public Health and it has been detailed for the present case of reproductive health of the women in Table 1 below –

Table 1 : Framework for Analysis of Efficacy of the Reproductive Health System

Parameter	Provision Status	Suggested Remedy
Distance	The Hospitals and health centres are situated at a Distance from the slums and so are difficult to access by the women who are either unpaid homemakers or low paid daily wage workers.	Clinics should be organised in the slums themselves. Doctors, nurses, lab technicians and pharmacists must go in a team to examine and treat the women.
Staff	The primary and community health centres do not have gynaecologists and adequate nurses and lab technicians. The bigger hospitals have less staff for the population.	Adequate numbers of well trained doctors, nurses and lab technicians need to be posted in health centres and hospitals
Services	Only obstetric services for safe motherhood are available in most health centres and even the bigger hospitals deficient in the provision of gynaecological services	Gynaecological services must be provided in addition to obstetric services.
Drugs	Drugs for gynaecological problems are unavailable.	Drugs provided free of cost for gynaecological problems
Social Appropriateness	There is lack of appreciation among medical staff of the huge cultural barriers that prevent women from expressing their gynaecological problems freely.	Awareness building both among medical staff and the women in slums regarding the inappropriateness of these cultural taboos and the need for articulating and understanding the gynaecological problems of women.
Affordability	Medicines and procedures for treating gynaecological problems are not available and so they have to be accessed from the open market at high prices	Medicines and procedures for gynaecological examination and treatment must be made available either free of cost or at subsidised rates.

The United Nations has developed a parameter based framework for gender equity and it is detailed for the present case in Table 2 below. The implementation of this combined strategy of improved reproductive health services delivery and effective gender equity measures by the government will go a long way in alleviating the dismal state of affairs with regard to reproductive health and rights of women that has been revealed by the intervention of MAJLIS. The implementation by the organisation has also shown that these measures do not require great outlays of financial resources and all that are required are a few policy tweaks to ensure that existing laws, rules and schemes are properly implemented through a gender equity lens.

Table 2 : Framework for Analysis of Gender Equity for Reproductive Health

Parameter	Provision Status	Suggested Remedy
Non-Discrimination in Allocation of Resources	There is a paucity of resources allocated for reproductive health and what is there is for ensuring safe motherhood to the almost total exclusion of gynaecological health.	Increase resources allocated for gynaecological examination and treatment for women.
The Right to Livelihood	Women's livelihood issues are not being addressed and they are mostly either homemakers or domestic workers. Without economic empowerment and independence, the women are subservient to their men.	Training and funding must be provided to facilitate women to find work either in jobs or in self employment and so become economically empowered.
Sexual and Reproductive Choice and Informed Consent	Women have no say in when to have sex, get pregnant or sterilised. These decisions are all taken by men. There is very little awareness about their rights and so in most cases there is no informed consent.	Awareness camps must be organised to make women aware of their rights and also sensitise the men to the problems created by patriarchal oppression for both men and women.
Women friendly laws and policies	There are substantial legal and policy protection for women but implementation is extremely poor.	Improved implementation of laws and policies for women's protection must be done.
Gender Based Violence	There is rampant gender based violence both physical and verbal. Women are mostly scared of their husbands and also of social taboos and so cannot live as free and fearless individuals	Better implementation of laws against gender based violence and the operation of shelter homes is needed to prevent gender based violence.

5. Education and Bhil Cultural Rejuvenation

The operation of the Rani Kajal Jeevan Shala school run by MAJLIS has stabilised after overcoming the disruption due to Covid 19. The extensive infrastructural enhancements carried out in the school in the previous year have considerably improved the performance of the students academically. Board examinations were reintroduced in Madhya Pradesh for

students of class five and eight from the 2022-23 session and the performance of the students was exemplary.

In class eight all students, three boys and three girls passed in first division with percentages as follows -

1. Ramila Choungad - 74.5%
2. Roshni Rathore - 73.8%
3. Arvind Solanki - 73.8%
4. Sonu Sastiyia - 72.2%
5. Pravin Dawar - 69.0%
6. Karan Sastiyia - 68.7%

In class five except for one student who has got 59.3% and just missed the mark all others have passed in first division. Five students are in the 60% to just less than 65% range, Twelve students are in the 65% to just less than 70% range, Six students are in the 70% to just less than 75% range and Two students, Naresh Mori and Vijay Jamra have got distinction with 75.3%. Himanshu, the son of the late founder manager of the school, Kemat Gavle, not only passed with distinction in class five but also got admission in the elite Navodaya School. Ten students from the school were also selected for the elite Eklavya schools. The results of the 2023-24 session are yet to be declared but one student, Pintu Kalam Singh, has been selected for the Navodaya school for which the results have been declared. This is by far the best performance among rural schools both Government and private in Alirajpur district.

Since the parents of the children are economically constrained, the school encourages the students to appear for competitive examinations to get admission to elite government schools where education is free and where admission begins after class five and eight. As most students succeed in these examinations after class five, the number of students in classes six to eight is much less. These too get admission to elite government boarding schools after class eight and some go to such schools in Indore city.



The school has an all round pedagogy that is not restricted to just academics but spans sustainable agriculture, ecosystem restoration and cultural rejuvenation. Thus, the students learn about sustainable and equitable development and also the use of media to propagate their rich culture through the Bheel Voice youtube channel. The youtube channel is quite vibrant and running regularly with quality content developed by the teachers and students. The teachers of the school were awarded on the World Indigenous Peoples' Day on August 9th 2023 by the Adivasi community in Alirajpur.



6. Future Plans

All the crucial work verticals are now well established and in the future there horizons will be expanded both geographically and quality wise to bring about widespread sustainable and equitable development. The thrust areas are as follows –

1. The infrastructure development at the school will continue as a smithy workshop remains to be constructed and the library and reading room has to be revamped. There is a possibility of mobile and internet connectivity finally being established through BSNL which has erected a tower in the village and so facilities for online teaching by experts from outside will have to be created.
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 as this was not done in the past year.

3. The Gender and Gynaecological Health, Ecosystem Restoration and Sustainable Agriculture programmes will be made more broad based so as to build up critical mass in them.
4. 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 which has already begun.
5. Policy advocacy based on the results of the micro-level projects of the organisation will be stepped up so as to mainstream these in government programmes.

