



# MAHILA JAGAT LIHAAZ SAMITI

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## Spreading Wings Across the Nation and the World – Annual Report 2024-25

The organisation (acronym MAJLIS) used its resources very efficiently over the past year to create impact not only in its own area of work in Western Madhya Pradesh but also across the nation and the world with its advocacy. The work done in the various spheres over the past year is as follows –

### 1. Sustainable Agriculture

Modern development since independence has devastated the habitats and livelihoods of the Bhil tribes and reduced them to being thieves in their own backyard primarily because actual governance has been in total violation of the provisions of the Fifth and Sixth Schedules of the Constitution of India, which provide for Scheduled Tribes to manage their habitats and plan their own development in accordance with their traditional eco-friendly customs. The biggest problem has been the decay of the traditional tribal natural and bio-diverse agriculture. This has been compounded by the fact that due to inadequate returns from agriculture even after adoption by them of the modern chemical agriculture as shown in the table below, they are forced to migrate for work which deprives their farms of the only resource that they have in abundance – their labour.

**Table 1: Results of Farm and Consumption Expenditure Survey 2024-25**

Average Daily Per Capita Calories Consumed (Calories)	Average Daily Per Capita Food Cons. Exp. (Rs)	Average Daily Per Capita Total Cons. Exp. (Assuming it is double of Food Exp.) (Rs)	Average Daily Per Capita Farm Income (Dividing Total Net Farm Income by 365 days) (Rs)	Average Household Labour Wage (Dividing Total Net Farm Income by No. of days of Household Labour) (Rs)	Average Agricultural Income Per Acre (Rs)	Average Annual Per Capita days of farm Work (Days)
2092	43	87	14	72	11950	54

This survey clearly shows that the average daily per capita food consumption expenditure is Rs 43 whereas the average daily per capita farm income if we were to divide the total net income by 365 days is only Rs 14. Which means that the farm income is grossly inadequate to even cover the food consumption expenditure. If we assume the total consumption expenditure for such a poor household to be double the food consumption expenditure then the farm income is able to cover only 16 percent of total household expenditure and 32 percent of food expenditure. No wonder then that the average daily per capita calorie consumption of the sample is only 2092 which is well below the benchmark of 2400 calories for good nutrition as determined by the World Health Organisation. This has to be compared with the poverty line determined by the World Bank which is \$1.9 per capita per day which works out to Rs 42 per day in India in purchasing power parity terms. As is evident from the results above, this poverty line income is not sufficient to even provide a minimum necessary food intake of 2400 calories per day let alone take care of other household expenditures.

This is the rationale behind the implementation of the sustainable agriculture programme to try and improve both the nutrition and income of the tribespeople. The logic is that women suffer the most from malnutrition and so it is they who need to act to make agriculture sustainable. Their lands being of very small size they have to anyway do other work, mostly migratory labour, to make ends meet. Therefore, they have been advised to use their farms for producing wholesome food with traditional varieties of seeds rather than for the market.

Gradually, as news of this initiative has gained ground over the past few years, people, especially women, from villages all over the Western Madhya Pradesh region have begun attending these meetings and taking the seeds for sowing. Thus, currently the number of villages covered through this programme has increased to 91 in the districts of Alirajpur, Dhar, Khargone, Dewas and Indore and it has now become a self-sustaining campaign. Consequently, the agricultural area covered by the initiative and the seeds conserved and sown too has increased to thousands of hectares. The various aspects covering actions and impact of the programme are as follows –

- Village level meetings for information and seed dissemination
- District level meetings for deciding on the strategies of the campaign of seed conservation
- Annual Fairs held in Pandutalab village in Dewas district with participation of farmers and activists from five districts. Activists from other parts of Madhya Pradesh too participated.
- Two seed banks have been created in Pandutalab and Kakrana villages.
- A new self-sustaining movement of organic millet production for consumption among women farmers has been created. Women farmers have regained their agency which they had lost due to chemical hybrid seed farming. The women's organization Kansari nu Vadavno, which means felicitation of the Goddess Kansari, who is the Goddess of Life of the Bhil Adivasis and according to their creation myth she proffered her breasts to the lifeless human form so that it could get lifeblood, will take this work forward to enroll more and more women farmers in this movement and make it a force to reckon with in future.
- Moreover, teams of the organisation have visited agricultural fairs held all over the country and disseminated the seeds to farmers from across 17 states thus spreading their adoption nationally. Finally, Subhadra Khaperde has become an ambassador of the seed saver programme internationally and she has participated in international seminars held online to propagate the need for ecological agriculture as in this video lecture on the occasion of rural women's day on 16.10.2024 organised by the Inter-Continental Network of Organic Farmers' Organisations (INOFO) - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c2b8OkQSsWo&t=66s>
- The work in ecological agriculture has gained publicity in the media also with a beautiful photo essay on millet farming published in People's Archive of Rural India - <https://ruralindiaonline.org/en/articles/return-of-the-native-seeds/#>
- Agricultural expert Dr Lakshmi Unnithan from Bengaluru has written a very concise yet evocative article in the June 16<sup>th</sup> to 30<sup>th</sup> 2024 issue of Down to Earth magazine on the work being done in the sphere of ecological agriculture -

# Native nutrition

**THE LUNCH** menu at the Rani Kajal Jeevan Shala School in Kakrana village of Madhya Pradesh shows a healthy mix of pulses, vegetables and millets. "Providing nutritious food to the children is our responsibility," says Rayatibai, who runs the residential school for children of the Bhil tribal community in the village, located in Alirajpur district. "The village shops do not sell the local varieties of cereals and vegetables we want. So, all of us, including the children, grow the varieties on the school premises. It also helps us conserve the seeds," she says.

Rayatibai was inspired to take up cultivation and conservation of local produce after joining Mahila Jagat Lihaz Samiti (MAJLIS), a non-profit focussed on the health and food security of the Bhil community in the district. "With help from 50 women from various villages, we conserve seeds of local native cereals such as pearl millet, *ragi*, kodo millet, little millet, *sangri*, *bhadi*, *bhatti* and *rala*. We also conserve *saath dini makke*, a variety of maize that was traditionally cultivated by the Bhils; local varieties of rice and pulses; and vegetables," says Subhadra Kharpede, founder of MAJLIS.

Along with her husband Rahul Banerjee, a social activist who also works with the Bhil tribe, Kharpede collects native seeds from conservators in the state and gives them to the women to cultivate. After harvest, the women set aside some crops for their families and deposit some seeds in a seed

Women of Madhya Pradesh revive native seed varieties for their families' food and nutrition security

LAKSHMI UNNITHAN

bank at Pandutalab village in the district.

Kharpede and Banerjee have been working with the community since the 1990s, helping them preserve their forests and apply for forest rights. Post Independence, demand for timber and forest produce led to deforestation in Alirajpur. With most men of the Bhil community having left their villages in search of work in other states, women took charge to save their forests. With Kharpede and Banerjee, they formed a trade union called the Khedut Mazdoor Chetna Sangath and have so far preserved over 13,000 hectares of forestland across 70 villages. During this time, however, the women noticed a change in their diet. With the Green Revolution and the push for high-yielding crop varieties, indigenous crops were replaced with hybrid maize. There was also an increase in the use of pesticides and fertilisers.

"Living in forested areas, we do not have easy access to towns and markets, nor do we always have enough money to buy produce. We had resorted to bland gruel made from maize, which had no nutritional value," says Tejlibai, a

resident of Khodamba village in the district. "After we started producing our seeds and cultivating them we at least have enough food at home for our children and grandchildren. Native crops also do not require pesticides and fertilisers, cutting down costs," she says.

Now, apart from conserving the seeds, the women of MAJLIS visit agriculture and seed festivals in other states to display and sell them. "We are now planning to open more seed banks, including one at the Rani Kajal Jeevan Shala school," says Kharpede.

A Bhil tribal woman from Alirajpur district displays native seeds she stores in a seed bank in Pandutalab village





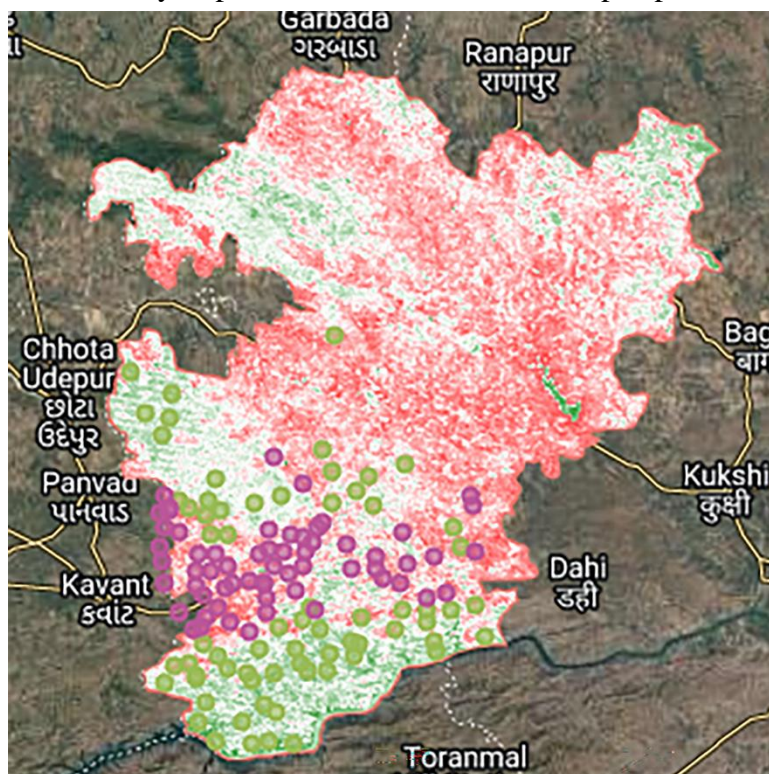
## 2. Ecosystem Restoration

The United Nations Organisation has declared 2021-30 as the decade of ecosystem restoration, as this is essential for addressing the multiple crises of water scarcity, soil loss, biodiversity loss, energy scarcity and climate change that currently face humanity (<https://www.decadeonrestoration.org/>).

MAJLIS has been at the forefront of implementing ecosystem restoration in Western Madhya Pradesh. The Bhil Adivasis of Alirajpur district in Madhya Pradesh, helped on by the organisation have been preserving and restoring the ecosystem and have conserved soil, water and forests over thirteen thousand of hectares across seventy villages constituting 24 % of the total land area of these villages. Sixtytwo of these villages have protected forests in 10 % or more of their land area with some having protected 50 % and more.

Analysis of Remote Sensing Data over a period of 33 years between 1990 and 2023 was carried out by the School of Climate Change and Sustainability, Azim Premji University, Bengaluru, for these 62 KMCS villages and compared with 62 control villages in the district which did not have communitarian protection. The results are summarised in the map attached in which the green areas are those in which there has been increase in vegetation and the red areas are those in which there has been decrease in vegetation. The green circles are the KMCS villages where there has been communitarian ecosystem restoration work and the purple circles are the villages in which there has not been any communitarian ecosystem restoration work. Clearly, the vegetation has increased in KMCS villages as compared to the control villages.

A more detailed analysis of LandSat data with higher resolution of 900 square meter pixel size was also carried out and that shows that even in the control villages there has been increase in vegetation over the three decades from the 1990s even though there are no dense forests there as there are in the KMCS villages. So overall there has been an impact of the KMCS in the whole of Alirajpur district as people have been inspired to protect trees. This is an extremely important achievement from the perspective of Climate Change Mitigation.



One of these villages is Bada Amba which has protected forests in 63 % of its land area. This is a unique village situated on the banks of the River Narmada that has neither road connectivity nor mobile connectivity and lacks grid electricity also. The villagers under the leadership of the veteran activist Hengibai have fought the forest department for the rights to their forests and also against their displacement by the Sardar Sarovar dam built in Navagaon in Gujarat. Under her leadership they have created a community forest protection team which has actively conserved the forests.

Roopsingh, of Attha village, says that they have taken a conscious decision to protect the forests. He says that after winning the fight to control their forests they decided to do it in their traditional way. Which is to regenerate the rootstock in degraded forests by preventing grazing as the rootstock is resilient enough to withstand the summer heat without watering. This is the best way to conserve forests as corroborated by Dr Aditi Mukherjee, who is a researcher with CGIAR and member of the International Scientist Panel on Climate Change. Thus, the members of the KMCS have done social fencing of common lands through communitarian cooperation to prevent grazing without much financial outlay and the huge cost of watering in summer is obviated. Women have played a significant role in this process led by the late Dahelibai of Attha village. It is now well established that ecosystem restoration can be successful only if there is effective community control of their habitats (<https://earthbound.report/2018/01/15/elinor-ostroms-8-rules-for-managing-the-commons/>)

Here are a few news articles on the ecosystem restoration done by the organisation-

- <https://followupstories.com/culture/how-forest-rights-has-strengthened-alirajpur-tribals-wisdom-of-co-existence/>
- <https://groundreport.in/ground-report-hindi/alirajpur-forest-conservation-and-wait-for-community-forest-rights-6696559>

### 3. Renewable Energy

The energy plantation of teak trees that was initiated in [Rani Kajal Jeevan Shala](#) under the management of Bhavlabhai is thriving. Teak saplings from the forest nursery which were hardly six inches in height at the time were planted in August 2023 on a barren piece of land which was rectified with soil deposits from the Narmada backwaters nearby mixed with mulch and manure. Drip irrigation was provided through the harsh summer. Now after just one year, the saplings, which were planted at intervals of 50 cms so as to promote competition for sunlight between them, have grown to 4 meters in height completely dwarfing their care taker Bhavlabhai. Nature rewards handsomely those who care for it. We are on course for sustainable harvesting of the teak in two years time. The harvested teak will be dried and then anaerobically incinerated in a gasifier to produce gas and biochar. The gas will be used in a generator to produce





electricity while the biochar will be ploughed back into the plantation and also the farms in the school campus to increase their fertility. In this way both carbon sequestration and reduction in emissions will take place along with improvement in soil health.

Summer temperatures in Western Madhya Pradesh reach upwards of 45 degrees centigrade especially in the Narmada Valley where most of the Bhil Adivasis reside. The proliferation of concrete roofs has resulted in the increase of inside room temperature and the consequent higher use of electric cooling devices which increase consumption of electricity and so emissions. All the centres of the organization have solar photovoltaic panels installed but to reduce summer heat it is necessary to cool the roofs. A reflective aluminium coated plastic sheet has been tied to those parts of the structure supporting the solar panels that are not covered by the panels to reflect away the sun's rays. A reflective paint has been applied to the surface of the roof below to further keep it cool. This heat proofing treatment has ensured that there is a 10 degree centigrade difference between the outside and inside temperatures and so the cooling devices do not have to be used as much as before.



#### **4. Gender and Gynaecological Health**

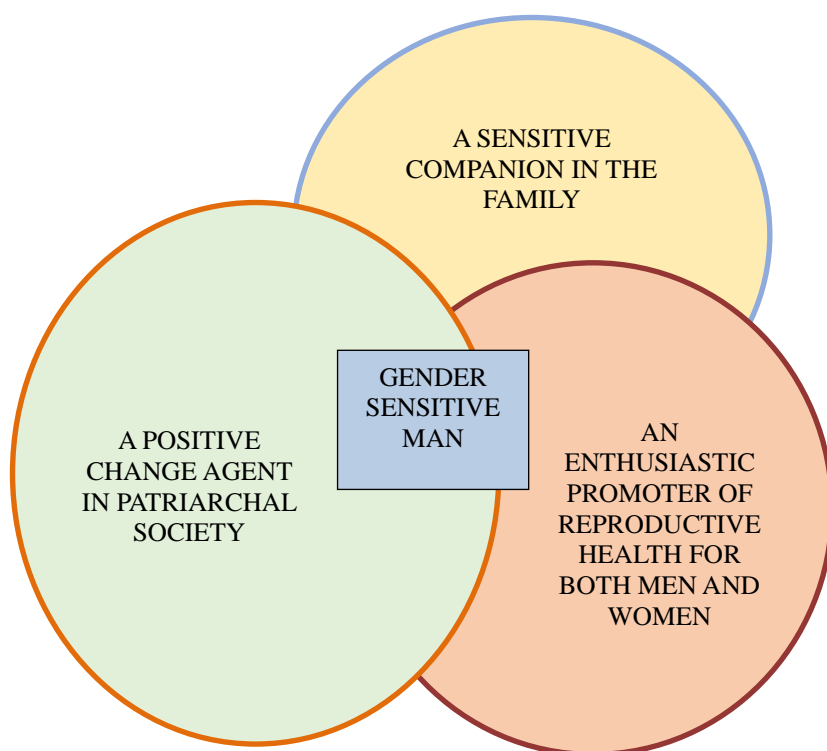
MAJLIS has a long standing programme of reproductive health and rights involving both awareness building among women and their treatment through clinics. One major problem that is encountered is the opposition of men to the liberation of women. However, since the familial relationship between women and men is an intimate one this opposition of men cannot be overcome solely through resistance. One major reason for this is the deleterious effect that the concept of masculinity has on men. Specific roles, attitudes and activities have been earmarked for men in patriarchal society and the behaviour of men in conformity with

these is called **MASCULINITY**. Masculinity requires that men should be strong, they should not cry in adversity, they should not do domestic work like washing clothes, cooking food and caring for children and elders and they should inflict physical, sexual and mental violence on women to keep them suppressed.

Clearly, masculinity is harmful for both women and society since women constitute half of the population and if they are not physically and mentally fit, then their contribution to society and economy also is less than it should be, leading to loss for the whole population. Specifically in the sphere of reproductive health, the non-cooperation of men results in problems for women and the children they are bearing, lack of menstrual hygiene and diseases of the reproductive tract of both men and women. Men also suffer from the burden of having to conform to the demands of masculinity. The violence and the resultant lack of peace in life adversely affects the mental makeup of the men. All these problems are not amenable to easy solutions.

Therefore, MAJLIS in its gender programmes has works with men to encourage them to reject masculinity so as to break out of their prescribed gender roles and participate in domestic work and care work and also refrain from gender based violence. This behaviour change programme for men has the following benefits –

1. Men get the right information about gender and reproductive health which helps them to take right decisions after consultation with women.
2. The cooperation of men helps women to improve their reproductive health and also their participation in social and economic affairs.
3. The participation of men in domestic work improves the care of children and the old.
4. Men have their own reproductive and sexual health problems which they are unable to address because of the culture of silence and the burden of masculinity. An open environment, free of such oppressive rules and customs has enabled men also to seek solutions for their problems.



The graphic along side illustrates this new role synthesis for men.

Intersection 1: Between sensitive companionship and promotion of reproductive health by men ensures better health outcomes.

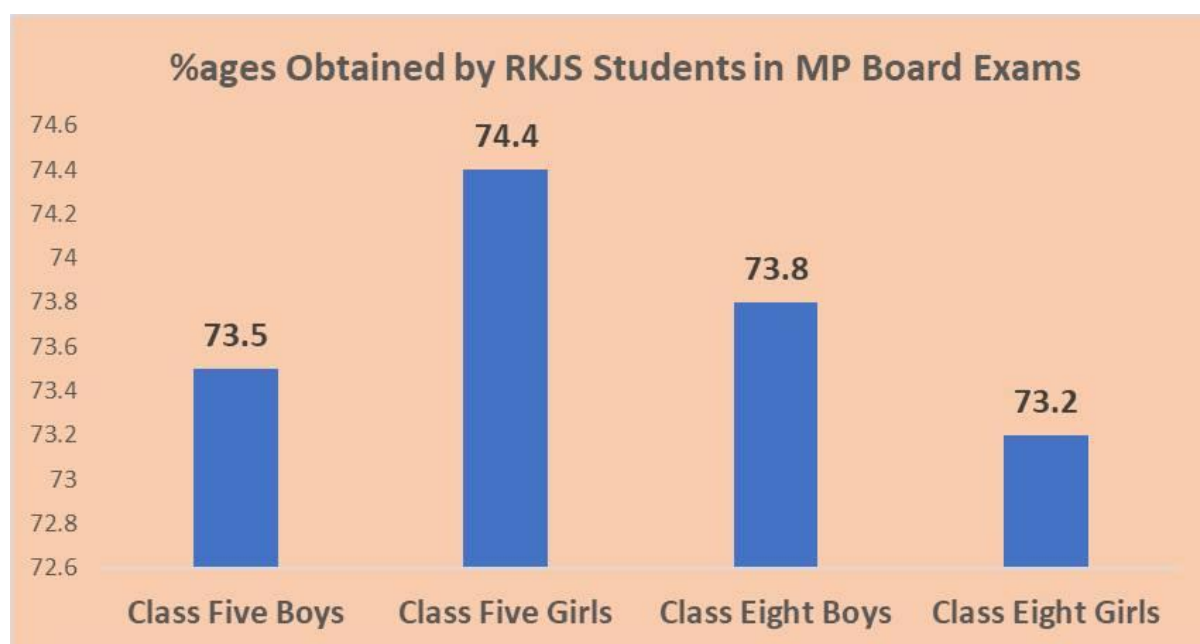
Intersection 2: Between promotion of reproductive health and positive change agency results in reduction of patriarchal oppression.

Intersection 3: Between positive change agency and sensitive companionship by men results in cooperation between men and women for more harmonious living.

## 5. Education and Bhil Cultural Rejuvenation

The [Rani Kajal Jeevan Shala](#) was set up in 2000 to provide a holistic education to Bhil Adivasi children that would simultaneously keep them rooted in their own culture and also equip them with the skills required to do well in the a modern economy and polity. The need arose at that time because the Government school system was dysfunctional in the rural areas as it is even today. The children being first generation literates needed special coaching after school hours and this was not possible with a day school. So, a residential school was set up in the village Kakrana on the banks of the River Narmada.

The school provides subsidised residential education encompassing ecological agriculture, ecosystem restoration, cultural rejuvenation and formal education to the children charging only nominal fees and this is the silver jubilee year of this unique educational institution as shown in this video <https://youtu.be/z-2QoV4Ymxk?si=JbLaVXvSG-wT1BgN>. The results have been exceptional always because of the empathetic pedagogy and this year too the students have excelled in the Class Five and Class Eight Board Examinations conducted by the Madhya Pradesh Board of Secondary Education for the 2024-25 academic session. All students have passed in first division with 25% of the Class Five Boys and 60% of the Class Five Girls getting 75% or higher marks and 33% of the Class Eight Boys and 50% of the Class Eight Girls getting 75% or higher marks as shown in the graphic below



The campus of the school is also the centre of the indigenous seed conservation movement. Twenty varieties of cereals like sorghum, maize and millets and vegetables and oilseeds are grown on the farm and then distributed to farmers throughout Alirajpur and Dhar districts. The farmers of nearby villages have gone back to cultivating their heirloom seeds again which then have got from the school. Simultaneously the school also has an ecosystem restoration programme involving soil, water and forest conservation. The students of the school take part in both ecological agriculture and ecosystem restoration as part of their extracurricular activities.

The school also has a studio called Bheel Voice which produces educational and cultural material in audiovisual format which is then broadcast through a Youtube Channel –



<https://www.youtube.com/@bheelvoice> . The studio which has state of the art recording facilities is functioning very well.



The fight of marginalised cultures against the dominant cultures to establish their identity requires their own “voice infrastructure”. This is a powerful new term that aptly describes the cultural ammunition that the indigenous people the world over are using to establish their distinct cultural identity that is sought to be drowned out in a neocolonialist cultural onslaught led by the dominant cultures of the world. The Bheel Adivasis of Western India too are in the forefront of this fight and are aggressively promoting their own culture. The [Bheel Voice](#) programme voice infrastructure was set up initially with the help of [Uttaran Dutta](#) of the University of Arizona and it is doing very well with over a hundred videos published for a cumulative viewership of more than 53000.

## 6. Future Plans

India faces serious ecological problems currently in the three crucial sectors of water availability, agriculture and energy as follows –

- **WATER :** The Falkenmark Indicators for water availability at the national level which are eponymous with the Norwegian hydrologist who proposed them are - Stress:  $1700 \text{ m}^3/\text{year/person}$  and Scarcity:  $1000 \text{ m}^3/\text{year/person}$ . The water availability in India on the whole is  $1400 \text{ m}^3/\text{year/person}$  and so the country is water stressed. However, 70 percent of the country apart from the Indus-Ganga-Brahmaputra and Mahanadi basins and the Western Ghats is naturally water scarce not only because of

less rainfall but also because of the underlying basaltic rock structure. Over-extraction of water for agriculture mainly but other uses also has led to a serious lack of water availability in most parts of the country.

- **AGRICULTURE:** Heavy use of diesel-powered agricultural machinery, Loss of soil fertility and consequently also their ability to act as carbon sinks, and use of synthetic fertilizers has led to higher emissions of green house gases (GHG) from agriculture. Overuse of nitrogenous fertilisers which are not absorbed by plants results in releases huge amounts of  $N_2O$  (nitrous oxide) which has two hundred times more of warming potential than Carbon Dioxide. Monocultures of hybrid rice, wheat, soyabean and cotton varieties has resulted in huge loss of agri-biodiversity that threatens the food security of the nation.
- **ENERGY:** The Annual Per Capita Consumption of Electricity in India is only 700 units whereas it is as high as 16000 units in the USA. Even so, the electric power industry is running losses of Lakhs of Crores of rupees and with a high dependency on coal, some of which has to be imported. Crude Oil Imports too are high constituting 18 percent of the total import bill. Thus, higher consumption of fossil fuel-based energy will not only be economically costly but also lead to far higher GHG emissions than at present.
- **GLOBAL WARMING:** The emissions of GHGs has resulted in a  $1^{\circ}C$  increase in ambient temperature since 1945 and it is still increasing @  $0.2^{\circ}C/Decade$ . The 21<sup>st</sup> United Nations Conference of Parties organized in Paris in 2015 had called for the limiting of ambient temperature rise to  $1.5^{\circ}C$  as beyond this the negative impact of climate change would be very serious. Currently, the total annual GHG emissions are 55 billion tonnes of  $CO_2e$  (Carbon Dioxide Equivalent) and the total amount of sequestration mainly through forestry is only 2 billion tonnes of  $CO_2e$ . Therefore, there is an urgent need to transition away from fossil fuels to renewable energy and also increase sequestration through various carbon removal methodologies, the main one being afforestation.

These ecological problems combine to create serious livelihood problems. The Food and Agriculture Organisation has estimated that a healthy diet costs about US\$4 per person per day (FAO, 2023), which applying the purchasing power parity conversion rate of ₹23 to the dollar works out to ₹92. So given an average household size of 4.4 currently for India this works out to a food expenditure of roughly ₹400 per household per day. The latest consumption expenditure survey conducted in 2022-23 by the National Statistical Organisation (NSO, 2024) says that food expenditure constitutes about 43% of the total household consumption expenditure. So, for a healthy diet combined with other associated requirements for a good life the annual household consumption expenditure should be at least  $(400/0.43)*365 = ₹340000$ . Ideally a household should have a savings of 20% over and above this and so a decent annual household income is ₹425000. However, due to the ecological crises having constricted livelihoods, more than 90% of the households in the country have less than this income.

All these problems require large scale Government interventions for their solution on the basis of two important principles of equitable development as follows –

## □ 1. SUBSIDIARITY

**“The central level of authority shall act only if and in so far as the objectives of the proposed action cannot be sufficiently achieved either at the regional or the local level, but can rather, by reason of the scale or effects of the proposed action, be better achieved at the central level”**

This principle, which was originally formulated by the Luigi Taparelli in the mid nineteenth century, basically calls for local self-governance on issues that can only be properly planned and executed at the community level. Gandhi was the first person in India to formally conceptualise this in the form of "Gram Swaraj" or the promotion of grassroots democracy through the establishment of autonomous village republics called Panchayats. Unfortunately, Panchayati Raj was included in the Directive Principles of State Policy in the first Indian Constitution that was adopted in 1949 and was made non-justiciable, that is unlike the fundamental rights these could not be enforced through the courts. Basic rights like that to free education, health and nutrition services and the means to a dignified livelihood too were included in this non-justiciable chapter. Moreover, the Fifth and Sixth Schedules of the Indian Constitution which have provisions for the Scheduled Tribe Population to carry out self-governance and appropriate grassroots development in accordance with their communitarian and nature friendly customs too have not been implemented.

MAJLIS along with other Adivasi mass organisations was part of a long drawn nationwide campaign that resulted in the enactment of the Panchayat Provisions Extension to Scheduled Areas Act 1996 (PESA) which made the Gram Sabha or village councils of the Adivasis the paramount decision-making body in Fifth Schedule areas. Later other people friendly acts such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act and the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest dwellers (Recognition of Rights) Act were enacted that gave further strength to the implementation of the subsidiarity principle. MAJLIS took advantage of these powerful legislations to further augment the grassroots processes of communitarian ecosystem restoration and implement workable pilots in all its spheres of work. The organisation will continue to do so in future as a part of its plan of action.

## □ 2. TRICKLE UP INVESTMENT

**Government Investments in ecosystem restoration, renewable energy, education and health to be made at the grassroots level through Panchayati Raj Institutions which will trickle up providing demand led dynamism to the whole economy.**

The presence of articulate Adivasi leaders like Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan and Jaipal Singh resulted in the debates in the Constituent Assembly reverberating with eulogies for the inherently democratic and non-exploitative nature of Adivasi communities and the expression of concern about enabling them to negotiate the process of integration into the modern economy to their advantage. Consequently, extensive provisions were made in the Fifth and Sixth Schedules of the Constitution and many laws were enacted for the protection and betterment of the Adivasis and to ensure that bottom-up development took place in these Scheduled Areas. Nevertheless, the imperatives of modern industrial development enunciated in the centralised trickle-down planning process initiated from the early 1950s and the powerlessness of the Adivasis in the face of the State authorities resulted in a policy of even greater intrusion into Adivasi areas than in colonial times being adopted after independence to exploit the vast natural resources that these held. The devastating experience of this trickle-down development process, which is conceptually flawed because investment will never be



allowed to trickle down by those who are powerful, has convinced MAJLIS that this is totally inappropriate and instead a trickle up development process needs to be implemented. Investments made at the bottom of the pyramid always trickle up because the people at the bottom mostly lead hand to mouth lives and do not have surpluses that they can accumulate. Especially so in the case of the Bhil Adivasis whose culture is a non-accumulative one.

Therefore, going forward MAJLIS will increase the ambit of its advocacy nationally and internationally for the implementation of a trickle up investment model. Immediately, the attempt will be to get the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Programme to work better with more funding directed to ecological restoration and ecological agriculture and also get the Government to launch a similar scheme for urban areas with the same ecological mandate.

