



AARAMBH
आरम्भ मध्यप्रदेश

NIHAL TRIBAL – THE LEFT BEHIND COMMUNITY MARCHED TOWARDS SOCIAL CHANGE

Sonkatch, Hatpipaliya Block, Dewas District, MP



Backdrop

In 2024, a comprehensive community assessment was conducted in Dewas District, focusing on its most neglected and marginalized 14 revenue villages of 3 blocks, i.e. Bagli, Sonkutch, and Haatpipiliya. The objective was to gain a holistic understanding of the specific socio-economic needs, vulnerabilities, and challenges faced by these communities, with a particular emphasis on the Nihaal community, which was identified as the most disadvantaged. The study covered all 1,119 households, accounting for a total population of 5,391 individuals, including men, women, and children. A well-structured survey instrument was employed to assess multiple dimensions crucial to sustainable community development:

- Housing & Infrastructure: Availability of livable housing, access to basic utilities, and sanitation facilities.**
- Education & Skill Development: Enrolment rates, dropout rates, literacy levels, and vocational training opportunities.**
- Healthcare Access & Nutrition: Availability and affordability of healthcare, maternal and child health indicators, and nutrition security.**
- Employment & Livelihoods: Economic opportunities, wage disparities, self employment trends, and government welfare participation.**
- Social Participation & Institutional Support: Awareness and utilization of social welfare schemes, participation in community decision-making, and access to financial services.**

The assessment uncovered stark inequalities, with every surveyed household classified as neglected and deprived. The Nihaal community emerged as the most severely affected across all indicators, underscoring systemic exclusion and an urgent need for targeted interventions.

Nihaal Community: From Isolation to Empowerment

About the Nihaal Nestled in the remote pockets of Bagli–Sonkathch–Hatpipliya in Dewas district, the Nihaal community has long lived in cultural and geographic isolation. Sometimes recorded as OBC in official records, their way of life — close-knit villages, ancestral customs, deep connection to nature, landlessness, widespread illiteracy, and traditional marriages within the community — strongly indicate tribal traits. Elders claim descent from Lord Rama and partake in symbolic rituals like carrying bows and arrows during festivals Aarambh's Journey: Bringing Dignity and Legal Access In 2019, Aarambh conducted a Child Rights Situation Analysis in 30 villages of Dewas district and identified several Nihaal hamlets exhibiting clear signs of marginalization. When we first began working with them, the Nihaal were living in near-total isolation. Children had never seen the inside of a school, many families lacked any form of identity documentation, and livelihoods were mostly informal and unfair. Alarming, a large number of children were engaged in labour, and adolescents were found to be involved in work that is clearly prohibited under the Child and Adolescent Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 2016. Recognizing the urgency, Aarambh, with the support of APPI, government bodies and local communities, initiated a focused intervention in 2024 to reduce child labour in the community. The and to help the Nihaal claim their rights and live with dignity. We are currently endeavouring to establish Help Desk, Child Friendly Panchayats, combating child labour and child marriage locally through parents, child and youth groups and Kite Centre. Over time, more than 143 children were enrolled in school, breaking the intergenerational cycle of illiteracy and child labour. Simultaneously, the organization facilitated over 100 birth certificates, Aadhaar cards, Ayushman Bharat health cards, and E-- Shram cards, giving the community its real access to identity and welfare. This transformation didn't happen overnight. It took persistent engagement, trust-building, and community participation. The change is visible in small but powerful ways. Yet, a significant gap remains. The Nihaal community is not yet recognized as a Scheduled Tribe, despite meeting many of the traditional indicators—distinct culture, backwardness, geographic isolation, and social exclusion. Their current

classification as OBC does not fully reflect their identity or address their marginalization. Recognizing the Nihaal as a Scheduled Tribe would validate their tribal identity and unlock critical benefits such as Inclusion under Article 342 of the Constitution, would not only be an act of recognition but also a path to breaking the vicious cycle of their poverty. It would provide access to reservations in education and jobs, inclusion in tribal welfare schemes, and protection of their cultural rights. It would empower the Nihaal to claim forest rights, secure land tenure, and benefit from livelihood schemes designed



specifically for tribal communities through the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, and National Commission for STs and Support for preserving cultural heritage and more. Our journey with the Nihaal is not just a development story—it is a story of belonging. It is about a people reclaiming their voice and place in society. It is never possible without trust and sustained support. Aarambh is working toward the next step: ensuring that the Nihaal are recognized for who they are—a tribal community deserving of dignity, protection, and opportunity.

The left Behind: The Nihaal Community that is grappling with Identity Crisis in Dewas District of Madhya Pradesh

The tribal communities are a vibrant yet often overlooked part of India's diverse population. For generations, they have lived in isolation, holding on to their unique way of life—their beliefs, customs, and faith interwoven into the fabric of Indian society. But now, their struggle for survival has become a concern for all who care about preserving humanity's rich tapestry. Social and political organizations have taken up the cause to uplift these communities, especially focusing on the children and women who bear the brunt of poverty and neglect. Nowhere is this effort more urgent than in the Bagli/Hatpipaliya block of Dewas District in Madhya Pradesh, where the Nihal community has been fighting for basic dignity and survival. AARAMBH has stepped in, lighting a spark of hope in places long shrouded in darkness, hoping to change the narrative for these communities. This mission reaches out to fourteen villages covering five Panchayats. It has recently started encouraging this community to reclaim their futures by helping the working children and the school dropouts to attend school regularly. In these small, tight-knit localities, illiteracy and dire living conditions paint a grim picture. Homes, made of leaves, stand frail and shadowy, barely providing shelter. The Nihal people live entirely within their community, their lives bound by age old customs—marriages taking place solely among their own. They are landless, labouring endlessly to earn their daily bread. They remain untouched by the country's political and economic changes, yet ironically, the adults possess voter cards, casting their votes with little knowledge of the world beyond their own struggles. There is an urgent need to bridge this gap and bring light to their lives. AARAMBH's efforts are a step in that direction, seeking to uplift these communities and give them the hope they have long been denied. About the Nihaal Many villages in the Bagli tehsil are home to tribal communities like Harijan, Gujjar, and Banjara etc. The most vulnerable are the pockets which are predominantly settled by Nihal. According to some age-old tales passed down through generations, the Nihal believe they are descendants of Lord Rama. And therefore, on certain occasions, they adorn themselves with bows and arrows as a nod to their divine ancestry. Despite sometimes being classified as OBC (Other Backward Classes) in official records, their lifestyle and characteristics align more closely with tribal communities.

They live in socio cultural isolation, maintaining a deep connection with nature, and are a small, close-knit group. Their innocence and simplicity in navigating life only underscore their tribal essence, raising questions about their official caste/ethnicity status and the need for a more nuanced understanding of their identity. Most of these communities, however, face severe economic hardship and are often landless, forcing them to rely on capable families or farmers to make ends meet. As a result, they are resorted to borrow loans from easily accessible sources. Sadly, due to their simplicity and lack of financial understanding, they often find themselves trapped in a cycle of debt, pushing them into bonded labor that feels endless. In this region, these bonded labourers are known by names such as Hali, Gwal, Servant, and Hardworking etc. Invisible Childhood of Nihaal Due to illiteracy, lack of education and awareness, they throw their children in the same work. The consequences for these young lives are immediate and devastating. These children become just the shadows of their hindering their all-round development. true selves. The creativity and potential that should flourish in childhood are stifled. They are imposed with all the burden of the family is expected to do. The demanding work takes away their time for education, leisure, mental growth, and development. They bear the weight of responsibilities meant for grown-ups, The children are often stunted, wasted and suffer many health issues. The signs of this hardship are evident from thinning and graying hair and aged faces marked by rashes. Their cheeks swell, their hands and feet are bruised. They fall prey to substance abuse. Their teeth turn pale and red, while their self-esteem crumbles, causing them to withdraw from their peers. Children caught in this cycle of bonded labor usually remain uneducated, growing up without discipline or self-confidence. Overburdened with work, they have little or no access to play or entertainment, isolating them further. With direct exposure to substances, they face consequences that echo throughout their lives. Friendship and joy become foreign concepts. Their legal entitlements are in oblivion. They are deceived in the pretext of works. They tend to live in the present, they are taught to be without future and without goals. Anger, frustration and failure all that their life offer them in the childhood and when they are grown up. Social

prestige remains a vague concept for them. Their life thus ends without the realisation of any of the crucial civil, legal and social rights. Child marriage takes place in a secret manner. There are various socioeconomic factors for child marriages in this area like migration and girls' safety concern, dowry, social pressure, exchange marriage, family pressure, social prestige, gender inequality, lack of awareness, due to the death of one of the parents or the death of both, very weak economic condition and practice of forgery in children's identity cards or important documents etc. Consequently, children in this area are more at risk of early pregnancy and lack of care that more likely to cause mental or physical disabilities, girls are deprived of education and other needs. In any condition the responsibility of providing nutrition to a child primarily fall in the hands of parents and the institutions which are working for the children at the government level such as Anganwadi and government schools (primarily for arranging mid-day meal), but in the present scenario, the status of nutritional intake health of children is not very satisfactory. Due to widespread illiteracy and lack of awareness, Nihal families have either no access or very limited access to government schemes and benefits. This is further complicated by the fact that the Nihal community is not officially categorized as a tribal group, nor do they fall under the SC (Scheduled Castes) or ST (Scheduled Tribes) categories. Consequently, they live in isolation, with no access to crucial government assistance. Lacking caste certificates and proper legal entitlements, children and women within the community become the most marginalized. The community's belief in their descent from Lord Rama has led them to reject tribal or SC/ST identities, further excluding them from governmental support. The harsh truth is that the Nihal community is one of the most marginalized groups, suffering from extreme poverty and living in dire conditions. They remain largely invisible, without official recognition or support. This situation demands immediate intervention and support from the State Administration to address their pressing needs and bring about change in their lives.

Children Vulnerability in Bagli / Hatpipaliya Block, Dewas

Most of the villages of Bagli/ Hatpipaliya tehsil are inhabited by tribal, Nihal and Harijan, Gujjar, Banjara. The most vulnerable are the pockets which are predominantly settled by Nihal. Some of the age old tales heard in this community believe that they are the descendants of god Rama and therefore, they adorn themselves with bow and arrow in certain occasions. Their caste status seems questionable since they though they are sometimes recorded as OBC, all their traits and behaviour resemble tribal characteristics such as socio-cultural isolation, closeness to the nature, small size of population and their innocent behaviour.

Most of these groups are however economically weak as well as landless, so these families depend on other capable families or farmers to run their livelihood. As a result, they are resorted to borrow loans from various sources which are easily available. But unfortunately their inability to calculate and simplicity leave them with no choice but do bonded labour to repay their borrowings, which are never ending. these bonded labourers are called in this area by the names of Hali, Gwal, Servant and Hardworking etc. Due to illiteracy, lack of education and awareness, they throw their children in the same work, as a result of which many adverse effects are seen in the children at a very early age. The creativity of such children is almost exhausted, or reduced; they are not as creative as other children. Because they are distressed in age- inappropriate work and are less engaged in educational- mental and developmental exercises. They are imposed with all the burden of the family which an adult is expected to do. As a result of which, their Physical development is also impeded - It is seen that the physical development of such children is not proper, they are stunted and wasted, they suffer hair thinning greying and hair loss accompanied aging spots and rashes on their face. Their cheeks are puffy, there are bruises on the hands and feet, they fall prey to substance abuse and the colour of their teeth turn red and pales; Consequently, the self-esteem is so affected that they live withdrawn from common village children. Children engaged in bonded labour mostly remain uneducated, there is always lack of discipline in them, and are grown up with low confidence level as compared to other children due to paucity of time and heavy laden work, the children have hardly access to

entertainment and games. They have direct access to get way substances, which have far reached consequences in their later life. Their life is thus spent with limited or no friends. They are deceived in the pretext of works. Their identity credentials are fake and tampered with in a fraudulent manner. They tend to live in the present, they are taught to be without future and without goals. Anger, frustration and failure all that their life offer in the childhood and when they are grown. Social prestige remains a vague concept for them. Their life thus ends without the realisation of any of the crucial civil, legal and social rights.

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like increased debt, so, most of their earnings get exhausted in repaying the loan. As a result of which they fail to pay attention to the nutritional health of their children.

Children's Voices from our model KITE Centres:

A Place to Belong, Learn, safe and Be Heard For many children in the villages from the Nihal Community, the KITE Centre has become a space of joy, freedom, and safety—a place where they are not just seen, but truly heard. Children who once spent their days helping at home or working in fields, now start their

mornings excited to reach the centre. Here, they participate in games, creative activities, drawing, storytelling, songs, and friendly competitions that make learning fun and meaningful. The walls of the centre display their artwork and achievements, filling them with pride and confidence. Children express that the KITE Centre is a place where they feel safe—free from the burden of work and the fear of being scolded or silenced. They say, "Yahan koi zabardasti nahi karta, hum apni baat keh sakte hain (No one forces us here, we can share our thoughts freely)." Many children now feel motivated to go to school regularly, and they see the facilitators and centre staff as caring guides who listen to their problems and encourage them to dream bigger. For the first time, they feel that there are adults who truly care about



their future. The KITE Centre has not only brought back their childhood but has also given them hope, dignity, and a sense of belonging. During the reporting period, a total of 1,376 individuals accessed the KITE Centres across various intervention villages, marking significant progress in community outreach and engagement. The largest proportion—670 children aged 6 to 14 years—actively participated in centre-based activities, reflecting the project's strong alignment with its core objective of addressing issues related to school dropout, child labor, and child rights. Additionally, 307 children under the age of 6 were present at the centres, often accompanying siblings, indicating growing acceptance and familiarity with the centres within families. The consistent participation of 211 adolescents (15–18 years) and 188 youth (18–24 years) further highlights the KITE Centres' role as inclusive community hubs that cater to the developmental, educational, and psychosocial needs of multiple age groups. This growing engagement underscores the success of the KITE Centres as safe, accessible, and trusted spaces within the community.

AARAMBH'S Holistic Approach to Ending Child Labour in 14 Villages

In communities where child labour is still an accepted reality, true change requires more

than rescue — it requires understanding, empathy, and transformation from within. The Model, developed by Aarambh, is a pioneering framework to dismantle the vicious cycle of child labour by focusing on what matters most — the wellbeing of the child. At the heart of this model lies the Child Wellbeing Analysis — a structured process of Child Labour Situation Assessment, which helps families, communities, and child protection actors see, listen to, and respond to the reality of children trapped in or at risk of Child labour.



The Child Wellbeing Analysis – Seeing Beyond Labour

The tool assesses various interconnected life domains: exposure to labour and its forms (be it informal, bonded, or unsafe), health and emotional balance (from physical stamina to mental resilience), learning status (dropouts, re-enrolment needs, or learning deficits), and personal vision (what the child aspires to become and what sparks their curiosity). It

further explores family dynamics — whether caregivers are nurturing, disconnected, or burdened — and whether the child is shielded by legal documentation and mechanisms like Aadhaar or child welfare committees. Finally, it captures access to entitlements — public benefits like food subsidies, education aid, housing, or pensions. Each child's profile is built through both numbers and narratives, categorising them in to the levels of their wellbeing from low to high. This composite understanding not only identifies risk but offers a clear direction for personalised support. What makes the model distinctive is its ability to turn abstract into actionable insights. Rather than producing reports for shelves, the process fuels reflection and responsibility across all levels — from frontline workers to local leaders and families themselves. What follows is transformation, not just information. Families begin to participate in change, children speak up in local forums, and community stories inspire others to believe that change is possible. Support systems become visible, mindsets begin to shift, and solutions arise from within. As children return to school, enroll in health schemes, or gain official identities, they move from being unseen to blossoming. The I

model is more than a framework — it's a pathway to regain childhood with dignity, and a scalable approach to ending child labour, one resilient community at a time.

SAFE VILLAGES INITIATIVE BY AARAMBH ON CHILD LABOUR AND CHILD MARRIGE

Weak Economic Condition is the main cause of child labour in agriculture sector together with limited access to quality education, inadequate agricultural technology and access to child - Adolescents labour and traditional attitudes towards children's participation in agricultural activities. Children are most often involved in child labour because their parents or guardians consider it 'normal' for children to work, and sometimes for children's own survival and that of their families. Aarambh is working closely in 14 villages of Sonkatch Block of Dewas District to understand the plight of children working along with their parents from the perspective of the children, families and communities at large. We have been succeed in enrolling more than 100 non school going children who are going for work along with their parents to nearby Government schools. Different Community Awareness activities with a community Led Approaches for creating models in 14 Villages with an aim to declare these villages safe villages with Child Labour and Early Child Marriage become a high priority mission of AARAMBH.

Creating Twelve Child Friendly Panchayats in Dewas District

The Gram Panchayats need to play a crucial role to guide and support the families for the due care of children, to-make the various programs for children effective and to solve local village level problems. Aarambh is working intensively along with the Sarpanch and Panchayat Secretary in 14 villages under the 12 Panchayat in Sonkatch Block of Dewas District to make it a ChildFriendly Panchayats who can help children realise their potential and make the village free with Child Labour and Child Marriages issues. Yes, panchayats at the village level have taken a responsibility for preventing child marriage and child labor by educating the

villagers specially in Nihal Communities and its harmful effects. Aarambh is assisting them to form Village Level Child Protection Committee to monitor and stop Child Marriages. They will now communicate with parents to delay the marriages until the children reach the legal age. Today A Child Help Desk was inaugurated in the presence of Sarpanch and Panchat secretary.

Community Engagement for Social Change: Aarambh's Grassroots Approach

Aarambh Education and Community Development Society has been working at the grassroots level to ensure the holistic development of children, youth, women, and marginalized communities. Its approach to community engagement is based on active participation, shared responsibility, and empowerment. Recent initiatives across villages like Mendia and Badiyamandu reflect Aarambh's inclusive and transformative methods.

1. Building Children's Leadership through Bal Panchayat

At the village level, Aarambh organizes Bal Panchayat (Children's Parliament) meetings to strengthen children's voices. In these sessions:

- Children are introduced to roles such as Education Minister, Sports Minister, and Health Minister through nameplates, helping them understand responsibility and accountability.
- Discussions revolve around children's rights, education, child labour prevention, and child marriage awareness.
- A suggestion box was introduced to encourage children to share personal concerns or community issues confidentially.

- A collective decision was taken to identify working children and bring them back to school. These steps not only enhance children's awareness



but also build their confidence and leadership skills, enabling them to actively contribute to community decision-making.

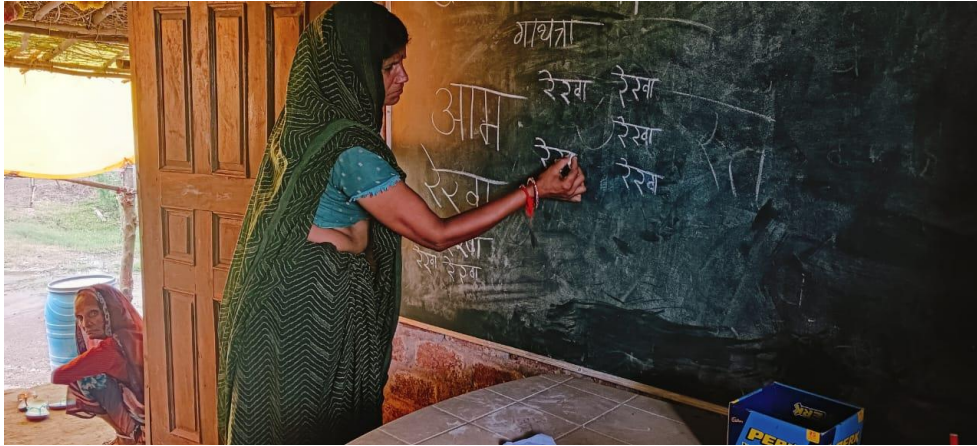
2. Youth Engagement for Social Development

Aarambh facilitates Youth Group Meetings at its Kite Centres, where young people deliberate on pressing social issues.

- The key agenda includes education, child rights, gender equality, drug abuse prevention, sanitation, and environmental protection.
 - Youth participants pledged to run awareness campaigns in their villages on these themes.
 - By practicing collective decision-making, young people gain exposure to leadership, responsibility, and civic participation.
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- A photograph showing a group of young people, mostly men, sitting in a circle on a striped mat on the floor. They are engaged in a discussion or activity. One person in the foreground is wearing a purple shirt, and another is wearing a white shirt. There are some papers and a small object on the mat. The background shows a brick wall and some furniture.



3. Women's Empowerment through SHGs and Collective Activities



Aarambh encourages women's economic and social empowerment by linking them to Self-Help Groups (SHGs).

- Women learn to save regularly, manage group finances, and access bank facilities for economic security.
- During community visits, women expressed eagerness to join SHGs, recognizing the opportunity for self-reliance and leadership.
- Women were also engaged in joint activities with children at the Centre, which helped them overcome hesitation, build confidence, and strengthen intergenerational bonding.

Additionally, women from the Nihal community learned to write their own signatures at the Kite Centre — a small yet powerful step towards self-identity and literacy.

4. Collective Action for Community Development

Community engagement also extended to addressing local governance and development issues.

- Aarambh supported villagers in following up on an application for installing street lights.
- After discussions with local representatives, orders were issued to set up lights at key points, ensuring safety for children, women, and the elderly during night hours.

This demonstrated how organized community action can translate into tangible improvements in daily life. Through these collective efforts, Aarambh is not only

addressing immediate challenges like education, child labour, child marriage, and women’s empowerment, but also nurturing a sustainable, aware, and self-reliant society.

Progress & Achievement 2024 - 2026

	Progress 2024-26						
Indicator No.	Indicator	Baseline		Target			Achievement -2025-2026
		2024	2025	2026	Total		
Goal	Reduce Child Labourer	722	250	250	222	722	550 total
Outcome #1	No. of child labourers retained in school.	722	250	250	222	722	547 total , evidenced from School attendance data and certification

Output #1.1	No. of child labourers rescued and provided legal and rehabilitation support.	800	350	250	200	800	311 children received Birth certificate handed over with proper validation from Panchayat and all concerned stakeholders
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