

pp. xi–xii (from the Introduction)

The first time Edda Sehgal visited the rural villages in Mewat, where Sehgal Foundation would start its work in India, she looked into the faces of women and was struck by what she saw in their eyes. She said, “There was this sense of total hopelessness. These people had nothing. I wondered how they could exist with so much missing, surrounded by dirt and filth, and not even having clean water to drink. A woman we spoke to said, ‘India has forgotten us,’ and it was true. India had forgotten these communities.”

Not long after Sehgal Foundation work began in Mewat, Edda Sehgal saw those same eyes begin to light up as women and young girls were given the opportunity to learn a skill for the first time in their lives, something as simple as stitching cloth. “This was touching to us. These people were anxious to have opportunities. They liked what they were learning. We knew we couldn’t do everything for everyone, but we were at least doing something constructive for some. We were excited, too, to see these young girls blossom.”

After more than fifteen years, despite Sehgal Foundation’s diverse and expanding work in hundreds of rural villages where incremental progress has been made, these communities remain underdeveloped, isolated, and still forgotten for the most part. “Inclusive growth” is a catchphrase that has not yet lived up to its promise.

The Sehgal Foundation team has learned that, while furthering the well-being of rural communities in India requires patience, the basic ingredients for transformation are already present even in the midst of formidable challenges. This is where hope lies. In order to tackle the generations-old local customs, ingrained myths, widespread illiteracy, and community indifference in a traditionally unequal society, rural citizens and their village-level institutions must be supported and strengthened with the knowledge, skills, and inspiration to take charge of their own destiny. Working alongside communities to achieve these ends is the key to accelerating development in rural India.

pp. 36–37 (from Chapter 3 “Building Trust”)

As it had from the beginning, water dominated every conversation as the greatest need in each village. In some villages there were water connections outside the houses, and water was available for an hour or two at a time. However, frequent failures and pipeline leakages rendered the system unreliable. Villagers had to find other sources of water, usually from some distance away.

Lalit was concluding a meeting with a group of women in the village of Karheda about the construction of soak pits for the safe disposal of domestic wastewater, when an elderly woman stood to speak. She said that getting water in the first place was far more critical than its disposal. Her village’s piped water supply was unavailable for weeks at a stretch, requiring women in her community to walk four kilometers to Ghaghas to fetch water. The woman’s face contorted in pain as she said, “Being old, I am not able to walk and carry water so long. So I take water from a nearby source (a village only one kilometer away) that is somewhat saline. But this saline water causes diarrhea and other problems. I can’t drink tea of my liking as boiling milk with this saline water spoils the milk.”

With that, her tears came.

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Lalit recalls, “I was deeply shaken that whole day. I kept thinking, *What is the use of my being so qualified and holding the position of program leader of Water Management if I cannot help these people have access to potable water?* I decided to do something innovative to create a local source of potable water.”

For immediate relief in Karheda, Lalit and the water team developed three wells over the next few months and diverted the infrequently piped water supply into those wells. People in the village helped with the digging. Now they could fetch water from those wells when their water was turned off. Though this was not the long-term solution, the same elderly lady told Lalit afterward how thankful she was to Sehgal Foundation. She said to him, “Every day in my prayers, I pray for God to bless you all.”

He said later, “These were the most motivating words of my life.”

Lalit was now committed to finding more solutions for solving water problems for people living in saline groundwater villages. Successes from the work by the Water Management team would later bring multiple honors to Sehgal Foundation.

pp. 45–47 (from Chapter 4 “Staying Focused”)

In the Income Enhancement program, crop-production practices were discussed with farmers in meetings and conversations about decreasing costs and increasing productivity. Most of the farmers in the villages with sweet water were vegetable growers who were not getting good prices for their produce. The majority of households had only one or two milk animals, usually buffaloes, certainly not a herd. The plan was to convince farmers that their farm productivity would improve with new cultivation practices, and their income would increase with direct connectivity to the market. Educating villagers about the available government agriculture and veterinary services and programs was an important component of the initiative.

The Income Enhancement program leader contacted Mother Dairy, the largest distributor of milk, fruits, and vegetables in Delhi, to see what could be done to get the Mewat villagers’ produce for their market. Larger farmers in India had long been able to deal directly with Mother Dairy, bypassing third-party middlemen; but the small farmers in Mewat had never been included in the practice. Mother Dairy wanted a reliable supply chain that could deliver quality produce in bigger quantities. Mother Dairy representatives suggested that villagers form a cooperative to serve as a link with larger organizations interested in buying their products. If farmers in Mewat could join together, their milk and vegetable produce would be picked up directly by Mother Dairy without added cost from third-party middlemen.

The foundation team met with the farmers and explained, “If you pool your produce, you can create an organization that large distributors will do business with.”

When forming a cooperative was first suggested to villagers, they were suspicious of the idea because the bank required an initial membership fee. Sehgal Foundation agreed to pay a portion of the initial fees, with the expectation that the farmers would pay back the money over time in small increments once their cooperative association had its own bank account.

The team explained that, as members of the Fruit and Vegetable Growers Association (FVGA), farmers would be able to bring their produce for pick up each day from FVGA by Mother Dairy. The farmers would receive payment for their goods within seven to fourteen days.

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However, farmers were concerned about the time lag between giving up their produce and receiving payment. They asked, “How do we know the organization will not just keep our money?”

The foundation team agreed to guarantee the payment amounts in the beginning so the farmers could see how the program worked. Once this promise was made, the farmers agreed. They immediately raised the money required by the bank.

As promised, each participating farmer saw the results of this initiative in cash within two weeks. The creation of these cooperative linkages with the milk and produce market brought recognition to the Income Enhancement program in the eyes of the local farmers and within Sehgal Foundation.

Agriculture interventions from the foundation team in each of the *Four, Four, Four* villages involved training at every level from seed to market. Farmers were taught proper soil preparation, row spacing, plant-to-plant spacing, how to construct low-cost polyethylene plant nurseries, and the safe use of pesticides. Training was provided to farmers on crop diversification and to encourage the use of raised-bed vegetable cultivation as a way to use less water and increase yields. An interest-free loan provided to the Fruit and Vegetable Grower Association in Ghaghas made it possible for farmers to purchase a bed maker (tractor attachment for forming raised rows for planting) and chisel plow for soil cultivation.

The first secretary of the Fruit and Vegetable Grower Association in Goela was the son of a landless farmer from a lower caste.²¹ His father, Puranchand, was one of the first farmers in his village to take a risk and try some of the progressive agronomic practices suggested by the Sehgal Foundation team. With assistance from the foundation, he constructed a low-cost polyethylene plantlet nursery and produced healthier and more robust seedlings than his neighboring farmers. His success with new methods, such as growing off-season seedlings on raised beds, was showcased during a “Farmers Day,” which Sehgal Foundation held on his fields. By hosting 280 farmers from three neighboring districts, plus numerous scientists and agribusiness personnel, Puranchand gained respect in his community. Other farmers sought him out for his advice on new agronomic techniques and growing off-season vegetable crops.

21. Though the social stratification of the caste hierarchy in India is far less rigid than it once was, members of lower castes can experience social isolation and discrimination even in the poorest communities.

pp. 108–109 (from Chapter 8 “New Heroes Emerge”)

Governance guides and trainees made slow and steady headway in their villages. One victory that was a long time coming was accomplished by a village woman named Kamlesh Sherawat, who was one of the first trainees to become a governance guide. While still in training in March 2009, she had taken direct action to resolve a dilemma for thirty-three villagers in Dingerhedi, in the Taoru block of Mewat. More than a year prior, villagers had applied to receive household electricity connections and paid a deposit, but nothing was provided. Having learned about the Right to Information Act, as part of her governance training, Kamlesh filed an RTI application with the District Electricity Department on behalf of the Dingerhedi villagers. Within a month, meters were distributed to the villagers, and a future date was given for installing them. However, the date

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passed, and again nothing happened. Kamlesh took the matter to the State Information Commission in Chandigarh.

She was pleased to learn that an inquiry had been initiated, to be followed by disciplinary action against the sub-divisional officer guilty of ignoring her RTI petition. But Kamlesh knew enough not to celebrate until she saw tangible results. Her persistent slogging footwork resumed when she learned that villagers were now receiving bills for their uninstalled electricity meters. Exasperated but determined, Kamlesh filed a complaint.

This time the office of the sub-divisional officer responded to her. Immediate installation of the meters was ordered and carried out, and the erroneous bills were cancelled. Each similar success depended on steadfast perseverance to overcome the enormous hurdles created by an encumbered bureaucracy. Dogged determination was emerging as the hallmark of the governance trainees and others joining in the *Good Governance Now!* campaign.

pp. 173–176 (from Chapter 10 “Good Rural Governance”)

Every Sehgal Foundation program would eventually benefit from the Communications team’s three-year effort to launch a community radio station. An accessible and dedicated medium of communication *by* the community and *for* the community, the radio station was envisioned as an effective means for people to learn about issues and voice opinions. Community radio promised to be an effective tool for bringing about social inclusion, empowerment, and change at the grassroots level, while also being a source of entertainment. Pooja O. Murada, who had spearheaded the project from the start, asked two members of the field team, Jaan Mohammad and Susheel Bama, to participate in the required presentation that was part of the process of receiving a license from the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting. Once again field team members made a great impression, and the screening judges were convinced that Sehgal Foundation had the skills and reach to work directly with the grassroots community. The foundation received a three-year grant agreement for close to Rs. 5,000,000 from the Ministry of Agriculture to set up the radio station in the Ghaghas Community Center and provide it with all necessary equipment and broadcasting support.

To select a team to manage local day-to-day operations of the radio station, Sehgal Foundation had offered a six-month broadcast training program. Thirty-four young people from all over Mewat participated in the training. The Communications team worked hard to enlist women in the training. Women-friendly policies were adopted during the training and maintained thereafter. Women would be provided with shared transportation, and no women would be required to do evening broadcast work. The foundation’s gender and sexual harassment policies would be strictly adhered to in all situations.

Community members and local talent came forward well before the launch and at every step along the way to help shape the broadcast programming. Villagers said that since the radio station was going to be the “mouthpiece” of Mewat, they wanted it called *Alfaz-e-Mewat* (Rural Voices of Mewat). However, some local villagers were entirely unfamiliar with radio towers or transmissions. Fewer than half of the residents of Mewat owned radios.

At dusk on the evening after the radio tower was installed outside the Ghaghas Community Center, the team was testing the tower connection and the radio antenna. The small red light bulb on the top of the tower became a subject of curiosity and unease. A rumor that it might be a camera

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for taking pictures of women spread fast, and a group of curious villagers gathered outside the center, some looking fairly concerned. To squelch the unrest, Pooja called members of the team who lived nearby and told them to open the gates and invite people inside to see the radio operation.

Senior field staff member Sayeed Ahmed turned off the red light and explained to the people how radio waves reached them. A few folks went into the recording studio and the team turned on the radio so those outside could listen to the conversation inside. That was the very first “broadcast” from Alfaz-e-Mewat! Sayeed invited the people who had gathered to listen to the radio each day to “please advise us for improvements.” All concerns were gone as villagers left with smiles. The first test broadcast of Alfaz-e-Mewat FM 107.8 MHz was on January 10, 2012.

The first station manager was a well-qualified young Meo woman who was one of two women who had completed the training. Razia⁴⁴ had a natural style in public speaking. She was an ideal role model for other Meo girls who were not confident or allowed to go to school or work.

Razia came from the villages of Mewat with a burning desire for education and to serve her community. Most of her family had discouraged her from attending school and actively tried to stop her studies, but her mother was supportive. As Razia continued to win prizes for academic excellence, her family finally acknowledged their pride. She was permitted to stay in school, despite disapproving taunts from the conservative community.

Razia went on to college, something quite rare for a woman from her circumstances, and graduated first in her class. Her academic achievements were acknowledged in 1998 when she won the Mewat Development Agency’s Best Woman Award. She completed a master’s degree in sociology and worked for the Society for Promotion of Youth and Masses as part of a project funded by Sehgal Foundation. When the project ended, Sehgal Foundation recruited Razia to a full-time position on the field team. As a community mobilizer, Razia was instrumental in convincing Meo women to step out of their homes to receive healthcare, seek vocational and life-skills training, and participate in community work. She stood up and spoke to the men in the villages and inspired male youth to take part in community work by posing questions about particular problems and engaging them in dialogue.

To support girls’ education, Razia was appointed project leader for the TARA Akshar literacy program, a learning program for adults created by an NGO called Development Alternatives. Among her other work for Sehgal Foundation before accepting the management position at the radio station, Razia had been block coordinator for a cluster of villages, assisting in implementing the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act. She had supervised Life Skills Education and the Rural Health program.

In Razia’s position as a facilitator on the Sehgal Foundation field team, several Meo men had reported to her, which was quite uncommon. She met new challenges with determination, confidence, a positive attitude, and occasional coaching from the Sehgal Foundation team. Her primary motivation was to help empower girls and women in Mewat, and her new position at Alfaz-e-Mewat FM 107.8 provided her with a broad-range opportunity.

The announcement that the station would be “Bringing Airwaves of Change” went out in the local language to more than 183 villages within a twenty-kilometer radius of Ghaghhas, reaching up to 200,000 people. After seven weeks of test runs, the formal broadcasting launch was on February

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28, 2012. Starting with four hours a day, programming increased to nine hours a day before the end of the first year. Outside of Mewat, people with Internet access could listen online.

The station offered a blend of program formats and topics that addressed issues in agriculture, water, soil health, local culture, education, governance, and village-based institutions. While a variety of programs were presented, care was taken to feature those geared specifically toward women, highlighting issues such as reproductive health, women-oriented government programs, the importance of educating girls, and so on. These fit well with the key interests of the station manager and the entire radio team. Early programs that focused on women included *Saaf, Safai, aur Sehat* (Cleanliness, Sanitation, and Health) and *Waqt Hamara Hai* (Our Time Has Come).

Razia faced some friction at first as a Meo woman working in an untraditional role at the radio station. Villagers with patriarchal mindsets were particularly concerned when they heard her speak on the air. She attracted the attention of religious leaders in the region who kept a close watch on her broadcasts. One day a few moulvis arrived at the radio station during one of her programs to inquire about her. The young woman, wearing her *hizaab* (head covering), faced the moulvis directly and spoke to them about her work for the welfare of the people of Mewat and her desire to promote positive change in their lives.

Though the moulvis found Razia to be a faithful Muslim, they continued over the next few months to monitor and screen her radio work. Razia eventually won over her critics, who began to express appreciation for her program delivery and offer advice on how to improve her Urdu diction. When she went out on interviews or visits to the community, she was welcomed by listeners.

From its inception, the radio station was essentially owned and embraced by members of the community. The learning promoted by *Alfaz-e-Mewat* enhanced civic participation. By providing a platform for marginalized communities to speak out, the foundation was able to gauge community interest in specific issues and increase awareness of citizens' rights.

44. Razia was one of the three women associated with Sehgal Foundation featured in the book *Poetry of Purpose: A Portrait of Women Leaders of India* by Dr. Shashi Gogate and Mick Minard, Purpose Press Books LLC, 2015. See <http://www.poetryofpurpose.org/>. Razia did not use a second name.

pp. 197–198 (from Chapter 11 “Grassroots Engagement”)

Though Sehgal Foundation's vital programs and activities to promote Good Rural Governance took the lead in 2014, the initiatives in Water Management and Agricultural Development remained strong. Each of the foundation's three main programs would always move along at a different pace and depend on the continued engagement of partners of every kind in this process. By necessity, every Sehgal Foundation plan would be well thought out with respect to its short-term and potential long-term outcomes. Successful outcomes were tied to awareness, education, and the integration of all the related aspects of a community's needs.

Jay Sehgal explained, “The results of true progress are rarely immediate because development is such a slow process. Impact can only be measured over time. This dynamic is important to keep in mind when establishing partnerships for funding that is required for particular initiatives.” Jay put the concept in simple terms: “There are two types of impact: immediate, such as changing the paint color in a room, and long-term, which is something very different. We evaluate our impact based on our mission and also on the mission of our partners. We are careful to read and understand our

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partners' mission statements, so that any work done by Sehgal Foundation will also help our partners meet their own stated goals. A company with a sincere interest in water augmentation, such as Coca-Cola, wants to see an immediate impact—for example, to create recharge wells that make more drinkable water available. Using donor funds, we can create the desired facilities and infrastructure, but our perspective must also be in line with our mission in order to achieve true prosperity for the communities of rural India. We must maintain a balance: the donor's immediate impact will occur, but so will our focus on that long-term goal. We will keep instilling our vision in crisscross themes in the implementation of every project. Our ultimate goal is positive change, to see the people in rural India leading secure, prosperous, and dignified lives. This kind of change, which includes the empowerment of women, will not happen tomorrow; it could take a generation to see our mission realized. We can't ask our large multinational corporation partners to wait thirty-five years to see the results of their investment. So we will continue to take an integrated, comprehensive approach to the work. Our ultimate goal remains intact; we never forget what we are about."