

## **Sehgal Foundation & District Legal Services Authority Collaboration: A Model for Social Justice to All**

*By Navneet Narwal*

Sehgal Foundation (SF) and District Legal Services Authority (DLSA), Mahendergarh, Haryana collaboration is a new effort to extend social justice to all in 2019–2020. As a part of this collaboration, nine legal literacy camps at the village level have been organized in the district. However, this kind of partnership traces its roots back to a collaboration between SF and DLSA, Nuh, since 2015.

Sehgal Foundation through its Good Rural Governance program, has been organizing legal literacy camps at the village level in collaboration with DLSA, Nuh, in the villages of Nuh district, Haryana. These camps were designed to tackle the information and trust deficits that prevent citizens from accessing the government programs that could improve their lives. The aim was to make citizens aware of their fundamental rights and entitlements under the law, and most importantly, to empower citizens to demand them.



Influenced by the successful collaboration of DLSA Nuh and Sehgal Foundation, National Legal Services Authority (NALSA) embraced the model of Legal Literacy Camps promoted by the foundation team through which rural communities are informed of various provisions of government programs. Consequently, DLSA Gurugram also adopted the model of legal literacy camps and has collaborated with the team to organize a camp, which was named "Festival of Rights" in Gurugram, Haryana. For this event, a booklet on provisions of various government programs was jointly published with Haryana State Legal Services Authority (HALSA) and inaugurated. Later, a similar program was also organized by DLSA Nuh at the district level. In addition, the foundation team collaborated with DLSA Gurugram and Nuh in training cadres of panel advocates and paralegal volunteers from time to time. Together with HALSA, Panchkula, a stall with information on government-mandated rights and entitlements was put up at the International Craft Fair held at Surajkund, Faridabad. Such a broad platform was selected for generating awareness on legal rights of rural communities with the aim of reaching the maximum number of citizens across states who visit the fair. In Bihar, a collaboration with State Legal Services Authorities in organizing an interface cum

training program involving the paralegal volunteers and panel advocates at Patna was successful.

The importance of such partnerships between nongovernmental organizations and DLSA is critical in spreading awareness on legal rights and entitlements among the

*The goal of the three-tiered national, state, and district Legal Service Authority's (LSA) system is to provide free legal aid to those who need it most and to secure equal access to justice for all citizens. In India, several groups of disadvantaged citizens are legally entitled to get free legal services from LSAs. For example, in the state of Haryana, free legal services under LSAs are extended to women, children, members of schedule castes and tribes, disabled persons, victims of a natural disaster or ethnic violence, freedom fighters, transgender people, senior citizens above the age of sixty, and any citizen whose annual income from all sources does not exceed Rs. 3,00,000 (if the matter is before the Sub-Divisional level, District level, or in High Court) and does not exceed Rs. 1,25,000 (if the matter is before the Supreme Court of India). In most of the states in India, the provisions of free legal aid are more or less similar, except for some variations regarding eligibility criteria based on annual income.*

citizens, especially the poor and marginalized sections of the society. This is because knowledge of law is essential to avail the basic rights and entitlements as enshrined in the Constitution of India. Once the rural communities are aware of the existing law, they are also able to recognize and challenge the injustice they experience in several forms in their daily lives in a rational way. Through legal literacy, rural communities can enlighten and empower themselves to a new level of progress. Since 1987, the Parliament of India enacted the Legal Services Authorities Act with the aim to provide legal services to the poor, marginalized, and weak sections of society, especially to people living in geographically isolated villages far away from the seats of government and the courts. Currently, the

partnership between organizations like SF and DLSA further strengthen this effort by making legal education available till the last miles of the country.

As already mentioned, to spread the model for the well-being of rural communities of Mahendergarh, district of Haryana, the team built linkages with DLSA Mahendergarh to extend the ambit of the existing NGO-DLSA partnership and involve CSR initiatives for furthering legal empowerment of the rural communities. Nine legal literacy camps and one medical health checkup camp were organized by Sehgal Foundation and DLSA Narnaul with support from HDFC Bank's Project Parivartan in January 2020. Of the 1,379 citizens who have participated in these camps, 687 are male and 692 are female. The head and members of all village councils also play an instrumental role by actively participating in organizing these camps. Apart from panel advocates, paralegal volunteers from DLSA, government officers from District Social Welfare, Development of Panchayat, Food and Civil Supplies, Forest, Women and Child Development departments and Secretary cum Chief Judicial Magistrate (CJM), DLSA Narnaul also participated in these camps and shared information about entitlements and other important guidelines of various government programs related to food, social security, legal aid, etc., run by their respective departments. DLSA Narnaul has partnered with Sehgal Foundation for the initiatives **"You are not Alone" for senior citizens** and **"Empowerment-Single Women and Single Parent Children"** for the enforcement of Single Women's Rights under the guidance of HALSA and NALSA.

In addition to creating awareness of rights and entitlements under government programs, these camps have provided a platform for citizen-government interface. The government officials who attended these camps interacted with the poor and marginalized population to better understand their problems and grievances at the grassroots level. It is expected that with the feedback of the villagers, government officials will concentrate more on improved implementation of their respective government programs. Additionally, the camp provided an opportunity to the villagers to interact directly with the government officials and share their grievances and hopes from the government. As an interface platform, the camp has been extremely successful, and DLSA's contribution in making it such a success is noteworthy.

Sehgal Foundation's involvement in the camp is significant. The last mile reach of the organization in villages of the district attracted DLSA to rely on the foundation with regard to mobilization of poor and marginalized people. Foundation staff used their field-level interaction in the entire village to motivate a large number of villagers to join the camp and become legally aware. Furthermore, Sehgal Foundation staff provided follow-up, encouraging villagers to avail the benefits provided by the government departments, and groomed them in how to use the application process.



Sehgal Foundation's odyssey of empowering rural communities on legal rights and entitlements began with the launch of its Good Rural Governance and its various initiatives. Legal Literacy camps are one of the most successful initiatives that have managed to bring about change in the approach of the rural communities in accessing their legally mandated rights and entitlements. Through these camps, the twin mission of legal empowerment is promoted. The camps encourage future litigants to opt for quick and easy ways to seek justice. They also help to create a robust law-abiding society by educating the people about their rights. Such small efforts act as a ray of hope and facilitate the process of access to justice, especially for all those who are deprived of the same.

*(Navneet Narwal is program leader, Good Rural Governance, S M Sehgal Foundation)*