

Good rural governance seminar inspires law students

By Ashish Poonia, student, Legal Aid Cell, Chanakya National Law University, Bihar; and Debika Goswami, program leader, Governance and Policy Advocacy

Sehgal Foundation, in collaboration with Chanakya National Law University (CNLU), Patna, Bihar, presented a seminar, "Legal Awareness for Good Rural Governance," at the university campus on February 7, 2017. Many of the 85 CNLU student participants were from rural areas of Bihar and had expressed interest in good rural governance.

During the seminar, law students learned about the particular importance of good governance in rural India. They were presented with the required information, skills, and encouragement to work through their legal aid cell in the university to ensure access to justice for the poor and marginalized populations, as well as to work for good rural governance in their own villages in Bihar and other parts of India. Students were also invited to undertake projects as interns of Sehgal Foundation in East Champaran and Samastipur.

Professor S. P. Singh of the Legal Aid Cell, CNLU, welcomed the participants and representatives of Sehgal Foundation. The inaugural address was presented by Professor A. Lakshminath, vice chancellor, CNLU, who emphasized the need for good rural governance in the face of the poor delivery of government programs and services, the lack of transparency or public participation (in social audits, monitoring committees of government programs, school management committees, etc.), and the lack of capacities of village-level institutions and panchayati raj institutions. He stressed that good rural governance can only be achieved by empowering citizens, which includes awareness, participation, and program monitoring, and with the active engagement of local government and the private sector to use information and communication technologies to reach out to villagers.

Navneet Narwal, program leader, Governance and Policy Advocacy, and Neeraj Dubey, Samastipur coordinator of Sehgal Foundation, highlighted the two components of the foundation's Good Rural Governance program implementation at the village level, 1) The *Good Governance Now!* initiative that empowers villagers by providing information about key government programs and the existing grievance redressal mechanisms to access them, and (2) Strengthening Village Level Institutions, which aims to strengthen the capacities of panchayats and other village-level committees with training on the roles and responsibilities that rural citizens have in the functioning of the local committees. The initiative creates collectives/groups of informed community leaders who focus on awareness generation, capacity enhancement, and policy advocacy to improve the transparency and accountability of key government programs, resulting in better delivery of public services.

CNLU students, Rakesh Raushan and Komal, shared the findings of their field studies conducted in the Samastipur district of Bihar. Rakesh worked on "Legal awareness among villagers about selected government programs." He said the benefits of programs such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, Swachh Bharat Mission, Indira Awas Yojna, and Old Age Pension Scheme hardly reach the beneficiaries because the entire implementation system is plagued by corruption. He stressed that this systemic malaise can only be dealt with by increased community participation. Komal worked on the project, "Justice at *gram kachhari* (village court)—A long way to go," which demonstrated the importance of *gram kachharis* as an alternative dispute resolution mechanism rather than the expensive and lengthy judicial apparatus. She provided helpful details about the procedures for instituting a suit in the local village court.

Key learnings from the seminar gave valuable direction points for the future. 1) Collaboration between civil society organizations and law institutes are crucial for bridging the gap between the government functionaries and the governed and have strong potential for bringing about positive change, 2) The partnership between Sehgal Foundation and CNLU helps to uncover various social realities plaguing India, especially the state of Bihar, at the foundational level and ensures access to justice for poor and marginalized rural communities, and 3) The partnership will continue to provide opportunities for law students to gain exposure to the field realities and learn how to contribute toward access to social justice in their own capacities.

