

## Focus on Sehgal Foundation team member: Nasir Hussain

### Nurture their wings and see women take flight

In the development sector when we talk about educating the girl child or promoting healthy living among families, we have all heard that there is no tool for development more effective than the empowerment of women. A father to four daughters, Nasir Hussain, an experienced staff member of Sehgal Foundation, firmly believes in raising his daughters to be capable and well-equipped to take charge of their lives. He knows that women have a crucial role to play in the nation's development. Nasir's eldest daughter is studying in grade 12 and has been a school topper all through. She wants to become a professor later in life and is a perfect role model for her three younger sisters who are in the middle and senior grades in school and her two brothers who are in their primary classes.



Nasir's thirteen-year journey at Sehgal Foundation is also truly a tale of empowerment. His career with the foundation began in December 2006 when he enrolled in the training of Village Champions and was then selected to lead development work in one of the villages where the foundation team was working. Prior to joining Sehgal Foundation, Nasir worked for the National Literacy Mission as a block coordinator and at NGO Adi Gram Samiti as project incharge. His dedication and hard work in all his roles and responsibilities has always led him to rise up the ladder of success. Nasir now works as assistant program leader, Strengthening Village-Level Institutions at Sehgal Foundation.

He recalls how skeptical the communities were when he started the work. He shares that people used to question the team's concern about water management and that they must be getting in return for their help. The team would then sit with the people over tea and explain how the organization started and describe its values. Nasir shared, "Dealing with the mind-set and behavioral change is the most difficult. Girls were not sent to school, women were not allowed to work and remained confined to the household—all these cultural taboos have been fought with, firstly by practicing what we preach and also by continuous capacity building. There was a time when we did not have women staff from the Meo community on our team, so we met with a couple of religious leaders and later with the families, sharing what we do and showing them the community development work being done."

Nasir encountered a lot of resentment from his own family when he wanted to send his daughter to a boarding school in a nearby state. This was similar to what is faced in the communities. People say that women do not have a stake in development. Nasir explains, "Earlier we also shared the same thought process. But the realization came through when we initiated *mahila gram sabhas* in villages. A one-of-a-kind initiative, we were astonished to see the development issues that came from these meetings—need for water facilities in schools, healthcare, so different from the other village meetings, which do not have women's participation. We were convinced we were on the right track."

Today the foundation team has created *mahila sangathans* (women's collectives) in every village. Women who are members of village-level institutions are part of the *sangathan* to become a collective force in solving village problems. These *sangathans* meet at regular intervals to identify priorities and action plans. Their annual event, *mahila sammelan* (women's conclave), is often organized around International Women's Day in March. Women from across all collectives gather to share their achievements. This is one of the projects closest to Nasir's heart, as he has been instrumental in bringing this paradigm shift from no women's participation to ever-increasing participation.

From being a village champion to a block coordinator and now in a leadership position, Nasir has never ceased to learn from people. His openness and steady nature are qualities other team members envy about him. Exuding confidence, Nasir closes by saying, "I feel fortunate that my association with the foundation led me to accomplish a variety of work in the development sector, ranging from planning and executing watershed structures to school renovation, contributions to Swachh Bharat Mission, project management, and capacity building of village-level institutions, among others."

*(The article is a translated version of the piece shared by the author in Hindi)*