

Focus on Sehgal Foundation field team member: Urmila Gupta

Urmila Gupta, age forty-four, was born to a Baniya family of meager resources in the little village of Pengaltu in district Faridabad, Haryana. Her father ran a small grocery shop and her mother did stitching work. Urmila has always been a self-motivated person who worked to help her family since her adolescence. She worked in adult education centers to support her mother and help other women learn how to read and write.

Since joining Sehgal Foundation fourteen years ago, she has built the capacities of the community by educating women about various government programs that are meant to benefit them, revitalizing village committees to work effectively and efficiently, conducting informal education centers for girls, carrying out school enrollment drives, and facilitating village committees to utilize allotted funds for village development activities.

Urmila is responsible for mobilizing village-based committees and institutions to strengthen community-led initiatives in several villages in Nagina block of Nuh district of Haryana. She heads the project execution and participates in monthly awareness sessions, conducts women's group meetings to educate them on the various women's and children's development schemes running in the village and



and assists them in accessing their entitlements, and further liaisons with district-level officials to help community members receive benefits.

When asked what motivates her to help others, Urmila said, "God has been kind enough to bestow me with an entrepreneurial spirit."

Urmila has been instrumental in facilitating and conducting micro-planning exercises to enable communities to create village development plans, and conducts women's *gram sabhas* (general body meetings) to highlight women's issues and include them in the development plans.

Beneficiaries of these projects are rural villages of Nuh district of Haryana, especially the women with whom Urmila works very closely. Nuh district suffers some of the poorest socioeconomic indices of the country with large family sizes, deep-seated gender bias, low literacy rates among women, and poor women's and children's health. Though Urmila started her work as a facilitator running informal education programs, she now also conducts meetings with women's groups on hygiene and sanitation, mobilizing them to contribute in the effective functioning of

school management committees and village health, sanitation and nutrition committees. She has trained about 2,000 girls on personal hygiene, reproductive health, and personality development in Life Skills Education centers. She promotes a rights-based development approach to empowering villagers. She has held a position in Sehgal Foundation's gender committee where she led the group in solving gender-related matters and mediating any conflicts within the team.

Urmila calls her contribution to the community "a work in progress." She says, "I feel immensely satisfied with the kind of work that I am doing, which directly relates to the community and helps to bring a positive difference in the lives of people."

Additional roles she has taken on over time include conducting technical training sessions on aspects of water management, facilitating the construction of soak pits/soak wells in households, and training women on health and hygiene, while still educating village-level committees on their rights and responsibilities so that they work more effectively. She has conducted three batches of a structured six-eight month courses for 20–25 girls at a time, and her work with school management committees in thirty-five villages, leading enrollment drives and meetings with parents of drop-out children, has resulted in all the schools nearing 100 percent enrollment. She has formed three Self-Help Groups, built the capacities of rural villagers in multiple village-level institutions, and conducted water literacy sessions in the community that have built water awareness in villagers.

Urmila believes in doing things "differently." She says the cornerstone of each success she has witnessed in her work is community trust. She feels that planning *with* the community and not *for* the community is a critical success factor in development. She adds her personal success formula, "The approach I use to achieve my goals is to reinvent the learning curve with each project, gather experience, and develop my own knowledge and understanding before approaching the community to take up something new."