

Seeding for Change

submitted by Marly Cornell

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As an author, ghostwriter, and social justice advocate, I enjoy finding and sharing true stories about extraordinary people. In recent years I have been honored to learn about and amplify the stories of remarkable people working for sustainable development and positively changing the lives of the poor in rural India. This all began with a biography I was asked to write called “Seeds for Change: The Lives and Work of Suri and Edda Sehgal.”

Interestingly, that book started out as a simple family book project commissioned by Suri and Edda Sehgal themselves, whose children hadn’t been aware until adulthood of the harsh struggles and startling experiences of their parents during key periods of world history.

Suri was born in the region of India that is now Pakistan. His father was an associate of Mahatma Gandhi and a member of the Indian National Congress fighting for India’s freedom from British rule. When that day came in 1947, Pakistan became a country. The resulting bloody Partition of India was history I’d only known from the movie “Gandhi.” I was horrified to learn of Suri’s personal experiences of violence and homelessness on the streets of Delhi at age 13, while separated from his family.

Edda’s early years also involved hardship and the trauma of being uprooted. Her family escaped German Silesia (now Poland) at the end of World War II.

The couple met while Suri was finishing his PhD at Harvard in plant genetics, a field he chose in part to see what could be done about the global food crisis. Suri and Edda raised four children and two nephews. As a seed scientist, Suri became a global authority on hybrid seeds. The Sehgal, then based in Iowa, became multimillionaires in 1998 with the sale of their seed companies. In keeping with their shared Gandhian ideals, they chose to use the bulk of the proceeds to help the rural poor in India.

The Sehgal’s non-governmental organization (NGO) in India began with a small team of sociologists working in a region considered “backward,” where struggling farmers with tiny parcels of land lived on the proceeds of their meager crops, women did most of the farm labor, and only 61 of 431 villages in the region had fresh water – the rest had only saline water. The development challenge was huge—and in every case, as the team created partnerships with individual farmers and communities to manage water scarcity, develop sustainable agriculture, and promote good rural governance, each success started and ended with the empowerment of women and girls.

Sehgal Foundation teams offered better agriculture practices to the poor farmers: quality seed, proper use of fertilizers, and methods of conserving water, such as crop rotation, laser land leveling, and drip irrigation. The Foundation crews also invested time encouraging kitchen gardens and promoting, educating, and empowering small groups of women farmers to work together to get their crops to market.

A group of scientists continue seed research on food crops that can survive in semiarid and arid regions in India, and applied to similar areas worldwide.

The foundation team and partners — such as Mosaic in Minnesota and Coca-Cola — work alongside villagers to increase their agricultural productivity and build water augmentation systems to store rainwater

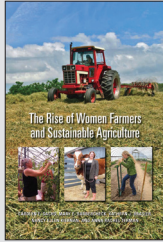
(rooftop harvesting systems, check dams, storage ponds, etc.). Women in these villages no longer have to walk 3–5 kilometers daily to fetch water for drinking and home use, and girls are no longer kept home from school to care for siblings and do household chores while their mothers are gone.

It was profoundly inspiring to me personally to write “Seeds for Change,” and the more subsequent history of Sehgal Foundation called “Together We Empower: Rekindling Hope in Rural India.” I remain heartened by Suri and Edda’s generosity of spirit and their entrepreneurial approach, deeply rooted in team culture, collaborative relationships, and an unwavering commitment to making a positive difference in the lives of the rural poor.

Marly Cornell lives in Minneapolis. “Seeds for Change” and “Together We Empower” won several literary awards, including International Book Awards. She also authored “The Able Life of Cody Jane,” which won a Midwest Book Award, written in honor of her daughter, who died in 2004, as inspiration for the hundreds of thousands of people living with disabilities and chronic medical conditions.

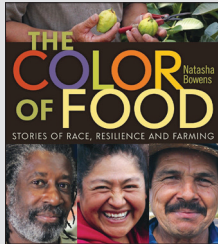
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Books for Change



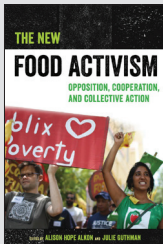
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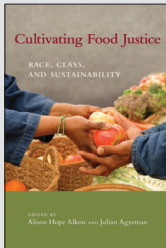
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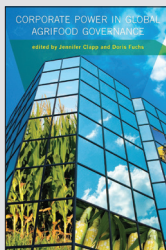
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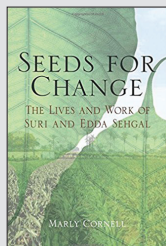
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