

LAYING FOUNDATION OF RURAL UPLIFTMENT

S M Sehgal Foundation is transforming the villages by implementing and developing sustainable development programmes in rural areas. It is providing agricultural research facilities, extension services, technology development, plant and livestock management in order to enhance agricultural productive capacity in rural India for sustainable development.

An Exclusive interview with;
Prof. Ajay Pandey, Chief Executive Officer, S M Sehgal Foundation

Tell us about S M Sehgal Foundation and its work with grassroots communities?

S M Sehgal Foundation (Sehgal Foundation) works for rural development in Indian villages. The founders, Dr. Surinder Mohan Sehgal (Suri) and Mrs. Edda Sehgal, established the S M Sehgal Foundation as a public, charitable trust based in Gurgaon, Haryana in 1999, with the objective of improving the quality of life of the rural poor. We envision every person across rural India empowered to lead a secure, prosperous, and dignified life.

With support from donors and partners, Sehgal Foundation works together with rural communities to create viable programs for managing water resources, increasing agricultural productivity, and strengthening rural governance through village-level institutions and citizen participation.

Our emphasis on gender equality and women's empowerment is driven by the realization that human rights are central to developing every person's potential.

You just mentioned about human rights. How is the idea of human rights promoted nationally and internationally?

There are various legal instruments, including the charter of the United Nations that strive to protect and promote human rights. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations on December 10, 1948, is a fundamental instrument that formulates human rights and binds us



as institutions and individuals to promote and protect them. Indeed, the international mandate is to ensure "all human rights for all". The most fundamental provision in the Constitution of India, Article 21, has been defined to include almost every human right in its ambit. Thus, the mandate for human rights in India flows also from the most fundamental provision of the Constitution. However, even with this strong framework in place, India remains

way behind in almost all parameters of human rights. Provisions of human rights seem unreal for majority of the population. How to make these provisions real and meaningful for everyone, especially those who are underprivileged and need them the most, is the biggest question.

Human Rights are central to Sehgal Foundation's work and approach. The three areas of SP's work – water security, food security, and social justice – have human rights, with special emphasis on women's empowerment, weaved into them.

How did the Good Governance Now initiative take shape at the Sehgal Foundation?

At the Sehgal Foundation, rural governance initiative for social justice started in 2008. The initiative will complete ten years in 2018 and in district Nuh itself, the

foundation team has been actively engaging with communities in over four hundred villages with over twenty thousand volunteers trained to participate in securing good rural governance with respect to certain fundamental rights of people including food, shelter, social security, and citizen participation. Our quest to secure good rural governance bridges the disconnect between provisions of human rights and their reality for the masses. Sehgal Foundation through its community radio, Alfaz-e-Mewat, also engages with the local administration to address the grievances of the local villagers and share information on various rights and entitlements through informative programs on governance.

Governance according to me is the stepping-stone for all development work. If there is good governance, things will automatically fall in the right places, thus strengthening human rights.

Clinical legal education (CLE) is one of your core areas of expertise. Though CLE methodology is old and tested, but you promoted this methodology as a university-NGO partnership model. Tell us more about this model?

After initiating the Good Governance Now program at Sehgal Foundation, I moved to Jindal Global Law School, O. P. Jindal Global University, where as an Associate Professor, I experimented with CLE. It worked and students took interest. All this while, I continued my association with Sehgal Foundation as an advisor, and used this opportunity to connect both the entities



through CLE.

The success of this program was the continued engagement of law students with Sehgal Foundation. Later, the foundation team also collaborated with various other law schools in the country, including Chanakya National Law University, Bihar; VM Salgaocar College of Law, Goa; National Law University, Delhi; National University of Juridical Sciences, West Bengal, and others. The team held several regional conferences to spread the message of good governance and inspire law students to actively take part in the legal aid clinics established at their universities to enable the access of legal rights to the marginalized communities in close proximity to the campuses.

Besides law, we also learnt that you have great interest in writing and editing. Tell us more about it?

Yes, that's right. I am passionate about writing and I like writing poetry. I have served as a member of the editorial board of "Kali's Yug" (a Journal about women and law, published by Women's Action Research and Legal Action for Women). I have also edited the monthly legal magazine, 'Legal News and Views', published from the Indian Social Institute, New Delhi, and contributed many editorials and articles in it. My other publications include journal articles; book chapters; booklets; and newspaper articles. I have also authored a puppet play for India's National Literacy Mission. As a part of my endeavour for creating legal awareness, I have done several phone-in programmes with the All India Radio. I also edit the quarterly Hindi newsletter of the Foundation called 'Vikas Patrika.' I always say that you can find many English writers who are good, but not enough Hindi writers.



Ajay Kumar Pandey is the Chief Executive Officer, S M Sehgal Foundation. He is also the founding faculty at the Jindal Global Law School (OP Jindal Global Univ., India), clinical legal education master's/Fulbright scholar (Vanderbilt Univ. Law School, Nashville, TN), international law master's (Center International Legal Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru Univ., New Delhi); Global Alliance for Justice Education (GAJE) steering committee. Email: a.pandey@smsfoundation.org

Prof. Pandey's areas of interest include clinical legal education; human rights; consumer rights; international law; constitutional law; legal aid to the poor; legal literacy; community empowerment and transparency, accountability and good governance.