

Ushering in a wave of rural transformation

Marly Cornell

▼ *Suri and Edda Sehgal-monitoring progress in a village in India*



Desiring to accelerate development in rural India, the Sehgals formed a foundation 20 years ago that is making a positive impact and changing lives

Though Mahatma Gandhi long ago lamented that India's villagers had "lost all hope . . . They suspect that every stranger's hand is at their

throats and that he goes to them only to exploit them," his observation is still a reality for many who live in poverty in the 840,000 villages in rural India. Against such a backdrop is

Sehgal Foundation, a welcome NGO that provides hope where there was despair.

The first time Edda Sehgal, who founded SM Sehgal Foundation in 1999 with her husband Dr. Suri Sehgal, visited the rural villages in Mewat, where Sehgal Foundation would start its work in India, "she looked into the faces of women and was struck by what she saw in their eyes. She said, 'There was this sense of total hopelessness. These people had nothing . . . not even clean water to drink. A woman we spoke to said, 'India has forgotten us.'"

The Sehgals chose to work in Mewat, now Nuh, about 50 km from the millennium city, Gurgaon, now Gurugram, because the social indices in the Mewat district were the lowest in rural India. The Sehgals felt that if they could bring positive change to such an impoverished place, they would be able to make sustainable changes elsewhere as well.

Not too long after the work began, Edda Sehgal saw the eyes of women and girls begin to light up as they were given opportunities to learn a simple skill such as stitching cloth. Edda said, "This was touching to us. These people were anxious to have opportunities. They liked what they were learning. We were excited too, to see these young girls blossom."

"Development is a path that, while often full of progress, never ends. As we enter a third decade in India, we must continue to adapt to the new challenges created by climate change, which affect food security, water security, and social justice, without forgetting the core values that have made our work successful so far."

– Suri Sehgal,
Founder of Sehgal Foundation

Sehgal Foundation's interventions include integrated grassroots programmes in agriculture development, water management, and rural governance, emphasising innovation, impact, and sustainability, with an overarching focus on the empowerment of girls and women.

The work that began 20 years ago entailed lots of experimentation and learning by doing, and strategies have adapted as needed over the years, but the Sehgal Foundation team has maintained its fundamental approach. Sticking to core values, honesty, and transparency were essential for establishing trust with the villagers, and working alongside communities was the key to creating impact and sustainable change.

However, despite Sehgal Foundation's diverse and expanding work in hundreds of rural villages where incremental progress has been made, these communities remain underdeveloped, isolated, and still forgotten for the most part. "Inclusive growth" is a catchphrase that has not yet lived up to its promise. The Sehgal Foundation team has learned that, while furthering the well-being of rural communities in India requires



▲ Suri listening to village women

patience, the basic ingredients for transformation are already present even in the midst of formidable challenges. This is where hope lies.

In order to tackle the generations-old local customs, ingrained myths, widespread illiteracy, and community indifference in a traditionally unequal society, rural citizens and their village-level institutions must be supported and strengthened with the knowledge, skills, and inspiration to take charge of their own destiny. Continuing to work

alongside communities to achieve these ends is the key to accelerating development in rural India.

According to Suri Sehgal, "Development is a path that, while often full of progress, never ends. As we enter a third decade in India, we must continue to adapt to the new challenges created by climate change, which affect food security, water security, and social justice, without forgetting the core values that have made our work successful so far."

▶ Legal Literacy Camp



Addressing most critical needs

SM Sehgal Foundation (Sehgal Foundation) is a public, charitable trust registered in India since 1999 with a mission to strengthen community-led development initiatives to achieve positive social, economic, and environmental change across rural India in the areas of food security, water security, and social justice. Foundation teams create integrated grassroots programmes in agriculture development, water management, and rural governance, emphasising innovation, impact, and sustainability, with an overarching focus on the empowerment of girls and women. Sehgal Foundation programmes and initiatives are carried out based on the most critical needs in villages, which help to develop a village into a community of engaged and proactive citizens with the tools to assist in their own further development. Sehgal Foundation holds Special Consultative Status with United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), sharing its work in relation to the Sustainable Developmental Goals (SDGs) with a global audience.

Sehgal Foundation, based in Des Moines, Iowa, USA, works closely with communities in the US to support the implementation of work by SM Sehgal Foundation in India. ■

This article was adapted from the Introduction of "Together We Empower: Rekindling Hope in Rural India" by Marly Cornell (Sehgal Foundation, 2016).

Marly Cornell is an American artist, writer, and social justice advocate.

Featured in arrangement with SM Sehgal Foundation