

A life-changing experience: Interview with Akshat Singhal

Akshat Singhal is a co-founder of The Blue Ribbon Movement (BRM), an ecosystem of social initiatives which builds leadership for a better world. Akshat has over a decade of experience in the social sector engaging in the space of gender equality, youth leadership, climate change, peace building, active citizenship and social entrepreneurship. Within BRM, he is co-leading The Gender Lab which works with adolescents to question existing gender narratives by engaging them in meaningful community service.



He loves exploring intersectionality of issues, deepening culture and questioning different aspects of power.

As a post graduate in Business Management, he was conferred with a special award for his social consciousness. Akshat has participated in numerous different national and international forums including being selected as one of the 50 World Economic Forum Global Shapers to attend the 2014 Annual Forum in Davos, Switzerland. He is an alumnus of Global Shapers network, an UnLtd India fellow (2013-2015) and Asia Foundation Development Fellow 2019. S M Sehgal Foundation's connection with Akshat dates back to 2007 when the foundation hosted his internship. Below is an edited excerpt from our conversations with him on his experiences leading a collective based in Mumbai.

The inspiration behind Blue Ribbon Movement

I come from a very modest family in Uttar Pradesh and later my family moved to Mumbai. I witnessed and experienced the existing socioeconomic gap/ divide. Since I am the youngest and have six sisters, I also grew up seeing the gender gap in my family. I saw the privileges I had as a boy, which my sisters did not enjoy. But I was not sure what I could do about it. After completing my MBA, I worked with corporates, but that was not my calling. During my MBA days, I spoke to one of my teachers and expressed my desire to do something different. I didn't want to do my internship in a bank, so that teacher connected me with S M Sehgal Foundation. I spent two months working with Sehgal Foundation on a project studying how the farmers could benefit through direct market linkages with organized retail chains. These two months were so powerful and proved to be a turning point in my life, as I acquired a purpose and the self-confidence that I can do something to make a difference. I had the opportunity to work closely with the farmers, and they were so welcoming in answering my questions and helping me with my research work. It was a moving experience. I still remember that in my field trips, I would not come back without having *sattu* (a drink made by dry-roasting grains or grams). I sat with farm families to understand their challenges and know how the foundation

team was working at multiple levels to address their issues. We used to start our day very early and meet with these families. It took me time to understand the various dimensions of the work. Construction of check dams, for instance, was impactful as it helped increase groundwater levels, ultimately benefitting farming.

Sehgal Foundation was a stepping stone in my journey into social work. It gave me clarity and purpose.

On gender equality

Sex is a biological difference with which we are born whereas Gender is a social construct, but there are other genders besides just male and female. Gender equality to me is giving equal opportunities to everyone irrespective of the gender and not discriminating on that basis. The Blue Ribbon Movement has a component called The Gender Lab that works in Mumbai, Delhi, and Haryana.

Change begins at home.

Gender inequality works at a very subtle level; we can see it in various forms such as distribution of household work, pay gaps for similar work, women overburdened with work, etc. Patriarchy plays a role in all this. Even in public spaces such as on buses and trains, we do not see many women. Women and men are mostly portrayed in a stereotypical way in the media too. Men too are victims of patriarchy. We raise boys with the notion that in future they will be the bread earners for the family, they can't do household chores, and they cannot show emotions such as crying because they have to be strong. Slogans such as *mard ko dard nahi hota* (men do not feel pain) have reinforced those stereotypes over time. In all this, we actually take away their right to express themselves.

On challenges

We work in 150 schools in three locations, and the biggest challenge we face is from the school system. Our work starts in making schoolchildren realize their potential and free themselves from societal pressures and stereotypes. Our curriculum runs parallel with academics so taking out that time becomes a challenge at times. We face issues with parents as they often take more time to understand what we are trying to do. But as we know, change doesn't happen overnight. Finding supporters and funders for the work is also a challenge.

The Gender Lab in Haryana is working in district Jind, and our program is running in government schools. We presently work with girls. Starting in 2018, we worked with 1,200 girls in twenty schools. They took up field projects that addressed domestic violence and the agency and rights women have over that social evil. The government is supporting us in this project. We have had the opportunity to present our work at national and international forums.

Gender inequality is a global issue that requires concerted efforts far and wide. My message to everyone is that change starts with us, and if we are able to do it, we can give a better world for future generations. Keep questioning the idea of patriarchy and change will follow.

(This is an edited excerpt translated from a Hindi audio interview done by Ms. Sonia Chopra, program leader, Communications)