

Law students from India and abroad learn about grassroots governance work

By Naveet Narwal

A thirty-member delegation comprised of faculty members and students from Stanford University School of Law and Jindal Global Law School visited Sehgal Foundation on March 29, 2018, to learn about the activities, aims, and objectives of the foundation's Good Rural Governance program currently being carried out in Haryana, Rajasthan, and Bihar. Mr. Ajay Pandey, CEO of Sehgal Foundation; Dr. Vikas Jha, director of Good Governance Now; and Mr. Navneet Narwal, program leader of Good Governance Now, met with the group at its Gurugram office, where they viewed an informational video, and the foundation team described various initiatives being used to strengthen rural governance: Village Leadership Schools (VLS), community meetings, Citizen Information and Support Centers (CISCs), and legal literacy camps held in collaboration with District Legal Services Authority (DLSA), Nuh.



Students asked questions regarding the common problems faced by the citizens with respect to getting entitlements under various social security programs run by state and central governments and what type of grievance redressal mechanisms were being used by citizens to avail those benefits. Information was shared

about the guidelines of the various government welfare programs and grievance redressal mechanisms, especially the Chief Minister Window.

Upon reaching the field, the group's first stop was the CISC at Nuh. Law students were intrigued to see this toll-free helpline at work, imparting villagers with information about various government programs related to food, education, health, agriculture, horticulture, and social security. Mohammad Sabir, coordinator, CISC, shared several success stories of their activities and outlined the challenges such as the poor grievance redressal system, which poses problems while imparting information and providing handholding support to citizens.

Course coordinator, Professor Eric Gilbert Jensen, asked what percentage of villagers hold bank accounts since most of the benefits are now directly credited to beneficiary accounts. Some students inquired about the percentage of villagers having mobile phones, what the majority of questions asked by the villagers through CISC are, and how the operations at CISC evolved. The team described various modes of advertisement of CISC including wall paintings, pamphlets, VLS, and a booklet listing government programs. The group then proceeded to the community center in village Ghaghas and interacted with present and former *sushasan* (good governance) champions of VLS: Imran, Fakrudeen, Jubeina, Haji Isha, Rithat, and Nirmala. They shared their experiences fighting corrupt practices in getting their entitlements under various programs. Sushasan champions also shared some case studies regarding use of the Right to Information Act, similar to the Freedom of Information Act in US. The group visited the community radio station, Alfaz-e-Mewat, and learned about its functioning, geographical coverage area, and types of programs being broadcast.

After seeing the grassroots work done by Sehgal Foundation and meeting with the governance champions and villagers, the delegation interacted with judicial officers at the office of District Legal Services Authorities (DLSA), Nuh, including Mr. A. K. Singal, District and Session judge; Mr. Puneesh Jindia, member secretary, Haryana State Legal Services Authority (HALSA); Mr. Sunil Chauhan, project officer, National Legal Services Authority (NALSA); and Mr. Vishal, secretary, DLSA. Other guests included Professor Dabiru Sridhar Patnaik (JGLS), Mr. Erik G. Jenson and Dr. Dinsha Farrokh Allen Mistree (Stanford School of Law), Jane Schukoske (Sehgal Foundation advisor), and other representatives from Sehgal Foundation.

Mr. Singal, as chairman, welcomed the delegation and initiated the discussion by describing the judicial system of India. Mr. Jindia gave a brief description of the activities of HALSA in the different districts of Haryana and talked about the collaboration of DLSA, Nuh, and Sehgal Foundation. Mr. Chauhan explained the role and activities of NALSA in bringing access to justice for all. Mr. Vishal provided an overview of the collaboration of DLSA, Nuh, and Sehgal Foundation in village-level legal literacy camps and training of the trainers of paralegal volunteers.

Students asked about the nature of cases DLSA encounters in its day-to-day work and the process followed for rolling out DLSA programs such as providing free legal aid to people with an annual income under three lakhs; women, children, and senior citizens; as well as schedule castes, tribes, and many more. Mr. Chauhan said that most cases they deal with relate to

marriage and land issues. Legal literacy materials and information about the Legal Services Act, Senior Citizen Act, Domestic Violence Act, and the Prevention of Sexual Harassment at Work Place Act, were shared with students and faculty.

Ajay Pandey gave a vote of thanks to all the judicial officers and students for an enriching discussion. This type of exchange program brings in new ideas and perspectives to Sehgal Foundation work while also highlighting the activities under the good rural governance program and making a strong case for replication of the NGO, DLSA, and law school model across different parts of India and the world.

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