

# Grassroots

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## Creating an environment that is conducive to learning

This story is about the yeoman service being rendered by an NGO, partnering with the government and the community, to improve the standard and reach of education in parts of Rajasthan and Haryana. The NGO has demonstrated that enrolment in government schools can be increased, and even students from private schools can be persuaded to switch to government schools.

**SARITA BRARA, Shimla**

It may have been just a district-level competition, but for Rahilya and her teammates of the Mahuva Khurd Government Senior Secondary School, the second spot they won in the basketball event was a big achievement. They were introduced to the sport just a month before the competition. In fact, Rahilya had never played any sport till then. Outdoor sports were considered taboo for girls of her minority community in their native village of Alwar in Rajasthan.

"We won because of encouragement by the school, the coaching and playing facilities that the school now has," says Rahilya, who wants to become a physical training instructor when she grows up. The young girl says her father, a farm hand, is much enthused by the initiatives taken by the school to encourage girls, and wants her to rise in any field that she chooses.

The school is among nearly a hundred selected in parts of Rajasthan and Haryana under the Transform Lives One School At A Time programme initiated by the SM Sehgal Foundation, an NGO. Among other things, it aims to reduce the number of dropouts, particularly girls, in rural government schools. This is being done by improving the infrastructure and creating an environment conducive to learning.

Bhagwan Sahay Sharma, who joined the school two years back after undergoing leadership training with the UK-India Education and Research Initiative (UKIERI) was keen to transform the institution which was in a shabby condition. He approached the SM Sehgal Foundation to take the school under its wing. Today, the institution stands out in terms of infrastructure and encouraging an academic and sporting environment, and has been able to attract increased enrolment even though it is located in an area where private schools have mushroomed. A total of 250 students were enrolled in the past one year, taking the total to 650.

The school is located in a minority-dominated village and the people are orthodox. Sharma says he uses opportunities like the morning assembly to instil gender sensitivity among the students. Tota Ram is a student of the Atta Barotta Government Senior Secondary School in Nuh in Mewatin Haryana, which the NGO has helped by refurbishing the lab, among other things.

Tota Ram was keen to take up Science, but the school in his village, Gangoli, did not have the facility to teach the subject. The lad, the son of a daily wage earner who works as a welder, had made it to the merit list in the Class X board exams. He had set

his eyes on getting admission to an IIT. He decided to commute 16 kms every day to study at the Atta Barotta School which had earned a name for its science faculty and other facilities.

"We could not do practicals as schools were closed for a long time. I had to use my father's smartphone for online classes," Ram says. Most of the students in the school belong to economically weak sections of society. Virender Singh, who is in charge of the middle school classes, says some 15 to 20 students have joined the school because of its science facilities. Like Ram, many come from other villages.

Many of the government schools in the villages were constructed long ago and lack proper sanitation and other facilities. The SM Sehgal Foundation started the programme to ensure that students in these government schools have access to drinking water, better sanitation facilities and separate toilets for girls and boys. It has installed rooftop rainwater harvesting systems and greened the schools, giving the students a safe and 'feel good' environment, to encourage parents to enrol their wards in government schools.

The NGO also works on digital and life skills awareness training for schoolchildren and youth. This is in line with the vision of National Digital Literacy Mission to empower at least one person per household with crucial digital literacy skills. Facilitating smart classes and providing laptops also form part of the programme.

Another area the NGO works on is building the capacities of the school management committees (SMCs). SMCs have the power to play an effective role for the betterment of the school. Unfortunately, as has been seen in many rural areas, the SMC



A training programme for building capacities of the SMCs.

members are not aware of their responsibilities and the kind of role they are expected to play. Under the programme, SMC members are made aware of the provisions of the Right to Education Act so that they are able to ensure implementation of the Act in letter and spirit.

In addition to six months of training, the SMC members are taken to visit model schools to learn more about how they can play an active role in improving the schools in their villages. SMCs can also influence the village community to ensure that all children are enrolled in schools, and bring down dropout rates, especially of girls. They can also ensure that teachers are regular and punctual. Effective SMCs are vital for sustained good functioning of schools, says Navneet Narwal, associate programme lead of the initiative to transform schools.

The success of the SM Sehgal Foundation is a fine example of how the government, the NGOs and the community can work together for the much-needed betterment of schools and the education of children in villages. There are several such organisations which are working in rural areas to improve the infrastructure of government schools and provide better facilities for digital literacy.

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Photo: SB

A cruise ship-like structure that serves as one of the classrooms at the Mahuva Khurd Government Senior Secondary School. Right: An airline-like structure serves as a smart class in the same school.