

NETWORK MEMBER: S M SEHGAL FOUNDATION



Helping Empowered Villagers Stand Up to Hired Thugs

Through its Good Rural Governance program, the **S M Sehgal Foundation** engages communities in improving poor conditions and inadequate public services in rural India. It provides vulnerable citizens and the leaders of village-level institutions with the knowledge, skills, and confidence to become informed, active participants in the development of their communities.

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www.smsfoundation.org



S M Sehgal donors and trustees inaugurating a school renovation project, October 2015 at Khedli Khurd, Nagina, Mewat, Haryana.

Section 506 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) relates to ‘criminal intimidation’. Thanks to India’s rather brilliant *myneta.info* National Election Watch website, we know that one of the candidates in 2014’s Ferozpur Jhirka district elections in Mewat, in the northern state of Haryana, was once charged with an IPC Section 506. More worrying still, he was also charged with an IPC Section 307 – which relates to attempted murder.

The quality of local politicians in rural Mewat won’t come as a surprise to the women of the village of Raniyala, part of the Ferozpur Jhirka ‘block’. Mewat is an arid and underdeveloped district, which despite being only 125km south of Delhi, is isolated and impoverished. Much of the population lack access to basic housing or to services such as water and

education. Human development indicators are low. In Raniyala 76 families are classified as ‘below poverty line’ (BPL) meaning they live on less than 781 Rupees (US\$12) a month.

To help desperately poor families such as these, the Haryana state government in 2008 launched the Mahatma Gandhi Grameen Basti Yojna, a housing program to provide 100sq yard plots to eligible families in 4,000 villages in the state. In Raniyala the 76 BPL families were allocated plots, but were never able to take possession. Instead influential families sitting on local government bodies – in this case the ‘Block Samiti’ (block council) which has jurisdiction over a section of a district - had seized the lands. The influential families were threatening the village council members and as a result the BPL families were unable to get their plots.

The next major obstacle in the case was the non-responsive bureaucratic system, including Additional Deputy Commissioner, Deputy Commissioner and Block Development Officer, and Block Samiti members – none of whom would respond to the complaints of women from BPL families for five years. Indeed not only did the Block Samiti ignore their complaints, they hired thugs to threaten the families seeking their rightful plots.

The S M Sehgal Foundation's Good Rural Governance team works on two aspects of governance in Mewat district: building the awareness and skills of citizens to know and speak out about their rights, and strengthening village level institutions to plan and act for the community. It conducted training for the BPL community to teach them about their rights to the allocated plots and about local redress mechanisms. In particular it trained the women of the BPL families to work together as a collective, not to hand over paperwork to officials – who would 'lose' the documents – and persevering with their legal demands to the local commissioner.

Sushila, one of the complainants, recalls: "We went to meet the Deputy Commissioner three times but could not succeed. He came to meet us only when we made it clear that we wouldn't leave the office until we met him." The grit and determination of the village women – when many of their menfolk had given up through intimidation – finally led them to the possession of their land, after five years of struggle. They have since turned their efforts to ensure the better functioning of food security welfare programs such as the school lunch and subsidized rations under India's Targeted Public Distribution System in the village.

In other villages S M Sehgal Foundation-trained villagers have chased education departments for buildings that should have been built. Its Good Rural Governance project works both on the demand side – with citizens – and on the supply side – with village-level institutions – to bridge the gap between India's constitutional guarantees and the delivery of government schemes at the grassroots.

The initiative has so far reached 151,133 villagers in 403 villages in Mewat district.

Under this initiative, Panchayati Raj Institutions, School Management Committees and Village Health Sanitation and Nutrition Committees in 53 villages have been trained and they have been able to access development funds for the village. Similarly, women's sangathans (community organizations) in 100 villages have been trained to raise issues affecting women before local government bodies. Meanwhile another 3,000 villagers have become trained through village leadership schools and legal literacy camps have benefitted over 22,000 villagers.

The result of S M Sehgal Foundation's work has been better access to food, housing, old age and widow pensions, and agricultural inputs for citizens in one of the country's most deprived regions. There is also better awareness about legal services available at local level. Village committees that look after schools and health, sanitation and nutrition have become more responsive and efficient.



Women attending a Good Governance meeting in Mewat, Haryana

Key Lessons

- 1 **Build Confidence:** organizations working at the grassroots should build confidence and trust, and encourage local talent who become the eyes and ears representing the community.
- 2 **Participation is the key to good governance:** Government schemes often lack proper implementation. Civil society and law school clinics with good working relationships with communities can assist communities to participate in the functioning and monitoring of government programmes.
- 3 **Increase awareness on legal rights and remedies:** legal literacy efforts should be made relevant and interesting when pitched in plain, local languages that many can understand.
- 4 **Use community media:** community radio is a good tool for spreading awareness of legal aid and local legal issues in the community. Participatory content creation is a hallmark of community radio, which is designed to give a voice to communities neglected by the mainstream media.
- 5 **Women's participation can bring about a dynamic social change:** Once given skills and information, women can play an imperative role in development.
- 6 **Community leaders as storytellers of change:** success stories serve as an inspiration, it is very important to document and report on key access to justice activities and events in a community.