

**DR. REGI GEORGE & DR. LALITHA REGI**  
**Recipients of the Award for Constructive Work - 2023**

Born: Dr. Regi: December 13, 1958 & Dr. Lalitha: July 30, 1960

Just after their studies, both Dr. Regi George and Dr. Lalitha Regi started work in Gandhigram Kasturba Hospital as clinicians – they are Anaesthesiologist and Gynaecologist respectively. It is during this time that they came to know about Gandhiji's principle of communities looking after themselves and Gram Swaraj. This attracted them very much and they decided to try out this concept in health. For this they chose Sittilingi Valley, a tribal area where 95% of the people are tribals and is nestled between the Kalrayan and Sitheri Hills, and almost completely cut off from the rest of the world.

**Tribal Health Initiative (THI):** They formed the Tribal Health Initiative, and it launched its activities in September 1993 when the two doctors started an outpatient facility in a remote forested valley and in a modest hut built for them by the local tribals in Sittilingi village, Dharmapuri District in Tamil Nadu. The infant mortality in the area was a pathetic 147/1000 and many mothers died in childbirth. In the next 10 years, by training the local population to take care of themselves, they brought it down to 20/1000 and no mothers have died in childbirth for more than 15 years. Gradually, the work expanded to deal with the determinants of health which included organic farming and community development.

The nearest hospital nearby was 50 kms away, and for emergency surgery people had to go to Salem (100 kms away). The Tribal Hospital, which was started in 1997, is now a full-fledged 35 bedded hospital with a labour room, a neonatal care room, an emergency room, operation theatre and an intensive care unit (ICU) which is busy most of the year round. The hospital sees more than 35,000 patients per year, admits and treats about 1800 in-patients, does about 800 surgeries and 800 deliveries a year.

**Health Workers & Auxiliaries:** But to attain self-reliance in health it was necessary to train local girls and women in health. The Health Worker training is residential for two years for tribal girls with a minimum qualification of twelfth standard. THI has now shifted to a basic Staff Nurse course which is recognized by the Nursing Council. They work in the hospital as well as go to remote villages to spread their knowledge of health as well as treat minor illnesses in the field. The health workers now plan and implement the community health program too. Dr. Regi & Dr. Lalitha also trained another cadre of village women called Health Auxiliaries. These 25 barely literate tribal ladies come from 25 villages, and they have been selected by the villagers. They are capable of weighing babies, register births and deaths, teach the village about nutrition and sanitation, treat diarrhoea and respiratory illness. They are the cornerstone of the THI health programmes, and they cater to about 15,000 tribals in the remote villages. With the new initiatives like hypertension care they now play a key role as a community development facilitator.

A team from the hospital visits each of the 25 villages once a month. Antenatal checkups and under-5 clinics along with Health Education are given. The team also does School Health Education. The antenatal checkups have dramatically improved upto 95% and malnutrition has come down by 80%.

**Sustainability & Self-reliance:** In 2004, they had finished 10 years of work and were wondering what to do next. It was the 75th anniversary of the Dandi March, and so to rediscover the community, the whole team did a *padayatra* to all the villages and sat down with villagers and discussed what they and

THI could do together to make their lives better. The first off shoot of the *padayatra* was the expansion of work into organic farming. THI has been forming farmers groups in the villages and helping them in sustainable organic agriculture and the marketing of the produce. The women groups now value-add to the local produce to get a better profit and sell under the brand name SVAD. The farmers have now formed a producer company called SOFA (Sittilingi valley Organic Farmers Association), which has 700 members. There is also a Women Entrepreneur Society also with about 500 women, bringing the total beneficiaries in this to about 1200 families. They had a turnover of close to Rupees 2.5 Crores last year.

In two villages with the Lambadi community (gypsies – now resettled), work started in reviving the dying craft and making it profitable for the women to support themselves. About 70 women have started reviving their almost extinct embroidery skills that generations before them were doing. They now make products for the Indian and foreign market – taking pride in their art and generating money in the process. Another 10 women are engaged in tailoring and other activities. A newly started venture has trained 50 tribal women in high end fashion tailoring, after which they will form a society to seek and fulfill orders.

Since the last 10 years, with a new road connecting the Kalrayan Hills nearby, Dr. Regi George and Dr. Lalitha Regi have been noticing that many tribals are coming from remote villages in the hills, with diseases and problems they had been seeing in the Sittilingi valley initially. To tackle this, THI has a weekly OPD and a community health program there on the same lines as in Sittilingi. THI hopes to have a full-fledged modern OPD with staff to cater to the tribals of the Kalrayan Hills, all through the week.

There are also plans to increase the income generating capacity of the tribals in the Sittilingi Valley and build up local cottage industries using the local material and expertise.

With better health care and modern culture coming in, THI, especially for the neglected elderly citizens, has started an insurance scheme for Rs.200/- per year and all health needs are looked after. There are also health insurance schemes to cover the farmers and the artisans too.

**Governance:** For 4 years the region ran through a drought which hit the farmers badly. THI's work has expanded to include watershed and water management in the Sittilingi valley and sensitizing the people to local governance and the Panchayati Raj system, to have true Gram Swaraj in this remote tribal valley. Last Panchayat elections the candidate put up by their Farmers Collective, was one of the Senior Nurses in the hospital, who won comfortably and is now the President. This is a good example of how people can govern and look after themselves, without any political affiliation.

### Since Inception

Tribal Hospital work is carried out in 5 districts - Dharmapuri, Salem, Kallakurichi, Tiruvannamalai and Krishnagiri

Outpatients	- 6,28,400
In Patients	- 28,574
Surgeries	- 10,132
Deliveries	- 8112
Health sector	- 26+ tribal hamlets of 15,000 population
Farming sector	- 48 tribal hamlets of 20,000 population
Sittilingi Organic Farmers' Association (SOFA)	- 700 farmers
Porgai Artisans' Association	- 60 artisans

Dr. Regi George & Dr. Lalitha Regi believe that Gram Swaraj is achievable even if one works in health, education or livelihoods, if one can carry the people along with one's work and empower them and their capacities, then they will be able to aspire for true self-reliance.

The doctor couple is an ideal role model for young medicos. Owing to this long-standing intervention, tribes of the area are on the path to self-sufficiency. They have not only served the communities in the area, but they have also spent their life with intensity following core Gandhian values in their personal lives and promoting them in the community. They have successfully empowered the village people to learn, to govern themselves better by organising and by taking group decisions to the extent possible.

An initiative that began with the purpose of bringing health to this remote tribal settlement some decades ago, has led to bringing a positive transformation in every aspect of life. A lifetime of exemplary and unwavering dedication of Dr. Regi George and Dr. Lalitha Regi has shown results in the form of a thriving, vibrant, rural community which has occurred in line with Gandhian principles for sustainable development.

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