



## **Dr. Regi George and Dr. Lalitha Regi**

**Recipient**

**Constructive Work Award 2023**

Honourable Chief Guest, Respected members of the Jamnalal Bajaj Foundation and dear friends,

We are deeply humbled and honoured to receive this most prestigious award today. It is the recognition of a tumultuous journey where we stumbled and fell many times but persisted to experiment a unique vision for the medical community, on what doctors could do if they wanted to. We started work in Gandhigram near Madurai after our studies and during our routine clinical work realized that “sickness” work is vastly different from “health” work. Working with empowering communities was an idea we picked up in Gandhigram - the idea of people taking control of their lives and Gram Swaraj. We searched and found an isolated tribal area in the Sittilingi Valley in Tamizh Nadu and started working with the Adivasis who lived there. From starting off with a mud and thatch hut built by the Adivasis, to a fully-fledged secondary care hospital, from working with women to empower them in health, we have come a long way. We sat down with the community and extended our work to include an Organic Farming Collective of 700 farmers, a Women entrepreneurship society of 485 women and the Porgai Artisans association of 70 artisans. While doing the watershed development work in some of the drought years through shramdhan, we realized that real people centred development can come only through good governance.

What started with a mass mobilization for governance ended up by winning the Panchayat elections in 2019 thus we have the Adivasis now governing themselves sans any political affiliation. We stepped back and realized that perhaps this was what Gandhiji meant by Gram Swaraj.

At midnight on the fourteenth of August 1947, our past generation listened to Jawaharlal Nehru’s stirring words about India’s tryst with destiny. And he ended up with the moving words of Gandhiji, that our calling and destiny is to wipe the tears in the eye of every Indian. Three generations have passed since then. We doctors have failed our people. While 7% of the Indian population are living in extreme poverty, 24% of the rural population don’t seek health care because they can’t afford it. 56,000 doctors pass out every year and yet very few are aware of the health needs of the rural areas and want to work there.

Malnutrition was the cause of 69% of infant deaths in our country and infant deaths are about 7.6 lakhs every year, which means by the time I finish this speech 8 babies have died. In Sittilingi and many rural areas of India, doctors have reinvented themselves to feel at home and to practice medicine according to the needs and social conditions in rural India, affirming the legitimacy of this way of life.

Our medical colleges are colleges of medical sciences only and they do not expose us to all the many things that go into health and ill health. Our medicalized model has little room for all the social and economic determinants of health. Unless the medical community learns to have this paradigm shift from sickness to health, we will fail to wipe the tears of the poor. Our work in Sittilingi has shown that this is not an idealistic or an impossible dream. It can and should be done.

