



HR RAJAGHEKAR/www.indiatodaymag.com

It was a jungle out there in the Sitheri hills of Tamil Nadu. Life was cheap and death swift for the tribals of the area with the nearest big hospital 100 km away at Dharmapuri, the district headquarters. But that was till **Dr Regi M. George** and his wife **Lalitha** made it their home. "Before our arrival, one out of five deliveries ended in the

death of the child or the mother or both. But since we started working here, there has been no child death at our hospital," says Regi, who set up the Tribal Health Initiative (THI) in 1993 at Sitlingi in Dharmapuri.

Regi, 51, and Lalitha, 49, who met at the Government Medical College in Alleppey, Kerala, joined the Kasturibai Hospital which served Gandhigram in Dindigul district of Tamil Nadu, in 1987. It was during an all-India tour that they realised that tribals are at the bottom of the development ladder.

Started as no more than a mud hut with only the cou-

ple on duty, THI has grown into a hospital with 40 staffers and facilities like an operation theatre, labour ward, scans and an X-Ray. They offer medical insurance to senior citizens among tribals for Rs 30 a year. For others too, the charge is not more than Rs 50-60. After 17 years of providing medical care, THI has now set its sights on livelihood issues. They are training tribal farmers in organic farming and providing vocational training in crafts, plumbing and welding.

But the doctors have their share of problems too. Getting volunteers is diffi-

cult. They've wanted a doctor for a year now but no one's come forward. They strongly believe that since medical education is subsidised at the taxpayers' expense, all doctors ought to give back to the community. "After two decades of work in rural and tribal areas, my wife and I have more happiness than regret," says Regi.

by S. Senthil Kumar

WHAT HE DID

Set up a healthcare centre in tribal belt of Sitlingi

83 mn

IS INDIA'S TRIBAL POPULATION WHICH CONSTITUTE 8.08 PER CENT OF THE TOTAL

"In Dharmapuri, where many tribal areas do not even have a primary health centre, the services rendered by Dr Regi and Lalitha are commendable."

L. KATHIRESAN, Assistant Professor, Assam University and a research scholar on tribal health in Tamil Nadu