

# *Pursuing the Stubborn, Yet Vulnerable*

BY JASMIN LOW



It was hard. 16-year old Anya was rejected by a few of the town hospitals and referred to a government hospital in Hyderabad. It was a long journey down and Anya was due for labour. Soon, a baby girl was born but Anya's condition took a turn for the worst. Without proper facilities to treat her, she was on an ambulance to be transferred to another hospital. As the ambulance drove along the dusty pavements, Anya breathed her last. Anya's baby girl was to return to her brother of only a few years old, who was living in a rural village in India. And Anya couldn't go with her.

This was just one of the many tragic stories that Pastor Steven, founder of the Asray Mother and Child Tend Station (ACTS), encountered as he serves pregnant women and children in rural India. In light of that incident, Pastor Steven refused to move on without an investigation as Anya was one of the women that was under the care of ACTS. He found out that Anya had refused to listen to the nurses in ACTS and even avoided them because of the deeply rooted traditions and beliefs about pregnancy and childbirth in her rural village.



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In the rural village, illiteracy, ignorance and poverty have brainwashed people to believe that the bigger your baby grows in the womb, the harder your pregnancy and labour would be. This misconception has been passed down through generations, causing a deep-rooted problem that still prevails today. Many women neglect having a nutritious diet and seeking proper medical treatments. Hence, deaths at childbirth is common amongst the villagers. As with Anya's case, she refused to take the advice from nurses of ACTS because of her deep-rooted belief. Pastor Steven knew that forceful instructions would not help these women, but only loving guidance could rescue these mothers from this dangerous cycle.

ACTS is aimed at providing nutritional supplements to pregnant women in rural areas. It also aims to educate these women on health and personal hygiene. The programme was founded by Pastor Steven and his wife, who is currently working as the head nurse of a governmental hospital. They were first convicted by the LORD when they watched the news and saw how pregnant women were dying every day, due to childbirth. The ministry was started from the little that they had in their own pockets. Even up till today, they invest everything that they have into the ministry.

Starting with just 70 ladies in 2013, Pastor Steven, his wife, and his small team of nurses, would drive a tuk-tuk into villages to reach out to these women. Other than regularly driving the mini hospital into the villages, they also conduct quarterly medical camps where local nurses would be hired and members of his local church would volunteer to serve.

Eventually, with the help of a foreign sister and their own money, they managed to purchase a van to serve as an ambulance. They recognised that village women are shy and extremely reserved. Hence, they needed an ambulance to contain their medical equipment, keep a log of

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the patients' medical histories and also, space and privacy for these women to receive checks and treatment.

Serving with pure intentions, however, might not always be well-received. The tribal people living in the villages were suspicious of ACTS at first, thinking it was propaganda. Some political fanatics saw the ministry as a scheme to convert India into a Christian nation. However, their guards were let down as ACTS faithfully returned to the villages every month, providing healthcare services to the women and infants.

Today, ACTS has made an impact on 1,200 women. With the support of Grace Missions, they are reaching out to 240 pregnant

women across 16 villages. On top of the healthcare services they provide, they also have regular believers' meetings with existing Christians in the villages. With the strong trust and relationships forged within ACTS, even non-believers have become drawn to the community and occasionally take part in these meetings.

Pastor Steven and his wife continue to serve by faith, and yearn to see lives transformed through the love and grace of Jesus Christ. This would be a long process of sowing and investing in the lives of people. But just as God did not give up on the obstinate Israelites, Pastor Steven and his wife, shall continue to pursue a people whose strongholds can only be broken by the power of Jesus.