



# The Right Livelihood Award

*for outstanding vision and work on behalf of our planet and its people*

Hannumappa R Sudarshan / Vivekananda Girijana Kalyana Kendra, VGKK (India)

(1994)

*...for showing how tribal culture can contribute to a process that secures the basic rights and fundamental needs of indigenous people and conserves their environment.*



Hannumappa R Sudarshan  
Photo: [Wolfgang Schmidt](#)

The Soliga tribals have for centuries lived in the Biligiri Rangana (B.R.) Hills of Karnataka State, for most of that time leading 'a life of abundance and peace, surviving by hunting and shifting cultivation', worshipping God in nature and living in harmony with it. From about the 1950s, however, their forests started to be cleared for industry and modern agriculture, their land expropriated by others, and the Soliga sank into a condition of the utmost poverty and exploitation.

H. Sudarshan was born in 1950 and graduated as a doctor in 1973. He turned his back on the possibility of lucrative urban practice in favour of working with poor communities, and in 1979 he arrived in the B.R. Hills to work among the Soliga. Since then, the Vivekananda Girijana Kalyana Kendra (VGKK), which he founded in 1981, has blossomed into a sustainable tribal development program.

VGKK differs from most such enterprises in that it is based on a respect for tribal culture and a determination to perpetuate it, even while developing the requisite skills and capabilities among the tribal people to enable them to become self-reliant in today's India, which is Sudarshan's eventual goal. VGKK's longstanding work on health has achieved such results among the 20,000 people served.

The 500-pupil school that is part of the program aims at spontaneous blossoming of a child's personality with an attitude of service and pride and confidence in their culture. The curriculum covers all normal subjects taught to national standards and also things such as environmental workshops, herbal gardening, value education, especially with regard to tribal values, and

encouragement of tribal culture. More than 95 per cent of children now get primary education. Tribal Forestry School and Nursing School have been added to the existing education complex. Some Soliga children from the school are now going to university, and several graduates and post-graduates have returned to serve their community. Jade Gowda, the first tribal boy to do post graduation and an PhD in Agriculture is the President of VGKK.

VGKK's vocational training scheme gives instruction in 16 crafts. Over 60 per cent of Soliga people now get a minimum of 300 days' employment a year from the Forest Department, other agencies and a system of Tribal Cooperatives were set up by VGKK, which employs 1,200 Soliga directly. VGKK has also pioneered the sustainable extraction of non-timber forest products (NTFPs) and the creation of Tribal Enterprises to process them.

VGKK considers its most significant achievement to be its fostering of self-organisation among the people. It has a governing board of which 10 out of 17 people are Soligas and every village has its own Sangha (council), through which the people solve their internal problems and fight for their external rights. Most of their alienated land has now been restored to them. Soliga candidates have also done well in elections and two tribal women are chiefs of the local council.

Sudarshan has expressed his philosophy thus: "To eliminate disease you have to remove poverty. The only way to do that, I have realised, is to organise the people for their rights."

VGKK has now expanded its tribal development programs to the tribal people in Arunachal Pradesh, Andaman Islands & Andhra Pradesh.

In 1986, Sudarshan founded Karuna Trust for integrated rural development through health, education and livelihood security. He and his health team have brought incidence of leprosy down from 17 per 1000 people to less than 0.3, hot water epilepsy has been controlled. The trust now focuses on strengthening primary health care through public-private partnerships in 4 states Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Orissa & Andhra Pradesh - where it runs 50 primary health centers, addressing gaps in these remote centers through its own innovations - telemedicine, health insurance and integration of mental health, to name a few.

Sudarshan has been Ashoka Fellow, Ashoka Innovators for Public, USA, Vice-President of the Voluntary Health Association of India, and a member of the Independent Commission on Health in India, the National Commission on Population, the National Nutrition Mission, the National Human Rights Commission, and the Indian Planning Commission's Steering Group for the development of Scheduled Tribes. As Chairman of the Task Force on Health & Family Welfare he has brought out a comprehensive report to reform the health system of Karnataka. As Ombudsman for Health, Education & Social Welfare, Karnataka Lokayuktha, he is fighting against corruption and promoting good governance to make the public services reach the poor including the tribal people.

He has received the Parisara (Environment) Award from the Government of Karnataka (1993) and the Padma Shree Award from the President of India (2000), the Human Rights Award (2001), a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Public Health Foundation of India (2009).

### **Quotation**

*"The so-called civilised society has a lot to learn from the tribals."*

Hannumappa Sudarshan