In Andhra Pradesh’s agency belt, there are dirt tracks and remote hamlets. Medical help is a far cry for the tribals in the hilly areas. Without roads, there are no ambulances to reach the sick either. The nearest primary health centre (PHC) or hospital looks too far.

To help tribals facing emergencies, including pregnant women, it had to be a new kind of solution. They had the ‘doli’, a makeshift stretcher, to carry patients to nearby primary health centres, but there had to be a vehicle to reach the nearest PHC, around 20 km away. Many women were suffering without help. For instance, a tribal woman Jindammi, who had a miscarriage on June 29, was being taken to Parvatipuram area hospital in a ‘doli’. It was an ordeal for her family to bring her, trekking almost 12 km to reach Duggeru sub-centre before shifting her to a hospital in Parvatipuram in an ambulance. Fortunately, doctors there could save her in spite of heavy bleeding.

The issue caught the attention of the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), sending officials into a tizzy to explain the geographical condition of tribal areas of Vizianagaram district.

After much mulling, the Andhra Pradesh government proposed the feeder ambulance — a novel sidecar carriage to tackle the problem. The Integrated Tribal Development Agency (ITDA) Parvatipuram Project Officer G. Lakshmisha took the initiative to place 24 feeder ambulances at remote points, each covering four to five remote villages of mandals like Gumma Lakshmipuram, Jiyamamavala, Kurupam, Komarada, Makkuva, Saluru, Pachipeta and other areas on April 28 this year. The ambulance is a six-and-half feet box attached to a 150-cc motorcycle with a cushioned semi-sleeper facility suited for movement of patients even on uneven ghat roads.

Each vehicle costs around ₹1.2 lakh. Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu who handles the Medical and Health portfolio directed the officials to give utmost priority to their maintenance.

So how does it work? The ambulance can be reached by dialling the regular 108 helpline. Once the call reaches the ambulance driver, the patient is picked up within 15-20 minutes. Though without a GPS, the driver carries an official mobile phone and the number is known to everyone in the villages concerned.

Small is big: The sidecar ambulance has helped patients reach health centres 20 km away. (*SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT*)

The sidecar ambulance is the first responder for patients in several districts of the Agency areas in north Andhra Pradesh.

Medics on mobikes provide SOS service for remote villages

Ambulance driver Murali Naidu of Raiguddi recounts many difficulties in operating in the difficult terrain. “With the support of locals, we could clear bottle-necks. Now, the vehicle is moving smoothly, ensuring a safe journey for patients,” he added. “We don’t have all the facilities but we have a first aid kit,” he said. The kit includes a mini oxygen cylinder, thermometer, glucometer, pulse oximeter, and intravenous fluid infusion set.

Medical officer Ratna Deepika of Dokusila says patients can be saved if brought in the golden hour. “That time is precious. Feeder ambulances are enabling us to provide treatment. The ambulance driver informs the hospital about the patient early,” she added.