

Pioneering Leadership and Public Health Experiments of Dr.T.S.Soundaram

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It is a real honor for me to deliver the T.S.Soundaram Oration. The COVID-19 pandemic gave me the time and the space to think about Dr. Soundaram, to reflect on her work and more importantly to be able to present it to you, the wonderful students of Gandhigram University. I am grateful to Dr. Pankajam, the former Vice Chancellor, who instituted this Oration to the Department of Home Science and to every faculty of Gandhigram Rural University for this opportunity.

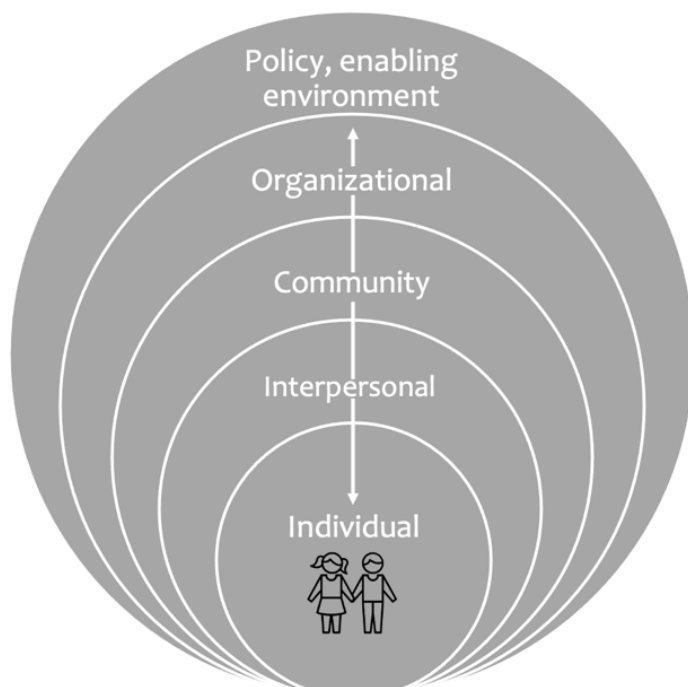


This beautiful image of Dr.T.S. Soundaram brings back so many happy memories. Happy memories that were made by a 10-year-old girl when she arrived at Gandhigram, of Dr. Soundaram's leadership, of her beauty, of her ability to be there for everyone but also, I think, of her tremendous experience that leaves a lasting impression in this generation and I am sure in generations to come. This is a summary of the Oration that I delivered on the 10th of December 2020 and I hope it will bring you and draw you to Dr. Soundaram's life a little bit more. I know there are only a few resources online and therefore this Oration is a contribution to that. There is a body of work that Dr. Soundaram has left behind, and with Gandhigram University we can present it to students but also to everyone who is interested in how Mahatma Gandhi inspired so many leaders to serve society and to leave lasting impressions.

Dr. Soundaram was a multi-dimensional personality, leaving her footprint on so many different aspects of work both at Gandhigram and in this wonderful nation of ours, India. She has layered so many different aspects of her own particular expertise into these footprints, but for the Oration today I would like to draw on two things - her pioneering leadership as well as her public health experiments which have an impact in modern India and a connection to the current crisis that we are part of, the COVID-19 crisis. Allow me therefore in this presentation, which is a summary of the Oration, to go deeper into the COVID-19 pandemic and allow me also to look at Dr. Soundaram's life and legacy through these two lenses of leadership and what leadership means to society as well as the critical importance of investing in public health. I will of course then look at the lessons that we can take as professionals and budding professionals in building leaders for tomorrow, as well as I think, very importantly, to be able to celebrate the human being that I had the deep honor to call '*paati*'.

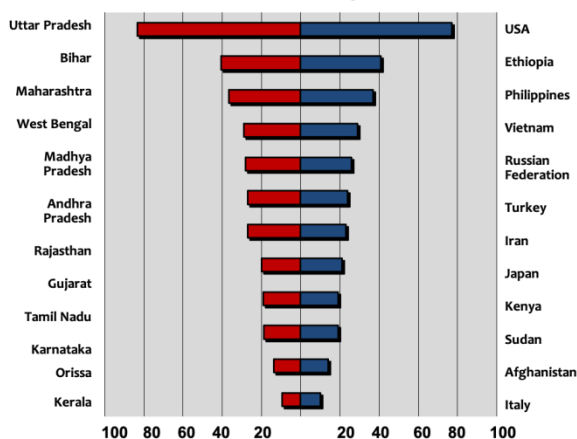
The reality of wearing masks everywhere is something that I was used to as a medical student. It was very much in the realm of the intensive care unit, the infectious disease unit where we use masks, but now in the middle of the COVID-19 crisis, everybody is wearing it. It was something that we never imagined and something that I'd like you to keep in the backdrop as we look at the data. Almost every country, nearly 200 countries have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. When I first started writing an academic piece in March of 2020, only 500,000 people were affected. Today, as I deliver the Oration, almost 70 million people have been affected. This it is a pandemic with all the characteristics of

a public health pandemic - the scale, the depth, the spike and the height of people who've been affected, but I think what I'd like to do in this backdrop is to see how this has affected individuals and communities. Allow me to draw upon the socio-epidemiological model of health promotion that we use so many times in public health. If I may again place the child in the center, 1.5 billion children have been affected one way or the other and look at the circles of influence - the most intimate being family then being community where schools and hospitals are situated, and you keep widening and increasing the layers around this individual child and you will see you will end up in policy.



Every single aspect of this model has been affected in the COVID-19 crisis. Paati (Dr. Soundaram) knew this even the 1940s and therefore her work layered in all these different ways from modeling and practice at Gandhigram, to policy through the union government in New Delhi.

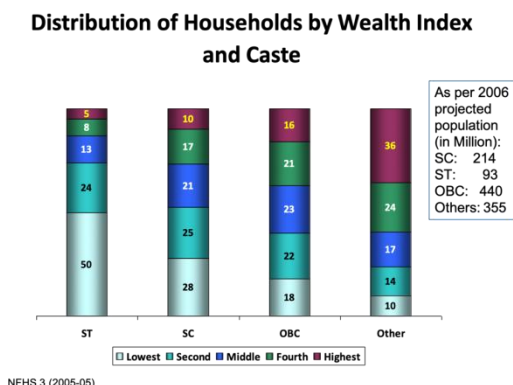
Many states have child populations similar to the child population of large countries



Children

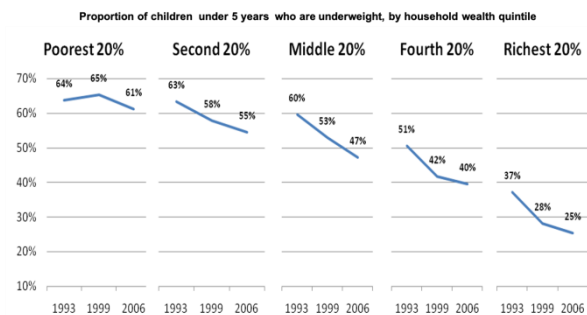
This graph is another one that always speaks to me. On the very top you see the pediatric population. The number of children in Uttar Pradesh, the most popular state of India, is equivalent to the child population or the pediatric population of United States of America. When you come right down you see Orissa, where Dr. Kalpana Raja comes from, somebody from a wonderful family inspired by Mahatma Gandhi, and you see on the right Kenya, the entire pediatric population. That's the scale of things, and no wonder did Dr. Soundaram choose women and children as her forte, her

area of focus, and when I speak of the COVID-19 pandemic it is not as if the virus alone has caused this crisis. There have been predisposing factors. Let's take the lens of economic growth. In the last decade, we have gone from 5% to 8.5%, but the wealth that we have generated has not been equally distributed. Still about 14% officially of India's population is below the poverty line but those of us who work closer to the community also know that the impacts are much more than 14%.



If you kind of go beyond the economic growth rates and you look at using another lens of social stratification which is the caste system, you see again the distribution is very skewed, it is very uneven. Traditionally, sections of society that have been ostracized and marginalized still receive a smaller portion of this wealth that we have generated and the ones who have always had access get a bigger share. Now this unequal distribution of course comes with a cost. We can also look at it in the way young children are growing up today and if you take one aspect that determines their growth, which is nutrition, and you again look and analyze as to where the nutritional achievements have been fast and good, it is again the wealthier percentile; the poorest sections have still remained very undernourished. I just read an article yesterday which is describing the deepening crisis as far as nutrition is concerned in India and NFHS surveys present that to you.

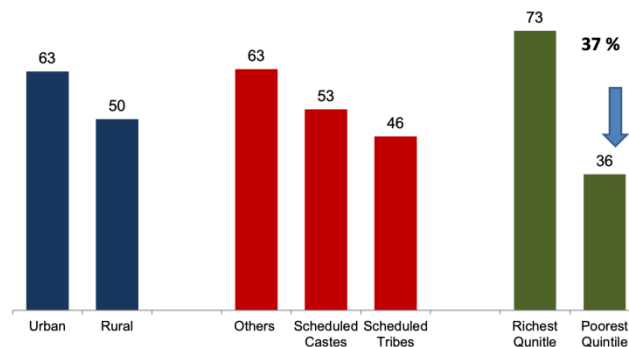
Level of under-nutrition in children belonging to the poorest households has remained stagnant in more than a decade



Progress for Children: Achieving the MDGs with Equity; September 2010; NFHS-2005-06

Immunization coverage varies significantly among different population categories

Percentage of children age 12-23 fully immunized : 54 %



District Level Household Survey 2007-2008

Go ahead and then look at it also in the way of another very important public health intervention, which is immunization, and you can see the stark difference again. The most educated, the most empowered, the ones that have resources at their disposal sometimes end up being immunized almost to about 75% to 80%, by which point you're hitting herd immunity. The discussion around COVID-19 is speaking about herd immunity, but we have poorer sections of our society where even now only one-third or little above 30% are immunized adequately. So, there are predisposing factors, and they are the current factors that have emerged out of this massive disruption through the COVID-19 pandemic that has led to this. I think that this context is worrisome. We do know that the World Bank and the IMF say about 130 million people will drop into poverty during the course of the COVID-19 pandemic. 50% are going to be children. These are children who are growing up today, their brains are forming, their bodies are forming and if it is a scarred childhood, we know it will be a compromised adulthood. Therefore, the first part of my presentation was to describe the context as more than a public health crisis - there is a learning crisis, there is a nutritional crisis, there is a mental health crisis, and we know there is a severe economic crisis which people say we will take more than two to three years to recover fully from.

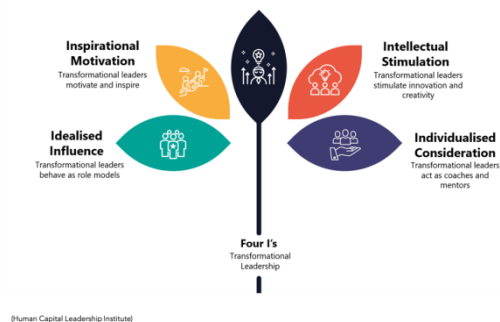
I would like to move on to a quick timeline of Dr. Soundaram's personal life and leadership trajectory. Mahatma Gandhi said at one time leadership meant power, muscle power, but today he said it is about getting along with one another and you know, getting along with one another is not just between two people, it is also what you feel about yourself, how empowered and how confident you feel in interacting with others.

Dr. Soundaram was born in 1904 in the TVS family in Madurai. A loved daughter of this family, she grew up and as was the tradition of the day, she was married off at age 14 to a medical doctor, and less than a decade into her marriage she lost her husband because he succumbed to plague as he was taking care of patients affected by plague. It could have been possible that she would have stayed and done what the times of the day and the culture of that time dictated, which is living life quietly in her own family. But the moment in India at the time was also for girls and women to be empowered and to be greater participants in India's progress and freedom struggle. So, Dr. Soundaram found her way to the medical school in New Delhi. In the Lady Harding's college, she found a wonderful hostel mate in Dr. Sushila Naayar, again someone who was greatly influenced by Mahatma Gandhi. These two wonderful women not only became medical doctors but went on to be great public health pioneers and to serve the government of India. In 1930, Dr. Soundaram joined the freedom struggle and was inspired by Mahatma Gandhi. I think she started forming that aspect of her that evolved later as a very visible public leader. She also saw the problems not only in the immediate circumstance of Tamil Nadu but started looking at it in a much wider framework. The country was really her laboratory for her to draw on, and when India won independence in 1947 Mahatma Gandhi asked some to join the government and invited many to lead experiments across the country of what that vision of integrated rural development could look like, and Dr. Soundaram was asked to start something in rural Tamil Nadu. These were the seeds of Gandhigram, she came back with her husband Dr. G Ramachandran and sowed the seeds for the Gandhigram Rural University, but also the entire Gandhigram complex. It was also then, I think, that she started looking at the public health problems of India a little bit more closely, which I will describe a little later in this Oration.

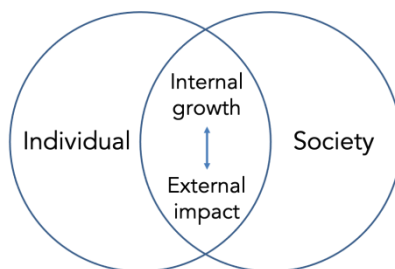
I would now like to move forward to the year 1962. It was a very important year for Dr. Soundaram; she was invited by the then Prime Minister of India, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, to come and become the Union Minister for Education and during her tenure as Minister she did two important things. I only found that out through research, where I was helped tremendously by Ms. Ramya Devaraj, who is interning at the Ashram and Dr. Suryakanti and with these materials that are available online but also in the wonderful archives of Gandhigram. I found that Dr. Soundaram wrote the policy brief and ensured that primary education would be free for the children of India. This was a tremendous legacy that she left behind. She knew education would be life transforming and she knew that the progress of India would be inseparable from the educational experience and the early educational experience of the children of India. The other thing that she did as she was already thinking of higher education was to integrate into it the spirit of service. She

knew the government could not do everything alone, so she integrated this spirit of service into what she developed and helped develop, the National Service Scheme. I was so inspired to read from the research that I received that 3.86 million young people are part of this, young Indian boys and girls are part of it. Look what happens when in the midst of your higher education you are constantly invited to reflect on the application and the application of your knowledge and leadership and expertise in the service of others. Dr.Soundaram of course was then honored by the government of India and the people of India with the Padma Bhushan. And more than the award, I think each one of us who have had a chance to hear her, see her, read her and benefit from her work honor her in our hearts with the kind of respect that she richly and rightly deserves. I would now also like to rewind to 1980.This is linked to me as much as it is linked to Gandhigram.

My father, Dr. M. Aram, became the second Vice Chancellor of the Gandhigram University. Besides the many things he did during his time in Gandhigram, he also introduced my brother Ashok and I to *paati*. As a young girl, I absorbed her and absorbed from her. I observed her and I saw that the problems of India in her mind did not stop as problems, they were always to be solved with the faith that we had the expertise but also the spirit to do so. I continue to draw from that. But let me now go to what I consider two important dimensions of her leadership, and it has relevance to the way that we can shape ourselves as leaders for the future. One is her leadership experience and the second is the public health experiments. I've already alluded to the leadership model that has roots in her personal life as well as her journey in the freedom struggle of India and post-independence in creating these models. The closest that comes to my mind to her leadership experience is this wonderful theoretical construction of 'transformational leadership' that is taught in business schools, in schools of public health, and in schools of diplomacy.



There is a space for 'idealized influence', there is an idealized influence that the person houses. But the person also draws from the work of the day - the intellectual stimulation. There is inspiration, it is not sterile knowledge alone, there is inspiration – it is alive, and then what they do is they bring it to individuals who can then become instruments of change. I think Dr. Soundaram added her own to this wonderful model of transformational leadership. She found space for the individual. Remember, she herself had a wonderful trajectory of growth and development and evolution and she found space for society collectively, but in the midst of it they were in this intersection. There was also the focus, as Mahatma Gandhi always said, of internal change - that if you did not reflect inwards and answer the question of what made you a better human being, you could never extend that to the way that you wanted to impact society. So, I'd like all of us who are together for this Oration to remember this - that there is a job to be done inside, we need to grow inside, but there is work to be done outside our comfort zones.



As I look at leadership, again I am reminded of this wonderful talisman of Mahatma Gandhi which is inscribed in the walls of Rajghat, where Gandhiji's remains still inspire us.

"I will give you a talisman. Whenever you are in doubt, or when the self becomes too much with you, apply the following test. Recall the face of the poorest and the weakest man whom you may have seen, and ask yourself, if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him. Will he gain anything by it? Will it restore him to a control over his own life and destiny? In other words, will it lead to swaraj for the hungry and spiritually starving millions?

Then you will find your doubts and yourself melt away."

I think *paati* looked at this quote every single day. Dr. Soundaram lived the day, but also her life, with purpose, and here is where I want to transition to the next part of my presentation and there is so much of it you can see alive in Gandhigram. I encourage everyone who is interested to know more about Dr. Soundaram to go and visit Gandhigram, spend a couple of days, absorb and soak in what she did there. But for this presentation, I want to speak about two things that I think are telling and are compelling presentations of her public health work. One was this whole idea of maternal and child health. Remember, it was in her nascent stage where she looked at the mother and the child together, and the second was public health modeling - creating models that the world could adapt to. We must not forget India is still home to the largest number of child marriages, girls married off before the age of 18. It was very bad in 1940, and it continues to be a statistic that should haunt our conscience in 2020.

Dr. Soundaram also knew that in addition to girls being married off before the age of 18, there was a very basic problem in Indian society - the skewed sex ratio. Normally, biology tells us for a thousand boys there should be more than a thousand girls. Various reasons like the cultural preference of the male child have contributed to the negative sex ratio. Professor Amartya Sen calls them the '*missing girls*' that India must have had in its families and in its society. Now Dr. Soundaram knew that there was this problem of the preference of the male child, and she knew that girls were marrying before 18 and so the birthing experience was very unsafe. A large number of young girls were dying at birth, so it was there that came the seeds of the Kasturba Hospital. In this hospital, Dr. Soundaram made it safer for women to have their deliveries and their new borns were taken care of, so that again another big public health problem of that time, infant mortality, neonatal mortality, childhood mortality, and the data surrounding it could be significantly changed and the models she developed could be presented. She of course knew it was not enough to work in the hospital alone. Dr. Soundaram used the socioeconomic determinants of health as her drive and went to the villages around Gandhigram to Chinnalapatti and to Chettyapatti and to Athur block and to Nadupatty and to Vedasanthoor and said "let's build good houses, let's bring water supply, let's improve education", and she was presenting in the process the model, the integrated model to India as to what could actually influence health deeply. It was in this context I remember as a 10-year-old being picked up every Sunday in her beautiful black Fiat car and being allowed the experience to observe her. And on one of those Sunday visits, she whispered into my ears, all of 10, "*Health for all*". I probably did not comprehend the full scope of it then, but today I understand it was not just an aspiration, it was an action plan that she presented to everybody. Everybody - she urged healthcare providers and experts from every field to integrate into their action plans the idea of 'health for all'.

But when I speak of health, the public health experiments must also include another problem of that day and that was the demographic problem. Remember the word, the phrase, 'population bomb' in the 70s; everybody was talking about this population bomb that would explode in India. She knew sterilization and contraceptives were not the only solutions in stabilizing population. She knew education is a far superior contraceptive and so she focused and she continued what she did as Union Minister - the focus on education. The Gandhigram Rural University, the 10,000 students today, and the many thousand students who have moved out of Gandhigram. Each of you is a recipient of that vision, each of you has the possibility of contributing to this legacy. But I must say along with this, I saw something that was so rare and so unique and so beautiful that Dr. Soundaram did. She encouraged young women to become leaders. It was not the order of the day. She created in her ecosystem thousands of young leaders and her focus on women was centered around human dignity. My mother, Mrs. Minoti Aram, was a recipient of that love and that nurture. Dr. Pankajam, who has initiated this Oration, is a recipient. Dr. Suryakanti, who helped me research for this, is a recipient.

So many of them were direct recipients of this leadership lesson and the encouragement to take leadership roles you know. I'm reminded of another leadership model which is 'leadership by the chair' and I hope every young girl who is listening to this Oration, every young woman, and every young man who is listening to this reflection this morning will remember that these lessons are not just to be learnt and analyze. These lessons are to be lived. I say this to myself all the time - let my balance sheet have innumerable number of girls who can say "I can lead, I'm confident to give my best to society" and this is where I think I come to the final part of my presentation, which is about the lessons that we can integrate into our learning but also into our life.

I think the first one is the problem-solving model. Dr.Soundaram presented the integrated rural development model as a problem-solving model and said that problems have to be analyzed but more importantly, we have to find composite solutions together so that these problems can change as we go forward. She also very beautifully linked theory and practice. Every single piece of Dr. Soundaram's work was informed by theory, but also deeply influenced by what she saw on ground. I also find in her a tremendous example of how policy and practice can be dynamically linked, and this is something for our generation to learn so that we do not see them in compartments, but we see them together so we will respect people on the front lines. The COVID-19 pandemic has seen that our theory is only as good as practice, so this conversation and dialogue with people on the front lines as well as conversations with people who can push the frontiers of knowledge is so important. Of course, Dr. Soundaram also presented to us an expanded classroom.

She presented to us the rationale behind inclusive societies, whether it was working for women, it was working for our harijan brothers and sisters, whether it was working with the elite; she knew inclusive societies would require everybody's participation. And let us not forget what she also did. She always reminded us not to accept the status quo. Critical thinking was her companion throughout life, whether it was in her personal life of marrying, remarrying, studying and leading, or it was in her professional life. These are important lessons to take. She was never afraid of working at any level. Individuals were worthy of her attention, institutions were worthy of her investment. And what she did for me personally was she brought Mahatma Gandhi alive for me. I have never seen Mahatma Gandhi, but in her work and my father's work and in their generations work, I saw Mahatma Gandhi's vision of Sarvodaya , the progress of everybody-alive, and as I work with children, I know children don't accept what you say, children accept what you live. She led by example and therefore with all of this she became the inspiration that we hold for our generation but I'm sure for generations to come. So I hope you will enjoy this multi-faceted personality, her life, her legacy, her leadership, both as something to be celebrated but something that can we can adapt into our own life and carry forward.

I have to say that preparing for this Oration I had thought of my father many times. When he was the Vice Chancellor, I saw him taking Gandhigram University to the next level, how he had done what Dr. Soundaram had done, by bringing another generation of leaders into deep service of the community around them, but also helping them grow. I also think of *appa* and see how he brought the best of the world's thinking and expertise into high quality work for the community, and he took from Gandhigram a model that was integrated into the new education policy of India. Dr. Aram, *appa* as I call him, *anna* as many of you call him, said education is meant for everybody -leaders and masters, elite, children, adults, everybody. And he meant education in the broad sense of the term, where we could understand not only science and math and language and literature but also understand that this is a shared destiny. Together we progress, and divided we fall - this was his call, this was his call always. He said a "creative person is a positive force", and I hope this Oration will stimulate you to think creatively to expand your footprint and to do what you should do so that the next generation will say it is a life well lived.

I thank Gandhigram University for this wonderful opportunity, and to all of you I have a request. Please go back and think about what you can do. Please go to Gandhigram sometime, please look at the resources that are available online, and in the libraries and archives of Gandhigram so that you may understand Dr. Soundaram and her generation better. It is an absolute honor for me to deliver this Oration and I must say I have been moved and I have been encouraged to see my life with a deeper purpose as I deliver this Oration. **Thank you very much.**