

Dr. N. Panchavarnam: An Icon of Smile Train Project in India

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Panchavarnam was born on April 22, 1946, in a middle-class family of nine in Sivagangai, a city in Tamil Nadu (►Fig. 1). He studied at a government school in Sivagangai and obtained his science degree (BSc) at Raja College, Sivagangai. His desire to study medicine was helped by his paternal uncle, who brought him to Chennai after graduation and obtained admission to Madras Medical College.

Dr. Panchavarnam completed his MBBS at Madras University and graduated in April 1973. He further did his MS (Gen Surg) at Madurai Medical College, affiliated with the Madurai Kamaraj University, in March 1987. He pursued MCh (Plastic) from Madurai Medical College, TN MGR Medical University, in September 1990.

He joined the Tamil Nadu government service following his MBBS in the Sathunavu project. He worked in Tamil Nadu Government service for 26 years, helping many poor patients with his expertise in cleft lip and palate repair. He retired as a Civil surgeon from Government Rajaji Hospital



Fig. 1 Dr. Panchavarnam (1946–2020).

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Madurai. Dr. Panchavarnam received President's appreciation for his great work in his government service from the then Honorable President of India Mr. Giani Zail Singh in New Delhi (►Fig. 2).

Dr. Panchavarnam was a dedicated teacher at Madurai Medical College and more passionate about cleft lip and palate patients. He often provided them with food and dresses for special occasions. He used to surprise some patients with presents at their house at festive events. Apart from cleft lip surgeries, he also performed hand surgeries in government and private practice.

After retirement, he joined Meenakshi Mission Hospital as a full-time consultant in 2003. He started the Smile Train project on July 1, 2003. He worked in Meenakshi Mission Hospital from 2003 to 2020 and conducted monthly camps all over Tamil Nadu and neighboring states. He has operated on 13,199 cleft lip and palate patients. He used to conduct good speech program to motivate cleft lip children once yearly.



Fig. 2 Presidential appreciation for government service from Hon. President of India Mr. Giani Zail Singh.

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Fig. 3 The Smile Train Hero Award.



Fig. 4 Appreciation from former president Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam.



Fig. 5 Life time achievement award from then TN Governor Mr. Rosaiah.



Fig. 6 Dr. Panchavarnam couple.

In 2007, the Smile Train selected Dr. Panchavarnam for the “Smile Train Hero Award” in recognition of his contribution in treating cleft children and training cleft surgeons. The

award was conferred at the 1st Annual Smile Train Hero Award Dinner, October 27, 2007, Baltimore. He received the HERO award at New York, United States, for his excellent work in cleft lip and palate cases (–**Fig. 3**). He was one among the five surgeons who were outside the United States. Dr. Panchavarnam also received appreciation from our former President Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam in 2010 for his amazing dedicated work in cleft lip and palate cases (–**Fig. 4**). He also received Lifetime Achievement award for corrective surgeries in 2013 from the then Tamil Nadu Governor Mr. Rosaiah (–**Fig. 5**).

He was a regular attendee of all APSICON and contributed actively. He also attended international conferences in Taipei, New York, Brazil, Singapore, and London. He was interested in weightlifting and gym activities in his college life. He gave much importance to fitness activities.

Mrs. Jothimani Panchavarnam, a graduate of Fathima College Madurai, was his backbone and dedicated her life to the achievements. She remained as a housewife supporting him (–**Fig. 6**). Even though he didn’t have children, he treated all cleft lip children as his children, and that passion made him do excellent and dedicated work in this field and made him an Icon (–**Fig. 7**). After his excellent service to the Tamil Nadu Government and the Smile Train project, Dr. Panchavarnam succumbed to COVID-19 infection and passed away on November 26, 2020.

Conflict of Interest
None declared.



Fig. 7 An Icon of the Smile Train.