

# LEADING

FROM THE

# FRONT

**DR SWATI PIRAMAL** is a shining example of how determination, conviction and a desire to do good for society can lead to a success like no other. By **Radhika Sathe Patwardhan**

**W**hen it comes to

[healthcare](#) and business in India, few have reached the upper echelons like Dr Swati Piramal has. The vice

chairperson of the Piramal Group, a global business conglomerate with diverse interests in pharma, financial services, real estate and glass packaging, is among those leading Indian scientists and industrialists whose contributions to innovation, new medicines and public health services have touched many lives. She spearheads many projects as the director of the Piramal Foundation, the philanthropic arm of the Piramal Group, to create innovative solutions and establish avenues that promote primary healthcare in rural India through the Health Management and Research Institute (HMRI), a mobile health service, and drives women's empowerment projects, and the transformation of India's education system across public schools to unlock the potential of the young leaders of tomorrow through the Piramal Gandhi Fellowship Programme.



**Dr Swati Piramal is a woman who gives of her talents unstintingly**



Dr Piramal began her medical philanthropy very early

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#### **EARLY BEGINNINGS**

“As a young, idealistic doctor, I wanted to help reduce the burden of disease,” Dr Piramal recalls. In 1982, moved by the plight of the children of mill workers who had migrated to the Parel area in Mumbai, she started the Gopikrishna Piramal Memorial Hospital—an ambulatory health care centre. She was still in medical college, doing her MBBS from Mumbai University. “It was a

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region then riddled with polio, a viral infection that paralysed the limbs of children, rendering them unable to walk. It was a little girl, just four years old and paralysed from the waist down, who moved me to tears and instilled a greater determination in me to do something about it,” she explains. “I got together a bunch of medical students, and, using song and street plays, we conveyed ideas on

how to prevent polio. The ambulatory care centre treated 25,000 children a year, and also made prostheses for children to be able to walk.” Mother Teresa visited the centre and appreciated her work with the suffering children. “Within a decade, the region became a no-polio zone; there was no need for our prosthetics centre. We had proved that prevention was less expensive and better than a costly cure,” she reveals.

That public health lesson was a game-changer for Dr Piramal. She went on to the Harvard School of Public Health to pursue a degree in public health. “The lessons our teachers taught us came in good use over the next few decades, as we deployed public health interventions by Piramal Healthcare and the Piramal Foundation for several diseases. Even during the [COVID-19](#) pandemic, public health principles have proved to be of great use in helping fight the battle against this deadly novel virus,” she notes.

The Piramal Foundation’s sustainable development programmes, largely in partnership with the central and state governments, have impacted over 112 million lives till date.

#### **HEALTHCARE AT THE FORE**

“In everything that we do, including our CSR projects, we try to leverage digital technologies and artificial intelligence to deploy innovative solutions in the remotest areas of India, as that’s where they are most needed and have maximum impact,” Dr Piramal informs. In this way, they were able to reduce their cost per screening of women for breast cancer to a quarter by miniaturising the equipment and with remote read-outs. They have also used telemedicine to help deliver babies safely in remote tribal areas. She notes that the COVID-19 pandemic has created an unprecedented global health crisis accompanied by a leadership and financial crisis that is compounded by inequities in >



The lockdown gave Dr Piramal some time to catch up on reading

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access to healthcare. “It is time to get our bureaucratic health care system to respond to the crisis with both speed and science,” Dr Piramal avers. “This will result in new drugs being available for treatment, faster and more sensitive testing, and affordable care in hospitals.” The need of the hour, Dr Piramal feels, is for many hands with diverse specialisations including healthcare frontliners, economists, corporates, governments, public health specialists, and engineers to work together find new innovations and technologies.

### LOCKDOWN DIARIES

Dr Piramal has worked from home through the lockdown “Pharmaceuticals being an essential service, all of our manufacturing facilities were operational globally, even during the lockdown in the early stages of the pandemic,” she notes. “I had more time to spend with my grandchildren and also to catch up on reading; I took online classes in subjects such as history, literature, or philosophy that I wouldn't have been able to do otherwise.”

### BREAKING HER OWN PATH

Dr Piramal has served as the first woman president of ASSOCHAM, India's apex chamber of commerce, the first in its history of 90 years, as well as on the Scientific Advisory Council and the Council of Trade of the Prime Minister of India. She is also the dean's advisor at Harvard Business School and the Harvard School of Public Health. She serves on the boards of several healthcare and financial services, and manufacturing and service companies, as well as on the boards of Indian and international academic institutions such as IIT Bombay, the Harvard School of Public Health, and Harvard Business School. In May 2012, she was elected to the Harvard Board of Overseers, and served on the board until 2018. Additionally, she was the commencement speaker at the Harvard School of Public Health in 1992. In these capacities, Dr Piramal has championed the cause of women leadership. Did she face any hurdles in her own journey to the top? “Yes, there were hurdles, but I gathered the power of many hands joining together. For example, if I was to make a presentation to the prime minister or to the Reserve Bank of India, I painstakingly gathered relevant information from other women bankers or economists before I spoke. I would read at least a thousand pages on a subject before I spoke on a topic like nuclear energy or defence,” she points out. “If you know your facts, it isn't easy to dismiss what you're saying. I have found that knowledge helps overcome gender bias too.”

All Dr Piramal's determination and zeal work to ensure that those in need are benefitted by the many projects she and her foundation undertakes. Her reach to the masses is testament to her success.>

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