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Kailash Satyarthi: The Saviour of Childhood

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Abstract: *It is a criminal offence to put children in awful work settings day, rejecting their right to have minimum education and snatching away their childhood. Some studies indicate that the money they make is so negligible it may not even add to the family's welfare. Many times it happens that economic condition is so bad that has forced the parents to make their children into child-labourers. The case study will focus on the role played by Kailash Satyarthi in initiating to eradicate the child labour from industries. The case will also focus on the initiatives taken by him on educating children. It will also depict what kind of characteristics he is having as a leader and as a social entrepreneur.*

Keywords: *Child Labour, Kailash Satyarthi, Human Rights.*

INTRODUCTION

Kailash Satyarthi (born 11 January 1954) is an Indian children's rights activist. He is the founder of Bachpan Bachao Andolan (lit. Save the Childhood Movement), the Kailash Satyarthi Children's Foundation, Global March against Child Labour, and Good Weave International.

Till date, Kailash Satyarthi and his team at the Bachpan Bachao Andolan have liberated more than 86,000 children in India from child labour, slavery, and trafficking. In 1998, Satyarthi led the Global March against Child Labour, 80,000 km long physical march across 103 countries to put forth a global demand for child labour. The movement became one of the largest social movements ever on behalf of exploited children. The demands of the marchers, which included children and youth, were reflected in the draft of the ILO Convention 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour. The following year, the Convention was unanimously adopted at the ILO Conference in Geneva.

Kailash Satyarthi has been a member of a UNESCO body established with the goal of providing "Education for All" and has been on the board of the Fast Track Initiative (now known as the Global Partnership for Education). Satyarthi serves on the board and committee of several international organisations including the Centre for Victims of Torture (USA), the International Labour Rights Fund (USA), and the International Cocoa Foundation.

Satyarthi was among Fortune magazine's 'World's Greatest Leaders' in 2015 and was also featured in LinkedIn's Power Profiles List in 2017. His work has been recognized through various national and international honours and awards including the Nobel Peace Prize of 2014, which he shared with Malala Yousafzai of Pakistan.

More recently, Satyarthi led a nationwide march, Bharat Yatraⁱⁿ India covering 12,000 km in 35 days, to spread awareness about child sexual abuse and trafficking.

Bachpan Bachao Andolan

Nobel Peace Prize winner Kailash Satyarthi gave up his job as an electrical engineer to dedicate himself to protecting and advancing child rights for over three decades now, freeing 80,000 child labourers and giving them new hope in life.

It is largely due to his doggedness and zeal that NGO Bachpan Bachao Andolan has emerged as by far the most prominent child rights group in the country even as 60-year-old Satyarthi rose to become a global voice for the children's cause.

He has passionately argued that child trafficking and labour perpetuate poverty, unemployment, and illiteracy and population growth.

From the factories exploiting children in the country's biggest cities like Delhi and Mumbai to the hinterland of Odisha and Jharkhand where children are still illegally employed as bonded labourers, his organisation has rescued them in almost all parts of the country.

He has advocated for stricter laws against child trafficking and labour and met with mixed success so far.

While growing up, Satyarthi has said he was concerned about the plight of child labourers around him and it finally prompted him to start an organised movement.

His early attempts to raid factories employing child labourers met with hostile reaction from the factory owners and at times the police but the significance of his work was slowly recognised.

He also played an important role in the movement for Right to Education law for free compulsory education to children.

Several prestigious awards have been conferred on him, including Defenders of Democracy Award (2009-US), Medal of the Italian Senate (2007-Italy), Robert F Kennedy International Human Rights Award (USA) and Fredric Ebert International Human Rights Award (Germany) etc.

He created the Global March against Child Labour, a movement that is active in many countries. He is also credited with establishing Rugmark, now known as Good Weave, in 1994.

It is a kind of social certification for child labour free carpets in South Asia.

Satyarthi has been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize many times in the past for his relentless crusade for defending child rights.

Satyarthi is the first India-born person to have been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize and the seventh Indian Nobel laureate. Mother Teresa, who was born in Albania, was the first Indian Nobel peace prize winner. She was honoured in 1979.

Reason behind Child Labour

Child labour makes up one quarter of the unskilled labour force in the organized and unorganized sectors of South Asia. It is established that South Asia has more than 80 million children in servitude, 20 million of whom are in "chronic bondage." Of India's 140 million working children, 55 million are in servitude and 10 million are bonded slaves to their employers.

Economic pressures force families to sell their children into servitude. Every year, millions of children are sold against petty loans taken by their parents or work as contributing members of entire families in bondage. This labour pool is cheap and inexhaustible because of a high birth rate, an education system that does not reach the economically depressed, rural indebtedness and severe poverty. As they join the ranks of debt slaves, bonded children compete with adults—often their own parents—for whatever jobs are available. Their wages are slashed to a quarter of the adult wages for the same work or they are paid "maintenance" in the form of food and "training." In many areas, the surplus of cheap child labour has depressed the already inadequate adult wages.

Children born or sold into chronic bondage work in conditions that do not allow for release. In the event of the death of parents, the task of paying off the loans falls to the child. The complicity of employers, middlemen and moneylenders ensnare the child in a vicious cycle of loan repayment.

That will ordinarily never release him from debt. Such children work twelve to sixteen hours a day and are beyond the reach of their families' care. They are malnourished and abused physically for perceived "errors" such as slouching on the workbench or taking their eyes off their work. Child abuse increases as the workforce of bonded children grow.

In many ways, bonded child labour perpetuates traditional hierarchies of power. Children continue to be employed in jobs that are concomitant with the caste occupations traditionally ascribed to their communities. For example, children from the "unclean" caste groups are employed as rag pickers, scavengers, and sweepers while children from families of landless labourers are sold to owners of agricultural plots.

Employing bonded child labour is a quick way for the owners of thousands of agricultural and unorganized manufacturing units across the country to boost their profit margins and ensure a docile and dependent workforce. The system of bonded child labour is sustained by an assortment of criminal alliances between semi-feudal employers, power brokers, local criminals and middlemen or contractors who recruit, maintain and control the network of children in servitude. These alliances operate in complicity with corrupt local administrations and law enforcement agencies to deceive prohibitive legal instruments like the Child Labour Acts and the factory acts that prohibit employment of children in a factory or hazardous industry. For example, no employer has yet been punished for violation of the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act of 1986 that identifies the carpet industry as a hazardous industry. A common tactic for employers of child labour is to pose as relatives of children and shield their enterprise by calling it a family trade.

Often, help for a child comes too late. As nongovernmental organizations and certain government bodies and officials mobilize to eliminate child labour, the time between identification and release of the child debt slave allows for enough time to browbeat a child back to the only kind of life with which he or she is familiar.

How Kailash Satyarthi transformed a bonded child labourer's life

The story of Singh, a diminutive, unassuming man with a ready smile, is closely intertwined with the story of Satyarthi and his organisation. When he was rescued, Singh was seven and like hundreds of others, he worked as a Bandhua Mazdoor, or bonded labourer, in the stone quarries of Faridabad in Haryana, just on the outskirts of Delhi. Today, he is the treasurer of the organisation, responsible for its annual budget of around Rs. 3.5 crores. He is the man signing the cheques and handling the staff.

Salaries and field expenses of an organisation that has 11 state offices and over 80,000 volunteers across India. Life, he says, could have taken a very different course had it not been for Satyarthi. Singh belongs to Bodi, a tiny hamlet near Harpalpur town in Madhya Pradesh. He came to Delhi as a two-year-old with his parents in 1975 when a severe hailstorm destroyed the wheat crop grown on their small farm of less than an acre. They had barely landed at the Nizamuddin railway station in Delhi when they were spotted by an agent of a stone quarry contractor who took them to Faridabad.

“The contractor gave my father about Rs 3,000 as advance wages -- and we were trapped,” recalls Singh. The couple would be paid Rs 150-200 for a week’s labour, which included breaking the stones and loading them on trucks. As he turned five, Singh too became a hand at the quarry, trying to break stones with a hammer in his tiny hands and filling them in baskets. From 7 in the morning to 10 at night, they worked. Food breaks were erratic and depended on the mood of the master. “Mostly, once you entered the quarry, that’s where you stayed through the day,” says Singh. Like the rest of the bonded labourers, they lived in a shack near the quarry and ate at a food shack nearby run by the contractor. The cost of the meal would be promptly added to the family’s debt account which kept swelling. Though a doctor was stationed at the quarry in case a labourer fell ill, the cost of the treatment would also be put down against the person’s name.

“They didn’t bother much if children fell ill like I did, because their absence did not affect business,” says Singh. There was no communication with the world outside. They had landed in a black hole from where there seemed no escape. Around this time, they met Satyarthi, who had started rallying the bonded labourers and telling them about their rights. “He would come from Jantar Mantar by bus, travelling 30 km, with a team of 8-10 people in the dead of night.

Slowly, the workers got organised. They started rebelling against their oppressors. “In 1980, Kailashji formed the Stone Quarry Workers’ Union. Over 20,000 labourers joined. The contractors fought back violently. A few workers, like Shaheed Dhoomdas -- that’s how we remember him -- were killed.” Finally, the Supreme Court intervened. “And in a night-long operation, led by Kailashji and assisted by the police, we were all rescued.” By now, Singh had two younger brothers, both born at the quarry without any medical aid. But returning to the village wasn’t an option for the family. There was nothing to go back to. They stayed on and continued to work at the quarry, now taken over by the government. The old contractors were removed, though the munshis remained. “We weren’t scared any longer. If there was trouble, we could approach the police. If the police didn’t help, Kailashji would.” The document with the record of their debt to the contractor was invalidated. “I don’t know where that paper is anymore. And it doesn’t matter,” says Singh. Satyarthi convinced Singh’s parents to put him in school and got him admitted to Gurukul Indraprastha, half a kilometre from where he lived. “For the first time in my life, I was going to school,” he recalls.

Bharat Yatra

Terming Kailash Satyarthi’s Bharat Yatra, a big step towards providing a safe environment for children in the nation, President Ram Nath Kovind said that it is the duty of every person in the country to provide kids the opportunity and experience of being citizens of a better India. Addressing the closing ceremony of the Yatra, organised by Satyarthi’s foundation for children, at the Rashtrapati Bhavan, the President said he believed that even if one child is unsafe, all society is guilty. ‘Therefore, the Yatra for a ‘Surakshit Bachpan-Surakshit Bharat’ is a big step towards providing a safe environment for children in our nation. It is the duty of every person in the country to connect with the objectives of this Yatra and provide our children the opportunity and experience of being citizens of a better India,’ he said. The President said that though there are policies and laws to ensure the rights of children in the country, these rights can only be ensured through the awareness and sensitivity of the entire society. ‘Millions of people, from south to north, have been made aware of this issue through this Bharat Yatra,’ he said. The President said the country must come together to ensure that every child receives education and achieves his or her full potential with freedom and dignity while being healthy and secure. ‘Mr. Kailash Satyarthi’s Foundation is always striving to achieve these objectives,’ he said. He appreciated the Foundation and all those associated with it. He hoped that the people of the country together would build an India where there would be no scope for sexual abuse and human trafficking of children. The President said that Mr. Satyarthi has been contributing towards the cause of human rights of children for almost 40 years. He said he had been made aware that more than 85,000 children have been rescued from atrocities by the efforts of Mr. Satyarthi. They have received educational opportunities and have been helped to start their lives afresh. Appreciating the cause taken up by the Nobel laureate, President Ram Nath Kovind said, ‘It’s an important issue which wasn’t touched so far. The campaign would create a new history and I am of the view these 300 marchers would be the real architect of our nation.’ He also said India is going to celebrate its 75th Independence in 2022 and “I urged Satyarthi to prepare a roadmap for next five years for its complete eradication.” Speaking on the occasion, the Nobel Prize Laureate said the Bharat Yatra for ‘Surakshit Bachpan-Surakshiti Bharat’ was a non-violent war on sexual abuse, rape, and trafficking of children. He said that the voices of children cannot be silent any more. On Diwali this year, he urged all to light a lamp in the name of protection of children.

Stating that the voices of children cannot be silenced now, he called for a boycott of the predators from the society. He also urged for a strong legal deterrent, appropriate allocation of resources and preventive measures to stop such kind of abuse and trafficking. Meanwhile, Mr. Satyarthi also proposed to set up a high-level national children tribunal in the country. Besides, also demanded establishing an exclusive court for child abuse and trafficking in every district of the country. On the occasion, the President also lit a symbolic Diya – ‘Bal Suraksha Jyoti’. A photo exhibition was hosted at the venue and a short film that provided a glimpse of the Bharat Yatra was also screened. In this Yatra, Mr. Satyarthi visited 22 states in 35 days with 300 marchers and garnered support from all sections of the society.

Roads Ahead

Although child labour declined substantially in many places, almost 60% of child labourers are still engaged in agriculture sector which is generally neglected. Child trafficking is a concern till date 11.5 million Children predominantly girls across the world are engaged as child domestic labourers. Although most countries have their own laws to combat and criminalise the worst forms of child labour and also the legal provisions that guarantee education, legislations regarding slavery and trafficking are not enforced and implemented properly. Governments along with society members need to take initiative to implement those laws properly. Despite the fact that Kailash Satyarthi has contributed immensely to reduce child labour, it is time for all of us to think what lies ahead of us. We need to find a way of making sure that employers, governments and ultimately the consumers of the products, created by child labour, take all possible means to reduce/eradicate child labour. Let us not forget that child labour appeared and continues to exist for some reasons: extreme poverty, lack of social security, human greed to make more money, the human need to buy cheap goods and saving money etc. Until and unless, all of the above parties undertake concerted action, the road ahead will be long and hard. Governments of exporting countries must eradicate poverty so that parents of these children do not have to use their loved ones and send them to harm their life in this manner. There must be social assistance to parents and their children to have at least the basic necessities. Manufactures in exporting countries show some social responsibility and be pro-active in devising HR policies and practices that are family focused and prohibitive of any children employment. Businesses in importing countries must make sure that they are not directly or indirectly involved in the employment of children, and workplace practices that promote profit over propriety. Consumers in Western countries must reduce their appetite to buy cheap and promoting products that are made by unethical employment practices. Kailash plans to extend the labelling program to other products such as soccer balls, another popular product that is commonly made by children. Kailash says "If not now, then when? If not you, then who? If we are able to answer these fundamental questions, then perhaps we can wipe away the blot of human slavery."

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