

THE HINDU  
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SHOWCASE 15

TABLE FOR TWO

## Making a difference

Over an austere meal, Nobel laureate Kailash Satyarthi talks about his commitment, campaigns and culinary skills

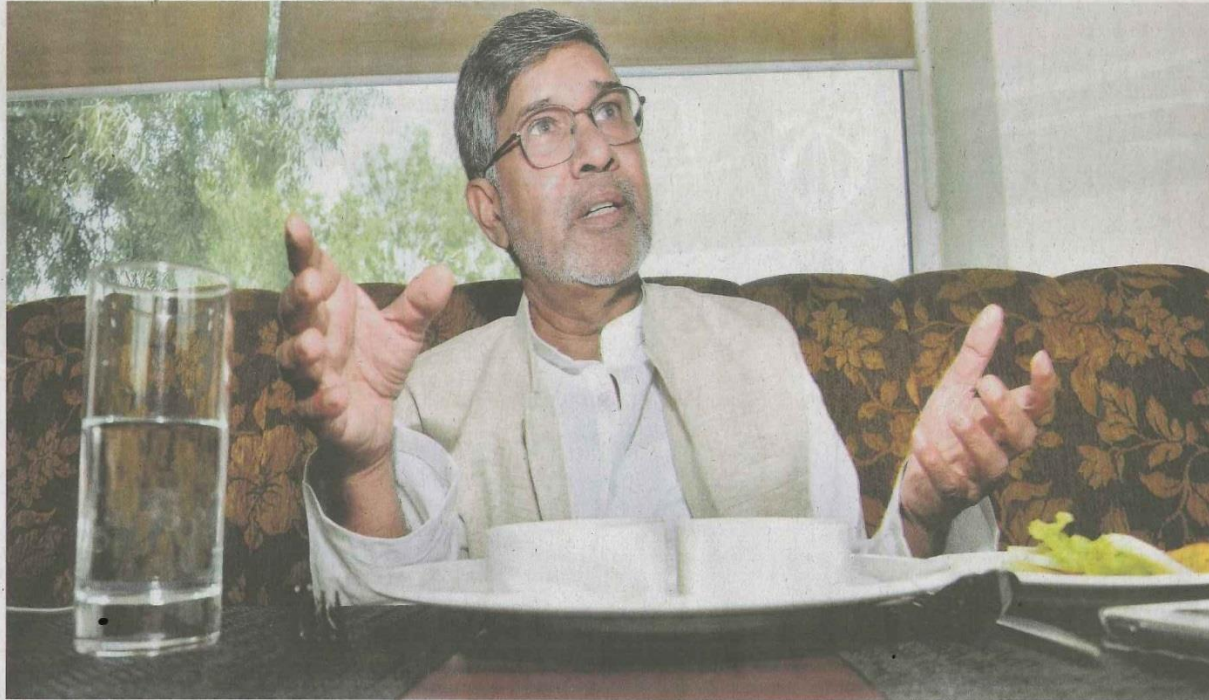
ANUJ KUMAR

In Kailash Satyarthi's profile, his fondness for cooking appears just as a footnote. However, during the course of our conversation over a traditional vegetarian lunch at New Delhi's Mantra Amaltas hotel, one discovers that the Nobel laureate's culinary skills played an important role in shaping him as a compassionate social activist. "When I was 14-15, I realised that many of my friends dropped out of school because they could not afford to pay fees and buy books. My home town Vidisha in Madhya Pradesh holds a big fair around Ramleela which lasts for three-four weeks. With the help of some of my friends, I decided to put a tea stall with the idea that whatever we earn, we would distribute among needy children. As I didn't want any charity, I wanted my food to be competitive with other stalls. First we learnt to make tea better than the neighbouring tea stall. As he used to sell samosas as well, our tea and papad were not attracting enough crowd. So I learnt making samosas but it were pakodas that I really mastered. I could make 60-70 varieties of them."

Simultaneously, he took up another venture. After the session got over, he borrowed a cart out of his pocket money and with one of his friends took it to his colony. "Standing atop the thela, at the top of my voice, I started congratulating parents for the success of their kids, and when they came out, I requested them to donate the books of their wards so that they could be distributed among needy children. The appeal worked as more than 2,000 books were collected in one day. As I was too young to understand trigonometry and anatomy, I took the books to my teacher who not only helped me in segregating them but also took me to the principal. The idea was soon formalised and a book bank was created."

### Rational argument

His entrepreneurial skills make one believe that apart from an empathetic heart, social service also demands a certain skill set. "I am not the one who believes in charity or empathy. I believe in



Glass is half-full: Kailash Satyarthi at New Delhi's Mantra Amaltas hotel • SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

compassion. Empathy is good for society for understanding the suffering of people but compassion drives you to solve that suffering." Satyarthi says it is here that his engineering background helped in putting together a rational argument based on knowledge, data and analysis against child labour and slavery. "When I started, nobody acknowledged that it is a serious problem. It was taken as part of life. Today, nobody can ignore it."

As the focus shifts to paneer bhurji, Satyarthi recalls he learnt making paranthas from his wife and engineered different variants

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of paneer. Having grown up in Vidisha, India's wheat basket, Satyarthi loves his chapatis. Here he starts with missi roti and dips it in dal tadka. "I often cooked food in bulk for children at our centres for rescued kids. Now the frequency has come down but I still love to experiment. I mix paneer with okra and brinjal which is usually not done." However, it doesn't mean that he heads the kitchen at home. "My wife would never say that I am a good cook because I have learnt from her but my kids always say that I cook better than her," he gushes. Satyarthi's life has changed after Nobel Prize in the sense that he doesn't have to underline his vegetarian preferences any more. "Now people ask for my dietary schedule before hand. "Recently, I was the guest of Sharjah's king and the queen asked me and my wife to name any vegetarian dish that we would like to have, and she would get it prepared, but I didn't know much beyond my dal roti," laughs Satyarthi.

### Direct parallel

Countering the excuses given to perpetuate child labour, Satyarthi says, "Around 168 million children are in full time jobs while on the other hand 210 million adults are jobless. Studies conducted in different countries have established that there is a direct parallel between child employment and adult joblessness. If we have so many jobs, why can't these jobs be given to able bodied adults. In India, unemployed parents' children find jobs. They are employed because they are the cheapest source of labour and they are not going to form unions. If you continue to allow child labour, poverty will continue," he insists and adds that it leads to economic corruption. "All the money that is created out of child labour and trafficking, is black money. A child earns around ₹30 to 40 a day which is way below ₹120, the average floor wage. The minimum legal wage, which the companies show on paper, is

even higher. It shows child labour fuels corruption, and crime and exploitation go hand in hand."

For all his work and popularity, it is strange that Satyarthi was never considered for any Padma award. Satyarthi says every time he rescues a child, he frees his soul and that is his award. "In parts of U.P. and Bihar, parents of rescued kids have put my letters and newspaper clippings in their place of worship. I often say: watan ki ret mujhe airiyan ragadne de, mujhe yakin hai paani yahi se niklega. (let me rub my feet on the sands of my motherland; I know the spring lies somewhere beneath.)" Satyarthi remembers how the then President Pranab Mukherjee was surprised when he offered to give away his Nobel Prize to the nation. "He said there was no precedent. When I insisted that it belonged to the nation, I was called by his office to check whether I was serious. When I was offering it to him, he got emotional and I cited a verse of Kabir: 'Mera mujh

mein kuch nahi, jo kachu hai so toh; Tera tujhko saupate, kya lagat hai mohi' (Nothing mine belongs to me, all that is yours; To give all that to you, what's there for my remorse?)"

Satyarthi finds the argument that he is weaning children away from learning traditional skills funny. "I had to face tremendous opposition, including violent reaction, when I took the children out of carpet, firecracker and bangle factories. I was surprised that most of the children employed in these factories were not from families who were into it for generations. They were trafficked from villages of Bihar and Nepal."

"And if you want them to learn only traditional crafts and skills," he continues, "you are setting double standards in society where the children of poor have no window to proper education. You can learn traditional skill after 15 but it should not be at the cost of education. It is guaranteed by our Constitution." Satyarthi says he has been to 140 odd coun-

tries and in most places he faced a common argument. "Everybody says that it is part of their reality or tradition and that I should not come in the way. For how long we are going to continue exploiting our children in the name of so called reality. All we need is 22 billion dollars of additional investment to ensure education for all children. This is just 4.5 days of total global military expenditure. The point is our children are not our priority, yet," he laments.

### New campaign

These days Satyarthi is busy meeting people from different walks of life to generate consensus on his campaign against child sexual abuse. "According to a National Crime Record Bureau report, two children are sexually abused every hour in India. There is a rise in the sexual abuse of boys as well. In 70 percent of cases, the perpetrator is either a relative or is known to the victim. So we are launching a campaign called Safe Childhood, Safe India. Apart from creating awareness, we are asking the government and the Parliament to draft a specific law on human trafficking and an act like POCSO (The Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act), which is good in terms of justice delivery and child protection, should be properly implemented."

It has been three years since he won the Nobel Peace Prize with Malala Yousafzai, and Satyarthi says he is working towards creating more Satyarthis. He introduces us to his aide Govind, whom he rescued from Nepal in the 90s. "Govind is now an important part of the new campaign."

Meanwhile, Malala has moved on to study at the Oxford. Satyarthi says she is like his daughter. "More than me, my wife is in touch with her." As he rushes for his next appointment, he acknowledges his wife Sumedha's role in keeping him going. From her kadhi and kheer to her active support in rescue operations, he remembers everything. "Without her support, it would not have been possible," Satyarthi signs off with the hope that in kitchen he will soon graduate from kala jamun to rasogulla.