



Institute of Social Sciences

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Democracy Lecture Series

by Shri Kailash Satyarthi

“SAVE CHILDHOOD, SAVE DEMOCRACY”

21 August 2015

Child rights activist and Nobel Peace Laureate Kailash Satyarthi delivered the third lecture in the Democracy lecture series initiated by Nirman Foundation, on 21st August, 2015 at the Institute of Social Sciences, Abdul Nazir Sab Hall, New Delhi. The session was presided over by Lord Bhikhu Parekh, Fellow, British Academy, and Labour Member of the House of Lords, U.K.

A human rights activist since his youth, Kailash Satyarthi is the founder of Bachpan Bachao Andolan (Save Childhood Movement) in India. In the 1980s, he left a comfortable career in electrical engineering to work for the rights of children, particularly those from poor homes who work as child labourers in India and elsewhere and those who suffer unspeakable oppression in war zones around the world. He began his lecture with graphic descriptions of the situation such children face. In one West Asian country, for example, over 4000 girls had reportedly been taken hostage, subjected to sexual abuse and resold for less than the price of a packet of cigarettes. In another country, small boys who were given guns and told to shoot were buried alive if they couldn't do it. In Africa, children working in cocoa bean production had no idea what they were processing or what chocolate, the delicious and lucrative end product, was. In India, in several cities, he had met children who had been forced into jobs like stitching footballs – for World Cup tournaments - embroidering bridal costumes and accessories for the rich, without access to first aid, medical treatment or schooling



Mr. Kailash Satyarthi delivering the Nirman Foundation Lecture

while companies and retailers selling their products make huge profits. Child workers were preferred as a cheap source of labour that can be coerced to work overtime, kept under control and even be sexually exploited.

It was ironical to note, he said, that around 168 million children in the world are victims of the child labour trade while 200 million adults in the world are jobless. Thus the extent of child labour parallels youth unemployment in the developing world. “Can we speak about inclusive development, good governance and freedom of expression in a state where children are denied their childhood?” Satyarthi asked. “Are we really ‘civilized’, ‘cultured’, or ‘truly religious’, if we can see this state of affairs and not become angry about it? Without anger, we cannot bring about change in the lives of people in this country. If children are denied education and their rightful freedom, there is little point in priding ourselves on being the world’s largest democracy, having regular elections, the ability to change our governments and access to courts of law.” Subjected to social ostracism in his community and police high-handedness for his work in rescuing child labourers, Satyarthi had learnt from early experience that the power of anger could be converted into a positive force to change the world for the good, and specially to help those children who labour and have no voice. He stated that he had started seeing things afresh from the lens of the eyes of the labouring children and socially marginalised people he had met around the world.

Our society should be educated, empowered and united to identify the victims of social inequality and injustice, raise our voices and take judicious action to help tackle the problem. Credited with having rescued over 83,000 child labourers in India, Shri Satyarthi described the practical problems he had faced in freeing them – the multiple agencies in national governments and multilateral bodies hamper rescue missions and prevent the formulation of clear and comprehensive policies for child development and child protection. For rehabilitation of rescued child workers in India, one has



Section of the Audience

