

India: Satyarthi's Nobel is a cheer - and a warning

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The award of the Nobel Peace prize to Kailash Satyarthi and Malala Yousafzai has been widely welcomed in India. This is doubtless positive for the cause of children's rights. But it's also a comment on how the world looks at the social reality of an India that struts about as an "emerging power" but tolerates large-scale abuse and merciless exploitation of children. Satyarthi got the prize partly for the same reason why Slumdog Millionaire was a hit in the West.

Satyarthi's Bachpan Bachao Andolan has done commendable work in rescuing 80,000 child labourers from bondage since 1980. True, this is a drop in the ocean in relation to the number of Indian children at work, estimated by UNICEF at a horrifying 12 per cent of our entire child population. The number is minuscule even in relation to the 2011 census estimate of 5-14-group working children (4.35 million), itself dubious because it represents a steep fall, against all observation and intuition, from the 2001 figure (12.67 million). But 80,000 isn't a trivial number even by Indian standards, considering what's at stake, or in relation to, say, our success in reducing human trafficking.

Satyarthi has attracted criticism, not all of it unfairly, for inflating/double-counting the number of rescued children, exaggerating the harshness of their working conditions, passing off regular schoolchildren as child carpet-weavers, relying on sympathetic officials and judges dealing with child-labour regulations to claim easy victories, and for being led by Western NGOs in the "Rugmark" initiative for carpet exports, which seemingly ran out of steam long ago. He has also been accused of intolerance towards critics and subordinates.

However valid, these charges pale beside two fundamental criticisms. First, the BBA's work only tinkers at the margins of the whole complex of social pathologies and economic conditions that sustain child labour. It doesn't try to integrate that necessary but limited agenda into, or even acknowledge the need for, a radical reform or transformation of the social system which alone can produce a lasting solution.

Second, perhaps a majority of rescued children aren't truly rehabilitated and soon regress back into bondage because of various compulsions. Poverty isn't the regression's sole cause. Lack of access to schools, uncongenial classroom conditions, caste prejudice, gender discrimination and insecurity, and absence of vocational training, also play a major role. The non-poverty factors are better understood now that the flaws in the Right to Education Act are coming to light.

But an overarching condition for the persistence of child labour, and the decades-long failure of official/NGO efforts to abolish it, lies in the mindset of the Indian elite. For the elite, child labour is like ether in medieval metaphysics: it's present everywhere, including in their own homes; but it's never noticed. The elite has largely inured itself to child labour not just because most working children are poor, but because it fundamentally rejects the concept of the universal rights of the

child, and the obligation of the State and society to provide education, care, safety and space for play to all children regardless of class/caste/gender.

India thus fails an elementary litmus-test of a civilised state. It continues to deprive millions of its children of literacy, which sociologist Daniel Lerner termed in 1958 as “the basic personal skill that underlies the whole modernising sequence.” Indian society thus condemns them to a perpetual existence that’s incompatible with developing their basic human potential. If Satyarthi’s Nobel helps some in the elite to comprehend this crime’s terrifying magnitude, it will have served a purpose.

Praful Bidwai

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http://epaper.dnaindia.com/story.aspx?edorsup=Sup&ed_code=820009&ed_page=12&boxid=19778&id=71903&ed_date=10/16/2014

The author is a writer and columnist based in Delhi