

# "Let us respect our children"

On June 1, Indian Nobel Peace Laureate and child rights activist, Kailash Satyarthi sat down for an exclusive interview with Mahfuz Anam, Editor of The Daily Star. Kailash Satyarthi talked about everything from how he gave up his career as an electrical engineer and became a child rights activist, to how to treat the deprived children as our own. Here is a condensed version of the interview that was aired on Channel i on June 3.

What are the main challenges facing the world in terms of elimination of child labour and establishing of child rights?

The biggest challenges include the lack of adequate political will. 168 million children are still languishing in various forms of child labour. And out of them 85 million are trapped into slavery, prostitution, working in hazardous conditions -- what we legally call the worst forms of child labour.

Another challenge is the dualistic mindset of the people. When we consider our biological children we think that they are born to become doctors, engineers, and professors—the whole world is for them. But when we talk about other children, we think, ok, they are poor children, let them work, we will slowly help them.

Let us consider all children our children.

Is it possible?

Why not? When I started my fight against child slavery and child labour in India, expanding into South Asia and then the world, it was a non-issue. Most people did not find anything wrong with child labour. But I kept on pushing against it in my surroundings. It was not easy. I had to establish that child labour is the killing of childhood and it is unacceptable. It is the destruction of humanity. Slowly, the media, the judiciary, governments and common people—not only in my country but in other countries—started listening.

We demanded that the world should know how many children are working as child labourers and child slaves. There was no data available until some 20 years ago. We came to know that almost 260 million children were working in child labour. Now the number has gone down to 168 million. Similarly, the number of out-of-school children had reached almost 230 million. Now that number is down to half. So things have changed. I am confident that things will change much

faster now than ever before.

What transformed you from an electrical engineer to a child rights activist? Was there any particular moment in your life that brought it all together?

The seed was sown on the very first day of my schooling. I saw a boy my age, five and a half years old, sitting outside the school. He was a cobbler. I asked the teacher: Why is this boy sitting outside while we are all in? My teacher said, "Just sit down. Make new friends. Be familiar with the school."



Kailash Satyarthi

Everyone tried to convince me that it is common practice for poor children to work. One day I gathered all my courage and went straight up to the father of this child. I said, "Why don't you send your child to school?" He said, "We people are born to work." That was unacceptable to me. And it is still unacceptable to me.

I am also very thankful to Bangladeshi children, some of whom have marched with me across the world.

Please tell us a little bit about this march.

I formed the South Asian coalition

against child servitude in 1989. And then I realised it's a global problem. I was influenced by Mahatma Gandhi's way and other social movements in the world. I decided to organise a long march. Three marches began simultaneously— from Sao Paulo, Cape Town and Manila. All these marches had groups of children from different countries including Bangladesh. In six months we covered 80,000 kilometres on road across 103 countries. The children said, "We don't want tools and guns in our hands, we want books and toys." It became a



worldwide movement, resulting in the formation of a new international convention known as the ILO Convention on Worst Forms of Child Labour. Six Bangladeshi boys and girls marched with me. They are like my children. They came to meet me a few minutes ago. They have become parents now.

Do you think there is a change in the political will of governments as a result of these movements?

Politicians realise that it is a popular demand from the masses. Now most countries have laws against child labour. And in many countries the laws

are being implemented. It has changed the attitude of the society as a whole. Corporate environment has also changed quite a bit. They have realised that consumers are much more aware now. They demand child labour-free goods. That has helped generate some pressure on the entire corporate world to find solutions to the problem.

You demand that governments must make child-friendly policies. Could you give us some examples of child-friendly policies?

Well, we make our policies, even the budgetary allocations, considering our voters only. That's short-time planning. But when we bring the issues of children at the centre stage, it becomes long-term thinking. In politics many of us plan for the next one year or five years. Let us sit and plan for the next 50 years. Investment in children is the beginning. We have to be their friends. Friendliness means mutual respect. Charity is not friendship. Let us build partnership as friends and bring about changes in the lives of these children.

How do you convince parents in poor families that it is better to send children to school rather than make them earn money for their families, which they perhaps need very much?

It's difficult. But if the choice is good quality, free education, if the choice is some incentives in education, some social security measures in education and around, then they would definitely love to send their children to school—and it happens. Also examples or role models are important.

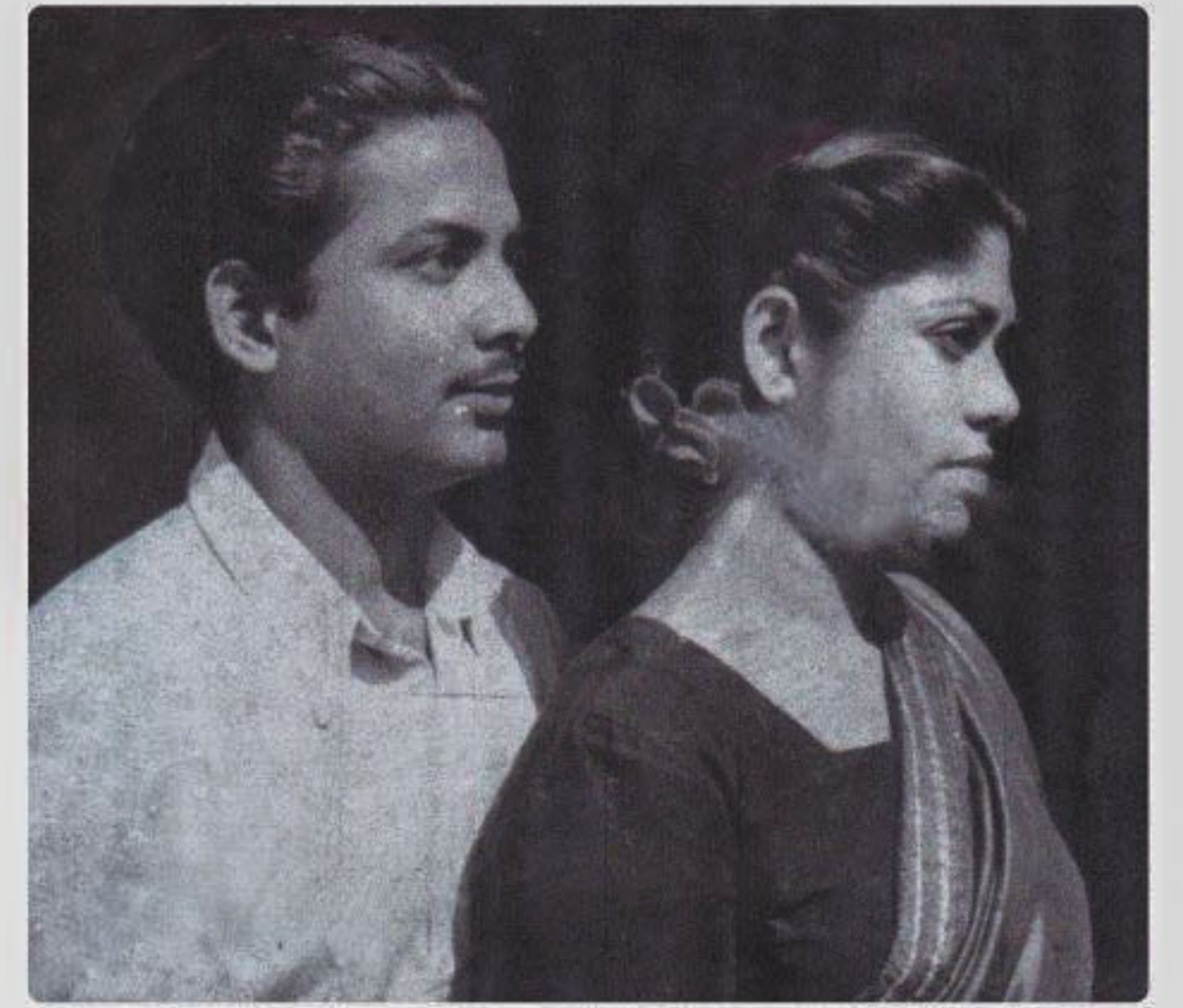
On behalf of all children of Bangladesh, we thank you. You have been a great friend to Bangladesh and we urge you to continue to be so.

It's my pleasure and honour. You already have a Peace Laureate, Muhammad Yunus. Now consider me another Laureate for your country because I feel that Bangladesh is not just a next door neighbour, I belong here.

—Amitava Kar

## OBITUARY A Selfless Comrade

### Mirza Abdus Samad



M A Samad and Laila Samad

TARIQ ALI

IN the later years of his life he would slowly walk with the aid of his walking stick from one table to another in his restaurant every evening and personally enquire of his clientele about the quality of food and service. Asked why he was taking the effort of limping from one table to the next, he would say, "service before self". This was Mirza A Samad, born in an illustrious family in Jalpaiguri in 1927.

He was one of the most self-effacing persons to walk in the political corridors of the country. Yet he was one of the most determined soldiers in the difficult terrain that the East Pakistan Communist Party would have to traverse in those dark days of early Pakistan, where the government derided any communist as an atheist, and not welcome in the pure Islamic land of Pakistan. His affiliations with the Communist Party began in his early years, and as a leader of the Students' Federation he soon began to be noticed in the party circles. He was one of the youngest members to have obtained a party ticket, while still in his twenties. He would proudly say the he got the party ticket at around the same time as the illustrious Jyoti Basu.

He moved from India to East Pakistan after 1947 with the party's blessings and was inducted into the party high office. He chose to stay away from the brightly illuminated rostrum and work quietly submerging himself in motivational activities. This is how he was instrumental in sowing the seeds of self-determination and secularism in the minds of the Bengali people, almost from the moment the country came into existence. He played a decisive role in guiding the Language Movement of 1952 and pushed forward, wave after wave of cultural activism that shook the very foundations of the religious state, in the wake of the Language Movement. He married Laila Samad, the eminent writer and journalist of her time during this period.

In 1954, the Communist Party, although not officially banned, was operating virtually clandestinely because of police repression. As a high official of the East Pakistan Provincial Communist Party, Mirza Samad played a dramatic role in shaping the political course of this country. The C.P. helped forge a coalition of Awami Muslim League, Khelafat Party, underground Communist Party and other smaller parties, into what would later be known as the Jukto-Front, an electoral alliance that would shake the very foundations of this still-born state. Although A.K. Fazlul Haque was not initially in favour of joining this coalition, Mr. Samad led a *gherao* of Mr. Fazlul Haque's residence at K M Das Lane and ultimately persuaded him to join the electoral coalition against the Muslim League. Mr. F Huq had insisted on taking on board the Nejame Islam Party as well. However, the Nejame Islamists insisted on excluding a "godless" party like the Communist Party from the coalition. The Communist Party yielded, in order to make this coalition a reality and the Awami Muslim League (it had not yet shed its Muslim name) agreed to withdraw four of their candidates and let the communists contest in these seats.

The result was a resounding victory for the Jukto-Front against the E P Muslim League in 1954. It was actually Mr. Samad's decision to *gherao* Mr. Fazlul Huq and his negotiating skills that enabled the forging of this coalition, which permanently broke the back of the Muslim League in East Pakistan and laid the philosophical base for the ultimate separation of the country. Without being disrespectful, Mr Fazlul Huq, in seeking a greater role for his party had vacillated a bit, but his later predominance in East Pakistani politics can be attributed in a way to this *gherao*, engineered by Mr. Samad.

After the Jukto-Front victory, the Communist Party workers were still hounded, albeit in a softer manner. As one of its most dedicated and active workers, Mr. Samad was able to set the party on a course that could have taken the leftist movement very far. But this was Pakistan, and after the Ayubian Coup of 1958, repression of the party was intensified with renewed vigour. In a way, he also chose to take a back-seat in the party because of the apprehension that the careers of his relations, many of whom were highly placed in the government, may suffer. By that time however, the rights of the Bengali nation were being articulated by millions of voices and both Ayub and Yahya Khan got swept away by the tide for the rights to democracy and secularism that the Bengali nation was seeking under the able leadership of the young Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Bangladesh was created.

Mr. Samad briefly took control of the NAP after the Liberation, but after a road accident he began to feel that age was gnawing away at his spirits and decided to make way for younger people to lead the party. He was still very much the silent worker that he always had been and after the brutal killing of Bangabandhu in 1975, many meetings of the left parties were held in his home to determine the party's course of action.

This was Mirza Abdus Samad – a silent self-effacing worker—like a true communist, who left us unsung last Thursday morning.

The writer is an activist, a trustee of the Liberation War Museum and a member of Bangladesh Mukti Sangrami Shilpi Shangstha.

## PAID BY THE PUBLIC for the good of the public



AASHA MEHREEN AMIN

NO STRINGS ATTACHED

THEY say they are going to be giving international awards for the country that has sent the most public officials abroad.

Bangladesh seems to be a tough contender in the race with more foreign trips by officials than any taxpayer can imagine. In fact, the way things are going, there is a good chance we may actually win.

The latest findings by a diligent fact finder of this paper, hoping to gain brownie points for the race, contain some amazing revelations. Ministers and Secretaries have been touring the world to solve the MRP (Machine Readable Passport, for goodness sake people you should know this by now, especially since most of you who don't have one, may never will) crisis. In case you are not aware of what the crisis is, basically IRIS (no not ISIS, God forbid) failed to change the passports of 30 lakh Bangladeshi expatriates to MRPs. This means that all these Bangladeshis working in foreign countries who still have the old passports, may lose their jobs and be forced to

come back home.

Obviously something needed to be done and like Superman (sans the figure hugging suit of course) our Men in Black flew off to various destinations. Oh but wait, where did they go? Not to Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Malaysia, where most of our countrymen are anxiously waiting for those MRPs that will make or break their future? No it was the Northern Hemisphere that they chose to fly to – perhaps they were on a 'secret' mission justifying the detour that we ordinary folks will not be able to understand. Perhaps it was the nice European or North American summer that compelled them to change course – *no no, don't indulge in such gossip*. Anyway, one of our great men in office decided he had to personally deliver 18 passports to expats in Germany through a 'special ceremony' even though the MRPs had been ready for weeks. Apparently, such 'inaugurations' of MRPs have been held in 60 missions so far, reveals this very entertaining report.

According to the fact finder, some of our valiant officials are now vying for a trip to Brazil, not because of the football and the beach scene, but because, you never know, there just maybe a few Bangladeshis waiting expectantly to get their MRPs from a VIP. Then there was the touching story of two officials who went all the way to

Australia (after a quick stop in España) to deliver a single laptop to the Mission in Canberra. Oh by the way, while they were completing this holy mission at the Mission they got to see their daughters too. Uzbekistan, France, Russia and Japan – these official adventurers have wandered as far away as possible from the countries where the real problem lies but where the weather is too enervating for any kind of constructive sightseeing, sorry, work. But that's ok, we understand, these things need to be done, for the sake of the overall good of... the good of... oh something we're sure.

Everyone likes a free trip, why should it be any different for public officials. More so because of all that fuss called protocol – flags on the limousines, seven star hotel rooms, chocolate mints on the pillows, day trips and the banquets, the photo ops with political celebrities... It is just an endless trip of joy and excitement, all the more pleasurable because it is absolutely free!

Thus delegations accompanying the head of state may have a few more members than expected, what's a few dozen more delegates to showcase the potential of a country of 160 million, abroad. What's a few more crores of the taxpayers' money?

The zeal with which public officials and their associates vie for foreign

trips is truly impressive. At a CHOGM (Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting) in a little beach town in Australia, the former PM's entourage consisted of a large number of public officials along with a group of media persons. One of the 'delegates', who said quite candidly that he was there because he had never been to Australia before, seemed to be quite taken with a female journalist from an independent paper (not part of the official delegation). After some chit chat he asked:

"Are you going to the one in the UK in September? You know, I can easily get you in, just send me your resume, two copies of passport-size photos of yourself, a photocopy of your passport, etc."

"What is the conference on?"

"Hmm. I think it might be on the environment or...not sure, will let you know."

"But I haven't been invited."

"Arrey apa, that is not a problem at all, you just say yes, I will arrange everything. *Ebarrerta jombe bhalo.*" (This one is going to be a real blast!) And that dear readers, is how you can get on the bandwagon of official foreign trips, all expenses paid by the very generous taxpayer.

The writer is Deputy Editor, Editorial and Op-ed, The Daily Star.

**QUOTABLE Quote**

**AUDRE LORDE (1934 - 1992)**

"I DIDN'T DEFINE MYSELF FOR MYSELF, I WOULD BE CRUNCHED INTO OTHER PEOPLE'S FANTASIES FOR ME AND **EATEN ALIVE.**"

**CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH**

**ACROSS**

- Graph points
- Spits out
- Cobbler fruit
- "Be quiet!"
- Winter weather
- Laughable
- Busy
- Kitten call
- Wrap up
- Bugs
- Sun setting
- Unwavering
- Paratrooper's need
- Pennsylvania's -- Mountains
- Before now
- Arthur Ashe specialty
- Dog warning
- Put away
- Warm blanket
- Fancy home
- Fuming
- Recital piece
- Stair part

**DOWN**

- Social classes
- Satellite connection
- Swift
- Entreated
- Start a business
- Biol. or geol.
- Mythical piper
- Paint type
- Port producer
- Heavy dishes
- Funnel-shaped flower
- Light
- Kicker's aid
- Includes in an email
- Friess source
- Police order
- Horriified
- Kitchen gadget
- Like an old cuss
- Circus star
- Amused look
- Lyrical poem
- Stop signal

**YESTERDAY'S ANSWER**

F	E	A	S	T	S	A	J	A	K
A	L	P	H	A	S	A	M	J	S
B	L	E	E	P	M	U	R	K	Y
R	A	S	H	L	A	S	S		
M	I	F	F	A	C	E	S		
I	C	E	W	H	A	T	S	I	T
C	O	C	O	A	A	S	I	D	E
A	N	T	O	N	I	N	C	O	N
W	H	E	N	A	W	L	S		
C	O	O	L	N	E	R	O		
O	P	R	A	H	P	E	R	M	S
W	I	L	L	A	I	N	L	E	T
S	E	D	A	N	C	A	D	D	Y