

Thank you, my Taiwanese Iodestars

Written by Kailash Satyarthi
Wednesday, 10 October 2018 06:34

My relationship with Taiwan dates back more than a decade. The children and youth of the nation love me like their father. For them, my wife, Sumedha, is mother.

Our bond of love gets stronger every time they visit us as volunteers at Bal Ashram, which is our long-term rehabilitation center for children rescued from slavery and exploitation.

Over the past 10 years, we have hosted tens of hundreds of volunteers from Taiwan and they are all family to me, my children at the Ashram and the entire Satyarthi Movement.

Taiwan happens to be the first country I visited after receiving a Nobel Peace Prize in December 2014. A couple of days after my birthday in January 2015, we flew to Taipei.

Celebrations began in the sky with cake-cutting and well-wishes pouring in from the crew and fellow passengers alike.

I was accompanied by Sumedha Ji, Representative to India James Tien (詹文義), who is a very dear friend, and his wife and a few of my colleagues.

Upon landing, I got a rousing welcome from almost all the volunteers who had visited us in the past.

I was overwhelmed to see thousands of children and youth with flowers, cakes and gifts hugging me, taking selfies and extending greetings. It was like a second homecoming after the Nobel and the exuberance in the atmosphere was absolutely electrifying.

Over the next four days that we were in Taipei, all the ministries and congregations that I visited, I cut a birthday cake, making it the best and longest celebration ever.

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Now, almost three-and-a-half years later, I am once again visiting my big, happy, extended family in Taiwan from today to Saturday. The love and warmth of my Taiwanese lodestars — my children as I prefer to call them — has brought me back. So here I am with my message of love, peace and harmony.

There is something remarkably special about Taiwanese volunteers. Although they hail from a small country, their hearts are way too large, full of compassion and forever brimming with positivity and enthusiasm.

At a time when the world is grappling with a trust and peace deficit, Taiwan clearly shows the way by lighting up the path of compassion. There is so much that each one of us can learn from our friends from Taiwan.

The Wake Foundation, Eden Foundation and several other organizations in Taiwan have given me and my children at Bal Ashram “best friends forever”— BFF as we say these days. Friends who we look up to. Friends who we count upon. Friends who inspire.

All the volunteers from Taiwan are so committed and dedicated to the cause that they get completely engrossed in engaging with the children at the Ashram, teaching them, listening to their stories, narrating their own life experiences, preparing case studies on children and earnestly striving to impart whatever skills they possibly can. Be it singing, painting, dancing, oratory, dramatics or any other life skill, they do it selflessly for the children at Bal Ashram with utmost passion and honesty of purpose.

The volunteers leave with enriching memories only to come back soon or send more of their friends to the Ashram to be with the children. They write letters and e-mails to the children at Ashram and the bond of love and mutual respect gets stronger with time.

I see my reflection in the children and youth of Taiwan. As a young child of five years I had refused to accept why a cobbler's son of my age should not be in school like all other children.

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I see the same fire in my Taiwanese friends to challenge the injustices and wrong in the world. Peace emanates from a deep feeling of justice and righteousness. If we get the beginning sorted, the end will fall in place exactly the way we want it to be.

Taking the life cycle approach, the best time for instilling a sense of peace, equilibrium and justice is childhood. Only a fulfilling childhood that is free, safe, healthy and educated can pave way for a gratifying and rewarding adulthood.

Is it not therefore everybody's responsibility to ensure that childhood thrives, unleashing its fullest potential?

I have seen children languishing in cocoa fields in the Ivory Coast without having ever tasted chocolate in their lifetime. I have seen young girls stitching soccer balls in Pakistan, often bruising their fingers with sharp threads and needles, haplessly dreaming about the day when they will be able to play with them.

Their dreams remain unfulfilled. Their desires remain unquenched. Is that not painfully paradoxical?

Many children who are trafficked for forced labor are physically and sexually abused as well, and this is a moral epidemic that has spread across the world. It is tearing into the fabric of our society. If this is how our children are treated today, what inclusivity and equity are we talking about in the first place?

When my Nobel acceptance speech documents were misplaced at the podium in Oslo, I recited the story of a little bird that was rushing toward a fire that had broken out in the jungle. She was asked by none other than the king lion as to where was she headed, to which she replied: "I am going to quell the fire." When king lion asked how she would do that, she said: "Sir, I have a drop of water in my beak and I will extinguish the fire with that drop of water." Laughing at the bird, the lion said: "You must be a fool to think that your one drop can extinguish the big fire." The bird said: "I am doing my bit, sir."

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This is the honesty of purpose and the sense of urgency that is required when it comes to saving childhood from being ruined.

Youth is intrinsically driven for doing its bit for what is right; what is good. That is precisely why I — or for that matter, anybody — look up to them.

Many people ask why I left a lucrative career as an electrical engineer and took up the untraveled path of raising a voice against slavery and child exploitation.

My answer is that somebody will have to pay the price for freedom. It will not come served on a platter. I always tell them I am doing my bit.

Every time I rescued a child in the past four decades, I liberated myself. That feeling of freedom cannot be described in words. Like I chose to become the voice of the unheard, vulnerable and exploited children, I see that passion in my Taiwanese lodestars.

Youth is the force to reckon with. Youth has the power, idealism and courage to bring about positive social transformation that the world so desperately needs today. I have immense faith in this cohort.

In the world there are about 100 million children who are stranded in slavery, trafficking, forced labor and sexual exploitation. In the same world we have millions of privileged children and youth who are educated and are enjoying all the rights conferred upon them.

If one privileged youth holds the hand of one not so privileged peer in an endeavor to steer clear of violence and exploitation, this world will become a lot better place for children.

This is precisely what the “100 Million for 100 Million” campaign that I launched in 2016 stands for. After rolling out in 30 countries, I am now bringing it to Taiwan.

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If we save this one generation and invest adequately in its health, safety, freedom and education, all other generations to come will be taken care of.

I always tell everybody: Whenever you come across injustice, do not stay quiet, or else you would be equally responsible for perpetrating that injustice. Speak up, raise your voice, ask tough questions to your legislators and law enforcement agencies; hold them accountable for their follies and chase until justice is reinstated.

Self-motivation and perseverance is the key in this journey toward justice for children. I always call upon the youth to not look for heroes outside. I instead ask them to invoke that heroism within themselves. By doing this they shall achieve their goal.

I never looked outside and always derived the zeal and enthusiasm from within to move forward to reach out to that last child standing in the line awaiting emancipation and justice.

In my fight against child exploitation over the years, hundreds might have become my enemies, but millions have become my friends. It is the faith of those millions that keep me marching ahead. I am sure if all stakeholders work in unison, we can wipe violence against children from the face of the Earth within this lifetime.

Youth is heralding the change across the globe. History is the witness that whenever youth has ignited a change, it has always snowballed into a big movement bringing about real transformation on the ground.

In South Africa, students have been at the heart of the fight for justice — 42 years ago during the Soweto uprising and still today, with the student-led Fees Must Fall movement.

In 1998, hundreds of thousands of children and youth marched with me in the Global March Against Child Labor with the sole demand for an international law against the worst forms of child labor. It resulted in International Labour Organization Convention No. 182 on the worst

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forms of child labor.

In Peru this year, young people protested against the “youth slave law,” which would make qualified graduates perform three years of unpaid work. Police threw tear gas at them, but the law was suspended.

Last year in India, I was honored to march again with hundreds of thousands of young people during our Bharat Yatra to make India safe from trafficking and child rape.

Many of the children at the march were survivors of horrific violence and abuse. This led to an amendment in the Indian Criminal Law. Our fight for a strong law against trafficking continues. I am very hopeful that anti-trafficking would also become a reality in India.

Clearly, youth is the engine for ushering in a new and better world. I call upon the awakened youth of Taiwan to hold the reins of the 100 Million for 100 Million campaign and make history again.

I laud the progressive and proactive steps that the Taiwanese government has been taking toward promoting career counseling and enhancing youth employability; encouraging young people to participate in volunteer services and involving in public affairs, and reinforcing diverse learning for the youth to extend their international perspective.

These initiatives have clearly translated into Taiwanese youth assuming a responsible role in standing up for the rights of children who cannot speak up for themselves, but in no way do they deserve a world that is unjust or a future that is any less promising.

Clearly, my Taiwanese lodestars are doing their bit for children. I am so proud of them.

Kailash Satyarthi is an internationally acclaimed child rights activist who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2014.

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