

# DEVINDRA SATYARTHI

## *A Living Legend*

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Devindra Satyarthi is a living legend. Born in Bhadaur, a small village of erstwhile Patiala State, he has traversed every inch of the sub-continent from Kashmir to Kerala and from Khyber Pass to Kashi Hills and beyond. He has personally known Gurudev Tagore and Mahatma Gandhi and lived in their ashrams as long as he wished. He also befriended innumerable unlettered folk singers, men and women, young and old during his travels and stayed with them as long as he fancied.

I met him in one of his similar peregrinations in Rawalpindi in 1935. I was still a teenager, having joined College the same year. Our first encounter was in the College library, a quiet corner full of wonderful books and latest journals from India and abroad. Satyarthiji was looking for a copy of *Asia*, an international journal of prestige, in which his article on folk-songs had appeared. I was greatly impressed. With his silken hair flowing along his shoulders, his long saintly beard, an angelic look in his soft eyes, well chiselled, sharp features, tall and fair-coloured, I became an instant admirer at the very first sight.

While I had just started writing, I was amazed to find that Satyarthiji had already appeared in the *Modern Review* and the *Saraswati*, the *Pritam* and the *Preet Lari* besides several other journals. And to my delight, I found he was living next door in Brahmo Samaj Ashram with his wife and a new born baby.

Echoes of his Punjabi article "Diva bale sari raat" figuring in the *Preet Lari* were still ringing in my ears when Satyarthiji told me that he had just been to Nowshehra and had stayed with the *Preet Lari* editor Sardar Gur Baksh Singh, who created magic casements with his enchanting pen and had charmed the entire Punjabi reading world. As if that was not enough, sitting in a lonely cubicle that afternoon, he pulled out one after another, issues of the *Modern Review*, India's most prestigious English Journal of the day and showed me his articles on folksongs of the tribals of Assam and the

boatmen of Bengal with his pictures with Poet Tagore and Adivasi women flaunting their firm, grainy busts.

The very first meeting and I became a constant companion of Satyarthiji. The moment I was free from my studies from the College, I would go over to him in the College library. Before long he visited our village in search of folksongs. I thought, I had already exhausted the reservoir after my meeting with him. Evidently, I was mistaken, the village folk have unlimited treasure of folklore, the more you draw it, the more it seems to generate itself. And it was a fascinating technique the way Satyarthiji went about it.

With his loose, flowing wear, looks of a Godman, a modest manner, an essentially effeminate voice, he would instantly endear himself to the village folk, more specially the women who would open their hearts to him singing and reciting, whispering and sobbing; song after song would flow from love-lorn lips. Satyarthiji's visit to a *mohalla* was an open invitation to the young and old who would collect at a convenient spot and start pouring out ever new, ever fresh folk song in competition with each other, trying their utmost to outdo one another in weaving strings of mahya songs or tappas.

At times it appeared that the clever young girls, and the carefree rustic youth would improvise tappas on the spur of the moment, some thing that appeared to be in reply to the song already sung or had reference to a person or a place or an happening around.

Satyarthiji at times would start singing in his own, not-so-musical voice, in order to draw out a shy damsel and then there would be no stopping her. She would go on reeling out songs in which a village girl sings about her brother—loving and sweet, her father—gracious and good, her soldier—lover—fearless and brave, her mother-in-law—fault-finding and cantankerous, her brother-in-law—naughty and youthful, and ever so many other characters around her.

Satyarthiji would visit a *trinjan* and merge himself amongst the women-folk around him. He would ply a *charkha*, knit a *Kaseeda*, weave a *Kamar-band* and do hundred odd jobs to placate and make his subjects feel at home before they started sharing their love with him.

It was a different method with school teachers and literate folk in the village. He would narrate to them his tours to far-flung regions in the country in the spirit of a missionary, read to them the charming songs that he had collected and inspire them to help him collect more.

And then he had his camera with him. He would pamper people with wonderful pictures that he managed to take of them.

Many a youngman took to collecting folklore after coming in touch with Satyarthiji. The late Dr. Shyam Parmar of Madhya Pradesh and nearer home Dr. Wanjara Bedi owe their devotion to folklore to a considerable extent to the lead Satyarthiji gave and the pioneering work that he has done in this neglected field.

And I must count myself also amongst the followers of Satyarthiji. After I completed my M.A. in English, I registered myself as a research student in Punjab Folklore for Ph.D. with the University of the Punjab. My bad luck that I had a non-folklorist in Dr. Mohan Singh "Diwana" as my tutor. I could, therefore, never complete my thesis and with the first opportunity that came my way in the form of a job in All India Radio, I gave up my research and switched over to broadcasting as a career. But the little work I had done in the field was highly rewarding. I had an opportunity once to show it to Satyarthiji. I told him how what he did as a hobby and a pastime had become an academic discipline. The folksongs are the autobiography of a people. After searching the skies and delving deep into the depths of ocean, man has at least realised that his best study is man himself. The folklore, at times, contains universal truth, even the secrets of science. The folksongs are no doubt some of the most fascinating poetry that mankind has produced.

Satyarthiji was astounded to see my work, more particularly my scientific approach to the subject. He has always taken pride in it. Because it was none other than he himself who had initiated me into it.

In the meanwhile Satyarthiji had brought out several books on folksongs in Punjabi, Hindi, Urdu and English. More important among these are *Gidha*, in Punjabi, *Main Hoon Khana Badhosh* in Urdu and Hindi, *Meet My People* in English. In collaboration with Dr. M.S. Randhawa, Satyarthiji has also compiled a number of highly popular collections of folksongs in Punjabi.

His love for folksongs is unbounden. There was a time when he was prepared to go anywhere in search of them. When his Urdu book *Main Hoon Khana Badosh* appeared, I decided to broadcast a series of four musical features based upon the volume. It was a highly prestigious series projecting the folksongs of different regions of India. We made a lot of noise about it. Lahore Station, where I was working at the time, booked the best talent to feature in the programme. From Malika Pukhraj to Munawwar Sultan, every outstanding singer took part in it. Everytime I met the artists for rehearsals, I praised the author so much that they were all anxious to meet Satyarthiji. I, therefore, decided to invite him to join us during one of my rehearsals. Satyarthiji came and I introduced him to the cast appropriately. He sat through the reading of the script and then I went to the Drama Control Panel (DCP) in the adjoining chamber. I was about to start the

rehearsal on the microphone when suddenly the DCP door opened and Tamancha Jan, a professional artist from Hira Mandi who was participating in the programme, walked in and said, "So this is your renowned author, He visits my *Kotha* every other day and sits through the *mehfil*. The poor man parts with not a paisa but we don't mind it."

I listened and smiled. I was not at all surprised. I knew Satyarthiji and his passion for folksongs. And Tamancha Jan was no mean singer.

It was a sad day when Satyarthiji started dabbling in creative writing. It was worse when he started devoting more and more time to writing poetry and short stories, novels and even plays. Not that he has not succeeded in these fields, but what was the gain of the world of the creative writing, was a grievous loss to the studies of the folklore in general and folksongs in particular.