



The Serenity of Being *Satish Kumar*

He walked—and walked—
towards an extraordinary life

BY MOHAN SIVANAND

HE WAS JUST four years old when Satish Kumar, the youngest of eight children in a Rajasthan farming family, wondered why his father was lying so still. “And why is everybody crying?” he asked. “Your father has died,” his mother explained softly. Satish was puzzled and became obsessed with this thing called death.

At age seven, Satish asked the family’s guru if he knew of a way to stop death. “Yes,” replied the Jain monk. “If you give up the world, become a monk, practise non-violence and *tapasya*. You then free yourself from all karma, from the cycle of birth and death. So when you are not born again, you don’t die any more.” Satish asked his mother to let him become a monk.

That’s where the journey began for Satish Kumar, now 77. Pacifist, Gandhian, ecologist, speaker, writer and educationist, Kumar has been a guiding spirit for many. Among his early achievements was the 13,000-km Peace Walk he undertook between 1962 and 1964 across three continents with a friend—and with no money. He never went to school or college, and learnt English mostly by listening to the language in his late twenties. Yet, for the past four decades he has been the editor of *Resurgence & Ecologist*, the respected UK magazine that focuses on environmental issues and ethical living. Reader’s Digest recently met Satish Kumar over tea to learn about his remarkable life and his holistic views. ➤➤

PHOTOS: RESURGENCE & ECOLOGIST

Did your mother agree to your becoming a Jain monk?

No. She said, 'Your father is gone, you are my little one. Don't go.' But when I got smallpox, my mother said, 'If you stay alive, I will not stop you.'

Inducted into the monastic life at age nine, I learnt Sanskrit and the Jain texts. My guru and I went to Jaipur, Bikaner, Delhi... always walking, barefoot. Jain monks don't use any transport or money—it's a mendicant order. We taught people about non-violence, simple living, doing no harm to creatures or nature and observed *brahmacharya*. This way, during my nine years as a monk, I learnt much about earth and nature.

What happened after that?

When I was 18, I read a Hindi translation of Gandhiji's autobiography and realized that spirituality should not be limited to monks or nuns. So we should have spirituality in politics and business, farming, domestic and everyday life. As a monk I had thought the world is a kind of trap filled with sin, from which I should liberate myself. But Gandhi was saying you could transform things through your motivation, through changing consciousness and make the world a spiritual place. I was taken by Gandhi's view.

You stopped believing in rebirth too?

By now my thoughts of death were not so powerful. But I gave up the belief that you have to forsake the world to

liberate yourself. So I opted to leave the monastic order.

IN 1955, when he was 18, Kumar went to Bodh Gaya and lived in an ashram started by the Gandhian sage Vinoba Bhave. He later travelled to Kerala, where Vinoba was busy with his *Bhoodan* movement, walking all over India and requesting well-to-do families to donate part of their land to the landless poor. He befriended E.P. Menon, another Vinoba follower. One day, in 1961, the two young men were seated in a Bangalore cafe when Kumar read in a newspaper that Bertrand Russell, the Nobel-laureate philosopher and pacifist, had been jailed for demonstrating against nuclear weapons. *Let's join the peace movement*, the two friends decided.

So what did you do?

As a monk I had walked thousands of miles. I'd walked with Vinoba too, so walking was no sweat for me. Menon and I decided to walk to Moscow, Paris, London and Washington, the four nuclear capitals. If we walked, there'd be worldwide interest—two men walking for peace. We went to Vinoba. 'You must go on this *padayatra*,' Vinoba said, 'and you should go without any money.' Menon and I looked at each other and we said, 'Without any money?' And Vinoba declared, 'No money at all!'

'War begins in fear, peace begins in trust,' he explained. 'You be the peace

by trusting yourself, trusting people, trusting the world. So if you go without any money, like a sadhu, you have to have trust and be free from fear—and freedom from fear is the first step towards peace.' Vinoba was a wise man. We started our walk from Rajghat, Gandhiji's resting place in Delhi. The whole media was there.

Were people skeptical?

Yes, some said 'you will go up to the Pakistan border and return.' Visas weren't a problem those days, but at the border a woman came to me crying, 'Satish you are totally crazy, going to Pakistan without any money! Our enemy country! At least take this food I have brought for you.' I told her she was very kind. 'Thank you, but these packets of food are packets of distrust. What do I say to Pakistani households? That we don't trust them, and so I brought food from India?'

'You may not return alive,' she said. It reminded me of my childhood obsession with death. But I felt strong and I said, 'If I die while walking for peace, that is the best kind of death I can have. If I get food on the journey, that's fine. If I don't get any, that will be my opportunity to fast. And if I don't get shelter, I'll sleep under the sky—a million-star hotel.'

What happened in Pakistan?

As a Jain monk, I'd had no inhibitions asking people for some food or shelter. We had a placard in Urdu, or in other

languages wherever we went—we got people to translate—explaining that we were walking for peace up to Washington. In Pakistan, there was



**WAR BEGINS IN FEAR,
PEACE BEGINS IN TRUST,
YOU BE THE PEACE BY
TRUSTING YOURSELF,
TRUSTING PEOPLE,
TRUSTING THE WORLD.**

a Muslim gentleman waiting for us. He'd driven 25 km from Lahore, after reading about us. He said, 'Enmity between India and Pakistan is complete nonsense—we were one people before 1947. Please come to my house.' We refused to ride in his car, but allowed him to take our rucksacks, drive home and wait for us.

You trusted him?

Trust was the key. At his home he'd invited his friends to meet us. It was wonderful—just an example of how it was day after day. We stayed in at least 25 houses during the month in Pakistan. People came to listen to us, even to walk with us. Over the Khyber Pass, gun-carrying Pathans protected us.

It can get very cold there, right?

Afghanistan was not too bad. We were given warm clothes in Tehran, sleeping bag, jackets. There, we met the

Shah in his palace. His office informed all officials on our way westward, so everywhere they welcomed us.

How did you talk to foreigners?

It's amazing how you pick up languages. I used broken English and phrase books. By the time we reached Moscow, I was speaking English quite well. Menon was my good teacher, always conversing in English.

What happened in Russia?

In Armenia [then part of the USSR] we visited a tea factory. There, as we spoke about disarmament, nuclear weapons, the Cold War, one woman came with four small packets of tea-leaves. 'These are not for you,' she said. 'They are for our Premier Khrushchev in Moscow, the president of France, the prime minister of England, and the US president. Tell them this Peace Tea is from a mother in Armenia. Tell them that if they ever thought of pressing the nuclear button, please stop for a moment and have a fresh cup of tea.'

KUMAR AND MENON then walked from Moscow (where the tea was accepted by the President of the Supreme Soviet) to Byelorussia, Poland, Germany, Belgium, France. Everywhere, they spoke at universities and public places. People gave them new pairs of shoes when needed. Their feet had blisters, but they'd put sheep's wool

they'd gathered in their socks to reduce the pain. They even got used to the blisters.

En route, in August 1963, they heard Dr Martin Luther King, Jr's "I have a dream" speech on radio. President Kennedy was shot weeks after he'd signed the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty along with Britain and Russia. President Charles de Gaulle of France had refused to sign it. Arriving in Paris, the two Indians demonstrated with local activists at the presidential Palace Élysée, and were jailed for three days until the Indian ambassador came with the chief of police. "If you don't stop demonstrating," the police chief said, "we'll deport you to India. Anyway, give me your packet of peace tea, and I'll try and deliver it to the palace. You carry on." They took a boat to England, where they were received by Lord Atlee (who also accepted the peace tea) on behalf of Prime Minister Harold Wilson.

You met your hero Bertrand Russell?

Yes, we were overawed by his presence. Lord Russell said, 'When you wrote to me from India that you were walking to London, I thought, *I am 90 and will never see them*. But you have walked fast! I'm still here. Good to see you warriors for peace! We had a long chat about the arms race, his arrest, our arrest. In the end he said, 'You'd need money to go to America. May I give you some?' We said no, we have not touched money, but he and other peace activists arranged for tickets



"According to my ecological perspective, even trees and rocks have spirit."

for us on the *Queen Mary*. We crossed the Atlantic, arrived in New York and took 40 days to walk to the White House in Washington, DC, where President Johnson's disarmament representative received us. Our Peace Walk, which started at the grave of Gandhiji, ended at the grave of JFK. After that we met Martin Luther King, Jr, in Atlanta.

What did Dr King tell you?

There was a picture of Gandhiji on the wall behind his desk. He said no sane person can ever use nuclear weapons. And yet we are spending millions on them when people are deprived of food, shelter, education, medicines. He said, 'I have a dream—just as slavery ended, racial discrimination must end, or else it's in fact a continuation of slavery.'

And then you returned to India?

No, pacifists in Japan invited us there. Buddhist monks walked with us through Hiroshima and Nagasaki. We returned to Bombay by ship in September 1964. Vinoba was delighted. He said, 'Look, I told you you'd survive without money.' Indeed, I learnt so much by walking the world without money. You develop a kind of art of being a guest everywhere. We were always getting a story, taking in messages, philosophies, adventure.

BACK IN INDIA, Satish Kumar wrote his first book *Bina Paise Duniya ka Paidal Safar*. He then translated Martin Luther King's *Stride Toward Freedom* into Hindi. Kumar and Menon also undertook lecture tours across India telling their story and talking of peace. Then, in

1969, the Mahatma's birth centenary year, Kumar was invited by the peace movement to England to talk about Gandhiji. Before he left, Jayaprakash Narayan gave him the contact details of E.F. Schumacher, saying, "Meet this great Gandhian economist." In time, Kumar made England his home, married an Englishwoman and had two children. He set up the Schumacher College and The Small School.



**I WOULD SAY
EVEN THE GOVERNMENT
SHOULD BE BEAUTIFUL.
BUSINESS, A FARM,
EDUCATION...
SHOULD ALL BE
BEAUTIFUL.**

What got you into journalism?

Schumacher was closely associated with *Resurgence* magazine and looking for an editor. When I was offered the job, I first said 'No, I want to go back to India and work for the Gandhian movement.' Schumacher smiled. 'Satish, there are many Gandhians in India, we need one in England. You edit *Resurgence* and make it Gandhian,' he said. I became its editor in 1973.

How did you learn about ecology?

During our Peace Walk, I became interested in ecology. Because peace has three dimensions: making peace

with yourself—your peace of mind, heart, peace in life. Second, peace in the world—with people. And so nations, races, religions, whatever you have, they'll have to live in peace and harmony. Third, peace with nature. We can't go on mistreating nature, causing environmental degradation, climate change and pollution, destroying oceans and rain forests. All this is war against nature.

What really motivates you?

I am motivated to act because the meaning of life is to love, to relate. We are all related. In that relationship we exist. René Descartes, the French philosopher, said 'I think, therefore I am.' But I feel he was wrong. We don't live in our head, we live in our relationships. We are all made of each other.

You also disagreed with 'Beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder' once.

Because beauty is a way of life. It is not just a visual thing, not about just looking at something pretty. When something is truthful and also good, it becomes beautiful. And then you experience beauty through your eyes, ears, mouth, nose, through your whole life experience. I would say even the government should be beautiful. Business, a farm, education... should all be beautiful. If something is beautiful, it will be sustainable and economically just, truthful, honest. If you sell beautiful paintings in a black market for greed, it is no longer beautiful to me.

You have said that non-living things, too, have a spirit?

They are not non-living things. According to my ecological perspective, even trees and rocks have spirit. Even this clay cup has spirit, shape, form, harmony, beauty. It holds my tea. I say 'Thank you my cup, you are very kind to hold my tea.' So I have a reverence for all things.

If so, how would you find beauty in something like war?

I am not saying everything is beautiful. War is not beautiful. Destruction is not beautiful. So if things are in their own situation and context, in their proper balance and harmony, in their own being, it's beautiful. When there's disharmony, beauty is gone.

All these years, you've advocated, almost preached, peace. Yet there's a lot of trouble in the world still.

The world is maintained by many, many forces. And I am part of the positive forces, which include Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr, the Dalai Lama, the artists, poets, craftsmen, farmers, the women singing, the workers in the fields, the dancers... people who are keeping harmony and balance in the world. I am part of that and I want to make my contribution. I'm not claiming that I'm changing the world, I'm only claiming that to the best of my ability I am serving the world. And whether the world changes through my service or not, at least I change.

You married, became a dad, worked for peace and the environment. Are you glad you left the monastery?

I would not say that I am happy because I left the monastery. I am happy that I had the wonderful experience being a monk, because I had a tremendous learning there. I am also happy that I had a great experience working with Vinoba. I am happy I've had a transformative experience walking the world. I am very happy that I've had such an opportunity to serve the ecological movement, the peace movement through *Resurgence & Ecologist* magazine. So I was happy as a monk, happy to leave the monastery. Leaving something is not a negative. Leaving something is also a positive, because you have to move on.

Despite your spiritual and religious background, you never use the word God. Do you believe in God?

In Jainism, and Buddhism, we don't have the concept of God. If you want my definition, God is the implicit energy of everything. God is in the trees, in the stones, in this tea. God is the implicit energy of quantum physics, the flow of energy. So if you have that idea, then God is fine, but if God means somebody in the sky who created the world eons ago and then went to rest and is somewhere up there controlling the strings and managing the world, I don't believe in such a God. 