

Conversation

An Interview with Asghar Ali Engineer

As an eminent social scientist and a crusader of secularism, Asghar Ali Engineer needs no introduction. Born in a Muslim priestly family on March 10, 1939 at Salomar (Rajasthan), he was trained in Islamic theology, commentary on Quran, Hadis Literature and Islamic Jurisprudence. He graduated in Civil Engineering from Indore. His first article on "Reform in Muslim Personal Law" was published in *The Times of India* (Mumbai) while he was a student of Civil Engineering. Since then, writing has been his *sadhana*, his *dharma* as is more than evident in his 45 published books ranging from sociology of communalism, secularism in India the Minority-question and the need for rethinking issues in Islam. His latest publication is *Quran, Women and Modern Society* (Sterling, 1999). In 1980, Engineer founded the Institute of Islamic Studies for research on various issues in Islam. In 1993, he established the Centre for the Study of Society and Secularism (after the infamous Mumbai riots) of which he is the Chairman. He has critically examined all major communal riots and written extensively on all the related aspects of this subject. As a paripatetic scholar, he has lectured all over the world. He received National Award for Communal Harmony in 1998.

Recently, he was in Chandigarh to receive the Haryana Urdu Akademi Award. He talked about various complex issues India is faced with in his conversation with Sudhir Kumar. Below are excerpts from his interview:

SK: You have long been a crusader of secularism in India. How do you react to a situation in which even the peddlers of worst kind of communal violence swear by secularism? Or, say, what, in your opinion, is true secularism in the context of Indian tradition?

AAE: There are those who perpetrate communalism and communal violence and still pretend to be secular, which is nothing but populism. Secularism in Indian context is the acceptance of and respect for plurality because India is a democratic country and with various extant religious and cultural traditions. India cannot be democratic without secularism, because, one, secularism is opposite of communalism and, two, it stands for the acceptance of and respect for the other.

SK: Do the sacred and the secular constitute a binary? How do you define the sacred and its inherent value in our day-to-day secular existence, irrespective of our faiths?

AAE: The sacred and the secular are not binary. They are a sort of continuum. The sacred is one that conforms to universal values whose acceptance and practice would amount to the sacred in daily life. And the practice of the sacred in the midst of worldly affairs links the sacred with the secular. They should not be viewed as binary but as one.

SK: Gandhi's emphasis on truth as God has immense significance and it does tally with what you have just said. Can we ward off the perils of fundamentalism in this manner?

AAE: In fact, all religious traditions of the world consider truth as God. Hence unity of religions. In fact, it is our linguistic prejudices that create a wall of separation between one religion and the other. For example, Indian God has been described as *Satyam*, *Shivam*, *Sundaram* in tradition. These three words are also mentioned in Quran as *Haq* (*satyam*), *Jabbar* (*shivam*) and *Jameel* (*sundram*). Similar ideas may also be found in other faiths as well. As such, we must remove our linguistic prejudices. Then it becomes a powerful weapon for fighting the menace of fundamentalism. Unfortunately, we consider our own tradition as superior to other religious traditions. And that is the beginning of fundamentalism. Unless we shed this prejudice, we cannot fight fundamentalism.

SK: What are the factors responsible for the rise of the menace of fundamentalism in post-colonial India, despite all political parties swearing by their secular credentials?

AAE: To swear by secular tradition is not enough. All of us swear by so many moral values but act in our own selfish interests. Cultural problem arises because of clash of interests, not because of clash of religions. This is very important. Unless we understand this, we will fail to solve this problem.

And this became our legacy in the post independence India also. Now, all political campaigns, communal campaigns, etc. occur because of the clash of interests—this also involves the clash of economic interests; however, clash of political interests is the prime. This leads to fundamentalism and the rise of communalism.

SK: How do you view such political outfits as Bajrang Dal, Shiv Sena and Jamat-e-Islami?

AAE: Outfits like Bajrang Dal, Shiv Sena or Jamat-e-Islami are the proponents of extreme partisan interests and have a highly prejudiced view of other religious traditions. Also, they are prepared to use violence to get their point of view accepted. It is because of the violent nature of Shiv Sena, Bajrang Dal and Jamat-e-Islami that so many violent events have taken place. Recently, the burning of a missionary with his two innocent children is an act of great shame, a slur on our secular credentials.

SK: Conversion is very much in the news now-a-days. How do you react to the various instances of violence against Christian missionaries? Do you hold the state an accomplice in all this?

AAE: Yes, state complicity has been there in Gujarat. Without it, violence of this magnitude would not have occurred. And this whole controversy about conversion is a mere pretext to target another community. They have targeted Muslims for long. Now, it is not possible to target Muslims because Hindus would not respond to it. Hence, now the Christians. There is yet another interesting aspect of this problem. Attacks on Christians increased after Sonia Gandhi became the President of the Congress. They (the Communalists) did this to convince Hindus that the Congress under the leadership of Sonia Gandhi will be an instrument of Christian interests. Now, this is a critical ploy to de-legitimise the Congress as it is emerging as a powerful party again. So, they are raising the bogey of conversion to get Hindu votes.

SK: This was about conversion as politics. Let me know your views on conversion per se. If somebody coerces

you to get converted to another faith or if the urge for conversion emerges from within, how would you respond to it?

AAE: If you hold the view of religion, I hold, that is, all religions are one—manifestations may differ in time and space, but they all represent certain universal values which complement each other. If you take this view of religion, I don't think conversion will be really necessary. For me, conversion has no meaning. But those who are not aware of their own religious tradition, or philosophy, they may be drawn to other religions, you'll see that generally those people convert who are very poor, illiterate and have been suffering from other socio-economic problems for long. And if somebody presents to them a religion that may address their problems, they may accept it for their survival. But the conversion of the intellectuals is a different affair because they are aware of their religious tradition and philosophy. There can never be a mass conversion among the intellectuals. Conversion among them is, however, rare.

SK: There appears to be a lack of interfaith dialogue in India at present. Do you think that our education system should have such inputs as moral education?

AAE: Yes, unfortunately the kind of education imparted, particularly at the primary level, is highly prejudiced one. An attempt is made to impose one religious tradition on all; this is wrong. According to our Constitution, all are free to follow their respective faiths. But, at the school level, this spirit is generally not observed. Even in the text books, one religious tradition is described as good and ideal with other religious traditions as flawed. So the child may start hating other traditions. This is a serious matter. But our politicians have no courage to reform the present system. Even the books of History are full of willful distortions. It has created and will create serious problems in national integration.

SK: What is Rushdie's intention in writing about Islam or distorting Islam? Do you approve of the ban on *The Satanic Verses*?

AAE: Salman Rushdie has written *The Satanic Verses* out of sheer arrogance and hatred. This is the problem with the atheists. He never realized that hatred and arrogance hurt the sentiments of millions of believers. That is why he invited trouble for himself. I do not, however, approve of the ban. Anyone writing such abusive text must face the consequences. As far as giving him visa is concerned, I am not against it. Let Muslim leaders not create another controversy; it could be manipulated by fundamentalists. Yes, a controversy was raised but it failed to gain momentum. I hope the Muslim masses have become quite sensitive and will not react to such issues in an aggressive manner. Let him come and go almost unnoticed.

SK: I want you to respond to Huntington's theory of clash of civilizations.

AAE: I totally disapprove of whatever Huntington has said about the clash of civilizations. His view is extremely narrow and superficial. All clashes of interests are not civilizational clashes. Let me tell you that civilizations do not clash, barbarians do. And there are many others in America who are writing in support of Islam. But the Western media is only highlighting or sensationalizing Huntington's view.

SK: The Indian intelligentsia has largely been indifferent to the larger agenda of nation-building. What is, in your opinion the role of the Muslim intelligentsia in the unfinished project of nation-making?

AAE: The tragedy is that Muslim intellectuals migrated to Pakistan after the partition. And a new class of Muslim intellectuals is slowly coming into existence. Slowly, because most of the Muslims are illiterate and poor. Now, a Muslim middle businessmen class comprising professional workers etc., is slowly emerging. This class would take the place of Muslim elite in this country and play an important

role in the making of the nation.
SK: Do you envision a federation of India-Pakistan-Bangladesh in future for greater peace, trade, and friendship in the region?

AAE: Federation of South Asian nations is a most welcome development. This is what the Cabinet Mission Plan had already envisioned in 1946. But, unfortunately, suspicions hardened and the Cabinet Mission Plan could not be implemented. But it is highly desirable to have such a federation. However, we should not intend to advocate it in a big way because it would unnecessarily create suspicions in the minds of many in Pakistan. They would think that India is trying to play a superpower in the region.

SK: How do you view the recent nuclear explosions in the context of Indo-Pak relations?

AAE: I am totally against nuclear weapons. Such explosions lead to violence and exploitation. But, after the explosions, the fear of nuclear holocaust has created a need for the elimination of war because a nuclear war would lead to utter destruction. From every evil, some good comes out.

SK: Let me ask you something about your recent book, *Rethinking Issues In Islam*. What are the major issues in Islam you have addressed in the book?

AAE: There are many issues facing the people today. If we still go by the medieval injunctions of Islam, Islam would be misinterpreted. I, therefore, thought it proper to rethink the major issues in the context of the contemporary world delinking them from the medieval times. For example, the concept of *jihad*. If we go by the medieval notion of compelling every Muslim to spread Islam by force, we do not get truth. I have tried to re-read the *Quranic* verses to get to the truth, that *jihad* is nothing else than one's

dharma, one's duty or responsibility to oneself and others. There is also the question of the treatment of minorities in Islamic countries. The popular myth is that Islam is an anti-minority-faith. I have tried to dispel this false perception by re-interpreting the *Quranic* verses. Similarly, the questions of family planning and human rights have been re-analysed from a contemporary point of view. The problem that most of the Muslims face is: "Should we follow the principles of Islam as they were followed in the middle ages or re-think them in accordance with the changing times"?

SK: You have also commented on the concept of *Kafir*.

AAE: Yes, contrary to the popular belief, a *Kafir* is one who hides truth, irrespective of one's religious faith. Even a Muslim may be a *Kafir*. How can Hindus be described as *Kafirs*? They also have access to truth. The manifestation of truth may be different. That's why there have been many Prophets in the world to stress truth. Even Rama and Krishna were Prophets to tell humanity about the value of truth. The *Quran* explicitly says that god has sent a Prophet for every community. As Mazhar Janijana rightly says, the Vedas are the revealed scriptures of the Hindus. Islam, therefore, is quite tolerant of other faiths.

SK: Do you approve of such terms as *La diniyat* or *dharma-nirpekshata* in the context of Indian secular tradition?

AAE: *La-diniyat* or secularism (*dharma-nirpekshata* in the Western sense) is a rejection of religion in human life. It is, therefore, unacceptable in the Indian secular tradition. In India, there is no question of rejecting one's faith or *dharma*. Let me tell you that even in the Western countries religion plays an important role in the so-called secular affairs, contrary to the popular perception. In Germany, it is the function

of the state to collect and distribute the sacred texts. Every American Congress session begins with a hymn to God. In India, the rejection of religion is impossible. Even in Urdu, secularism as a word has been accepted, not in the sense of *La-diniyat*.

SK: Do you favour reservation for the lowly-placed needy sections of Muslims in India?

AAE: I am for reservation of the Muslims included in the Mandal report. Washermen, weavers, panwallas, gardeners and other down-trodden sections of Muslim community should get reservation benefits. But I am against the reservation for Muslims as Muslims.

SK: What is the essence of Indian culture?

AAE: It is very difficult to say this in one sentence, so to say? Indian culture is primarily a spiritual culture. And we have inherited the great spiritual values stressed by Vivekananda and Gandhi as also by many sufi-saints.

SK: Lastly, what is your message for the people of India?

AAE: My message for the people of India is that we should accept and celebrate plurality in all spheres. Let us respect all religions practised in this country and even those who do not follow any religion. Let us cherish our spiritual values without disregarding the progress being made in other areas. This is again a synthesis between the spiritual and the secular. If there is lust for money, lust for power and influence, only spiritualism can redress such evils. This synthesis between the two is a characteristic feature of our civilization. And ours is a great civilization and we should justly be proud of this great culture.

Sudhir Kumar teaches English at Panjab University, Chandigarh.

From the Blurbs ...

CULTURE, SOCIALIZATION AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT
Theory, Research and Applications in India
ed. by T.S. Saraswathi
Sage Publications, New Delhi.

The various human exchanges that form part of daily life are not only necessary for the survival of a social system but deeply influence the social construction of knowledge and the development of the mores and social values. The volume draws attention to the significance of the diurnal interactions through an exploration of theoretical and methodological concerns combined with analyses of patterns of socialization and enculturation in Indian society. Highlighting the importance of contextual factors in understanding human development, the contributors argue for an integrative and multi-disciplinary approach to research in the field.

Bringing together contributions from a large number of disciplines, the volume provides a context for the scholars from allied fields to transcend their disciplinary boundaries and to come together to contribute to a body of culturally relevant knowledge. The book will be of considerable interest to those in the fields of education, psychology, sociology, social theory, human development and gender studies.

1999 440 pp. Rs. 495

From the Blurbs ...

ELEPHANTA: THE CAVE OF SHIVA
text by Wendy O'Flaherty, George Mitchell and Carmel Berkson
photographs by Carmel Berkson
Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Pvt. Ltd., Delhi

Three descriptive essays and numerous fascinating photographs allow the reader to experience a major monument of the Indian art: the sixth-century temple cave on Elephanta Island in Bombay harbor, with its extraordinary stone structures. These capture the atmosphere of the cave and the spirit of the sculptures, which portray the relentless energy and paradoxical power of Shiva, greatest of all Hindu gods. The photographs are successful in revealing the dramatic alternation of light and dark that is so much a part of the beauty of the cave interior. Ms Berkson's trained and loving eye picks out the subtleties of the main sculptures and humorous details that the visitor might miss even on the site. The essays interpret the myth of Shiva depicted in the sculpture, historical background and a stylistic analysis and overall structure of the cave to show that it is a *mandala*-like image of the heavenly mountain residence of the universal self.

1999 48 pp. + 74 B/W plates Rs. 600