



Seriously Shah Rukh

Bollywoodlegend speaks on social issues



Apart from being the darling of the Indian film industry, Shah Rukh Khan is of great political importance. Today he is the most inspiring member of the Indian Muslim community that is the largest minority in the world at 12 percent of the total Indian population of more than one billion. This interview with him took place on the sets of "Swades" in February 2004, just before sunrise. It was on the eve of the general election in India that was held in four phases between April 20 and May 10 in the same year. Therefore many questions asked of Shah Rukh concern politics of the day. He is a role model for all minorities as his life is so spectacularly successful.

Shah Rukh is originally from Delhi and came to Mumbai nearly two decades ago with little except passion to make it in the world of cinema. No Godfather like figure exists in his life and the fruit of success that he enjoys today are a result of his own hard work. Although Shah Rukh is a Muslim he remains a living example of the majority in India who pride themselves on being Indian first and then Muslim, Hindu, South Indian, North Indian etc. despite the confusion caused within the country by fanatics and fundamentalists, including radical Hindus and Muslims who in their ignorance and arrogance are unable to celebrate the colourful contrasts that enrich Indian society. India is perhaps unique where protected by a secular constitution people of different ethnic and religious groups continue to freely express themselves in a variety of different languages, clothes and cuisine. The country remains joyously united in all its diversity and also in its undying adoration of Shah Rukh Khan, the Badshah of Bollywood. However the most celebrated matinee idol and high profile Indian Muslim sees himself merely as a monkey.

What do you mean by saying that you are a mere monkey?

When I was a child I once saw a monkey dance. Ever since I have wanted to thrill people like the monkey had thrilled me with its performance. That today I am the most famous monkey in India only adds to the thrill. But it does not change the fact that I am a monkey. It is just a job I do. It is not more or less important than what most other people do for living.

Apart from being India's most famous monkey you are also a very influential member of the country's large but minority Muslim community?

I am a Muslim, but first and foremost I am Indian and I am proud to be an Indian. Very proud. Besides you can't take my performance on stage seriously; always remember that I am only acting. I look at films as pure entertainment. I cannot take a film too seriously. Even in films like Lagaan I enjoyed the cricket match but missed the social message, if any. Perhaps I am too shallow to concentrate on social issues while making a film.

Do you think Indian Muslims, 12 percent of India's more than one billion population face a crisis today?

You mention the word crisis. By mentioning it, by recognising it, by bringing it to my notice even if the crisis did not exist, you make it exist. If you spot the crisis don't you also spot how secular India is, the goodness that also exists in this country?

Muslim leaders tell us that secularism in India is on the decline?

I am a living example that it is not. The most influential member of the minority community, as you call me is also a superstar in India today. This would not be possible if only Muslims had appreciated me. Take it from there instead of just picking on the crisis part of it.

Is everything all right then with the Muslim community?

Of course there are problems. But problems of poverty and illiteracy are problems of the country, not just of Muslims. I hear that Muslims are ill-treated and also that Muslims are terrorists. That is too simplistic. It is true that some very sad things have happened to Muslims. Gujarat is very sad. But what makes me most sad is that people died in Gujarat. When I hear about riots and violence I don't count how many Muslims died before I become sad. When sad things happen in the country I am sad and when good things happen here, I am happy.

Why do Muslims feel that they are ill-treated and why does the world look upon Muslims as terrorists?

What is happening in Kashmir and what happened in Gujarat is way beyond my understanding. I don't know why these things happen. But I also try not to take a too simplistic view of things and reduce it to this is right and this is wrong. However, without getting into the complexity of the problem I must say that what saddens me is violence against anyone.

Whenever people are killed in the country it is shameful not just when Muslims are killed.

I know that there is a problem – that there is a crisis – but there is a sunshine side to it too. People from the minority community are also doing well and dominating life in the country. This speaks volumes for the state of the minorities. And I do not look upon reservations that will benefit the minorities.

What should the minorities do to improve their image?

I think it is possible to do well in this country if religion is practiced in the private realm. We must live and work in this country beyond religion. When we look around us we should keep in mind that we as Indians have a problem and the problems in this country concern not just the minorities.

The more we keep harping upon the differences between Hindus and Muslims the more harm we will do to each other as Indians. During a riot it is one bloody Indian fighting another bloody Indian.

What is the role of politics in a communal riot?

Around the world politicians use communalism and religion to promote their respective agendas. This is wrong. Then, there are fanatics in every religion not only in Islam. But to me the fanatics and extremists are the real minority. It is not Christians, Muslims and Sikhs who are the minority but communal, violent people. And you should, I should and we all should point this out till this small minority of fanatics is seen and recognised by everyone for what they really are and exposed forever. The majority of Indians want to live and work in a peaceful environment and should stand up to the destructive forces of evil.

Muslim politicians tell us that the minorities face the danger of being sidelined in India today?

These politicians, I am sure they are very knowledgeable and better informed than I am. And if they have taken that stand they must be right and they must have information that I don't have access to.

What I would like to say to them is that I don't like communalism and sectarianism.

I am no politician. My life is totally apolitical. And I am sure that when people decide to go into politics their intentions are noble and they like to protect themselves and their larger family of voters. Just like I need power to run my family – to always be in control. But then if I lose perspective and allow myself to be misled that will lead to chaos.

What about institutions like the Minority Commission?

I know nothing about them. But if they exist there must be a reason. If they were set up to protect the rights of the minorities, then I hope they are doing their job.

Do you vote?

It is complicated for me to do so. My family votes. And yes, I have voted once in my life.

Why would you take the trouble to vote, if ever you decide to do so in the future?

That way I hope to help someone to guide the country. I am a capitalist by nature. I believe in hard work and the need for a strong head of state who is in control and takes good care of the community. When I vote, I hope that the person who gets my vote will make life easier for ordinary people. I believe in giving power to the politician to take care of some of my needs in public life. And this I can say from the bottom of my heart that every politician who

contests elections does have the good of the community in mind, but somewhere along the way politicians get lost and begin to think more of themselves than of the people.

India has had more than half a century to attend to its problems. What has the country achieved in all these decades?

Much has been achieved but the problems have also multiplied. I personally feel that India has made progress. Over the past two decades I have been made aware how huge the country is and the enormity of its problems and I think India has done very well. We are far more self-contained than before. Japan was considered such a role model of progress but I found its lifestyle totally virtual. When I look around I find some virtuality here as well. But India is far more real and we have made some real progress. The problem of moving things at the grassroots remains. Maybe it will take another 50 years for that to be achieved. That is all right as I have the patience to go on working hard and to see that too happen one day.

What bothers you most about the state of India today?

That there are no roadside toilets for women. I am a small man with a small mind and this small problem bothers me most about India. I feel very sad when I travel by train and see women lined up along the railway tracks in the morning. It hurts me. It makes me feel that my mother and my sister are sitting there.

With your kind of wealth and influence what are you doing about a simple problem like this one?

If there is anything I can do about it, I will. This problem has played on my mind for a long time and as soon as I feel ready I would like to invest in a project that will line the country with toilets only for women, inshahallah.

What is it that gives you the most pleasure about being an Indian today?

That I am liked wherever I go in India today. I feel so fortunate. Although, when I travel abroad people do give me a warm reception and sing my praises but there is nothing to beat the warmth and ease of people and life in India. The standard of life here is so high. And I don't say that because I am a rich person. I have found that even those who are not wealthy seem to give so easily in this country. Even those with few possessions are warm and friendly. I like the way I am able to work in this country. I often hear that Indians are lazy and slow. That is not true of the people I work with or all those Indians who have made a name in the world. I am very proud of Indians like Sabir Bhatia, the Tatas and the Birlas. Sometimes I get the feeling that the economy of the world is perhaps run by people of Indian origin. That is such a great high.

You said that you are making an effort to rediscover Islam. Why now?

Now I am a father. I have to read up on various subjects, including religion. When my children ask me questions about God, I have to give them an answer. But I am happiest when my son defines God as Ganesh Allah. I don't want that to change. That sounds so right to me.

I tell my son, God, Allah and Bhagwan are all one. My daughter is still too young to ask questions like these.

What role does religion play in your personal life?

I am God fearing and would not do anything to make God unhappy. I smoke and apologise to God for the bad habit. I believe in heaven and hell.

In this life or in the afterlife?

Here, in this life. I don't think that the other world has room for concepts like heaven or hell. It is all here. I can feel it here. Up there, I imagine the world endlessly serene and peaceful.

What is most important to you in life?

Whatever is most important to everyone else. My family is important to me, my relationships, my job...like whatever is important to you. What is important to me affects only my life but what you do influences society. You can inspire an entire generation by lifting an eyebrow. Do you see that difference? Look, I can sit here and give you a whole spin on how important I am. That would not be true. A pilot does a far more amazing job; flying an aeroplane is more important than what I do. My job is only to entertain and in the bargain, if I am put on a pedestal and called a super star that is not of my choosing.

Does your unreal life bother you sometimes?

No, not at all. Not when I see the benefits that I reap from such a life. All my life I wanted to be a rock star and now that I am one, you can't expect me to be unhappy about it. I always wanted to be this and now I can't use it as an excuse to be someone else. No, I am very happy being what I am. And I am very thankful to my audience for helping me to realise my dream. ■

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