

NDTV 'Walk the Talk' Interview, Shekhar Gupta (Hyderabad, India)

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So what do you tell your friends in the Western world about their new stereotypes of Islam and what do you tell your Muslim brothers and sisters and followers about their stereotypes of the Western world?

Well I would start by asking a very simple question: in 2013 what is the definition of an educated person? What is the knowledge that that person should have and how is that person going to use it? And the knowledge that that person requires, in my view, is more and more understanding the world not understanding little parts of it. And I think that understanding the world is a massively complex goal but I think that we've got to admit that that's what's necessary. It's unavoidable. We're more of one world than ever before.

Interviewer: Shekhar Gupta, Editor in Chief, The Indian Express



This week we travel to outskirts of Hyderabad to interview His Highness The Aga Khan, spiritual leader of the Ismaili Community and Founder and Chairman of The Aga Khan Development Network. He speaks about how he bridges the east and the west and brings different communities together. He says that the modern world suffers from [a clash of] ignorance rather than civilization. He also speaks about how his academy is devoid of caste, religion and sect. And about how his life changed after the World Trade Centre plane crash in 2001. He also talks about the turmoil in Egypt, Syria and Pakistan and how he disagrees that the angriest Muslims are in Pakistan and sends a message to its leaders and the Shias and Sunnis.

Shekhar Gupta: Hello and welcome to Walk the Talk. I am Shekhar Gupta at the Aga Khan Academy on the outskirts of Hyderabad and I have a very special guest today, His Highness the Aga Khan.

His Highness the Aga Khan: Thank you, sir.

SG: It's been said about you, that no human being today bridges so many divides as gracefully and as powerfully as you do. And how many divides: East and the West, Islam and Christianity, material and the spiritual and, if I may add, from ancient, to medieval, to the modern and to the future. Such a special privilege to welcome you to Walk the Talk.

AK: Thank you very much and I'm very happy to talk with you. Thank you.

SG: And welcome to a country which is in many ways your homeland.

AK: Yes, yes. My grandfathers ... way back.

SG: Right. He was born in undivided India.

AK: Yes, yes he was and the place where he was born is still there. Still in the family.

SG: And the first school that ...

AK: Was built on the top of ...

SG: That was setup was built in India ...

AK: In Mundra, in Mundra

SG: In Mundra yes, and it's still there.

AK: It's still there!

SG: 1905, or?

AK: 1909 or something like that.

SG: 1909 or thereabouts, yes. And now there are ...

AK: Hundreds.

SG: Eight and ninety thousand students, and one more [school].

AK: Yes, yes.

SG: So what's this thing about the Aga Khans and education?

AK: I think my grandfather and I have always felt that education was really an essential part of a community's life, of a country's life, of an individual's life. It is the unavoidable building block for all people all around the world — it doesn't matter the age, the society — so we've really wanted to build with that and this academy is part of that exercise.

[Education is] also a way of making rational judgements. What we need in society is rational judgement.

SG: Education is also a healer of the mind. (1)

AK: It's a healer of the mind, but it's also a way of making rational judgements. What we need in society is rational judgement. It helps evaluate, it helps position issues ... (1)

SG: So before we get into the more profound discussion on making rational judgements in times when all wisdom is presumed to be given. Tell us a little bit about the academy. How is this different from the rest?

AK: Well this academy was born out of an evaluation process. Some ten years ago we got together and started asking ourselves — with my colleagues in education — where are we? What do we need? And we came to the conclusion there were a number of countries where secondary education was a critical issue. So we decided that instead of trying to respond on a country by country basis, we would try to make a network of institutions to move intelligent children from one society to another, from one language to another so that we would try and build global capacity and bring it in at the secondary level education, not retard it until tertiary education or career.

SG: And an academy like this is not limited. It's not ... access is not confined to your followers or only people of one faith?

AK: No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no. Not at all.

Purely on merit and indeed it goes further than that because it is means blind so the moment a child is qualified its our responsibility to find the ability to fund that.

SG: Purely on merit?

AK: Purely on merit and indeed it goes further than that because it is means blind so the moment a child is qualified its our responsibility to find the ability to fund that. So it's a means blind process ...

SG: Funnily I haven't heard that expression before, "means blind."

AK: "Means blind," that is you are blind to the means ... (laughs).

SG: I know, I know. It's a wonderful expression.

AK: That's the expression that is used.

SG: It's fascinating that I hear that expression from somebody who doesn't like the world "philanthropy."

AK: (Laughs)

SG: So explain to us why the objection to "philanthropy."

AK: Well I think philanthropy is very close to the notion of charity.

SG: Giving away.

AK: Giving away. And in Islam its very clear charity is desirable, necessary, but the best form of charity is to enable an individual to manage their own destiny, to improve his condition of life — or her condition of life — so that they become autonomous. They make their own decisions.

SG: And there I remember something that you said in an interview. You said becoming an Imam doesn't mean you distance yourself, you renounce the world. It actually means engaging with your community even more and improving their quality of life and to give them protection.

AK: Right.

SG: It doesn't mean going away.

AK: No.

SG: *Sanyaas* if I may use something from [the] Hindu way of life.

AK: No, it's not [just] in the Hindu way of life, it's also in many other faiths. There are Christian schools where engaging in life is not desirable. In Islam that doesn't exist. It's the contrary actually. Imams are responsible for the security of their community, for the quality of life of their community — they must engage, but they have to engage ethically.

SG: You make a very unlikely imam. You don't look like one — as we know the stereotype now — don't talk like one, don't act like one. And don't play like one — you still suffer skiing accidents. (1)

AK: If you look at the life of the Prophet, he led a normal life. And in a sense he showed that Islam is part of life. It's not separated from life. (1)

SG: And that's the inspiration for you. (1)

AK: It's what I believe to be correct. (1)

SG: And that's what should apply to all Muslims. (1)

AK: All Muslims, I think, live in the real world. I don't know of many leaders who have removed themselves totally from life. It's not part of our religious tradition. (1)

The whole domain of mysticism, as we all know, it exists in many, many, faiths. And that is an evidence of a personal search, not of an institutional search.

SG: What about the Sufis, the dervishes? (1)

AK: The whole domain of mysticism, as we all know, it exists in many, many, faiths. And that is an evidence of a personal search, not of an institutional search. (1)

SG: And religion and spirituality should be a personal exercise. (1)

AK: It's both in Islam. It's a community approach to life, there are community responsibilities, social responsibilities, but there are also personal responsibilities. Certainly, in my interpretation of Islam, the two must go hand in hand. You can't abandon one for the other. (1)

SG: There's another thing you said, [a] fascinating statement. You said there is no clash of civilisations, there's a clash of ignorances.

AK: Right, right.

SG: But that clash of ignorances [is] what someone else called "scars on our mind," in a different context — cold war — is now a reality. How do you deal with it?

AK: (Laughs) I've asked myself that question so many times — actually since 1957 ...

SG: That's since you became Imam.

AK: Since I became the Imam.

SG: At a very young age.

AK: Yes and I've used all the methods I thought I had to try and help bridge civilisations rather than have them continue to look at each other in ignorance and discover each other in conflict and all the rest so it's been an important part of my life but I'm one individual.

SG: Why call it a 'clash of ignorances'? Let me add something to that. If the stereotypes about Islam are today cast in stone, you defy all those stereotypes. (1)

AK: That's very kind. I did my degree at university on Islamic history, so I should know... (1)

SG: And you went to Harvard. (1)

AK: So in that sense, I may have had a certain amount of comfort. But if I take what was the definition of an educated child in 1957 and ask you, what was the composition of the curriculum at that time, there was nothing on Asia, nothing on Islam, very little on Africa, if anything. The industrialised world was turning around on itself. And today you still see decisions taken between the industrialised world and the Muslim world that would not have been taken if they had known each other back then. (1)

SG: And if I can be ... if I can take a little chance and be sort of indiscreet, in a way the Islamic world knocked at the doors of the Western world in the forms of those planes slamming into the buildings.

AK: Yes.

SG: And I'm over simplifying.

AK: Well I think it would be difficult to associate what we call the Ummah — the totality of the Muslim world — with that. I don't think that would be right.

SG: But that stereotype did get built.

AK: That stereotype did get built, without doubt, without doubt. But I don't think you can attribute that to the totality of the Ummah. That's simply not correct. So the stereotype itself is **massively incorrect** which then raises another question: what is the form of communication we're living in? How miscommunication be as acute as it has been? [Emphasis original]

SG: So has your life changed — and your role — since 2001, since this happened?

We're seeing that the industrialised world is no longer the industrialised world as it was 10 years ago, 15 years ago.

AK: Yes, of course! Of course. We are trying to understand the polarisations that are occurring in our world, in the industrialised world. We're seeing that the industrialised world is no longer the industrialised world as it was 10 years ago, 15 years ago. We're seeing major powers come up on the radar screen. We're seeing intermediate powers playing a new role — including India. So there is a whole process of global change now.

SG: So what do you tell your friends in the Western world about their new stereotypes of Islam and what do you tell your Muslim brothers and sisters and followers about their stereotypes of the Western world?

AK: Well I would start by asking a very simple question: in 2013 what is the definition of an educated person? What is the knowledge that that person should have and how is that person going to use it? And the knowledge that that person requires, in my view, is more and more understanding the world not understanding little parts of it. And I think that understanding the world is a massively complex goal but I think that we've got to admit that that's what's necessary. It's unavoidable. **We're more of one world than ever before.** [Emphasis original]

SG: Because your community has also suffered because it's now come to be represented by people of a certain kind. People who hog the headlines, prime-time TV and whose silhouette usually has as an AK-47 or worse. How do you deal with that and how much damage have they done to your community?

AK: I don't think the community is seen as a community that is in any way engaged in this sort of concept.

SG: Because a Muslim passport at a Western airport ... I'm again using a stereotype, but it is a reality.

AK: Right, right. Well I'm not sure that is really true of all Muslims. I think there are certain, certain areas of the Muslim world which are more, let's say, questioned than others but I don't think that's universal, really not. And that's happened in other faiths — let's be quite clear.

SG: Look at the Middle East. Egypt with which Ismailis have such an old relationship. Where does Egypt stand now?

AK: Right, right. Well I think that what we're ...

SG: And then next door, Syria.

AK: Well first of all Egypt. I tend to think — and this is a personal view — that what we're beginning to see in the Ummah, in these unstable situations, is the manifestation of civil society. I think we're seeing civil society expressing itself. It's expressing itself in different ways in different countries but essentially it is the forces of civil society. They are saying, we want an environment in which we can live freely.

SG: 'And that don't use any ideology, any religion to deny us that.' (1)

AK: 'It's our freedom'. But, at the same time that is a very fine concept so long as it is within an ethical construct. If it goes out of the ethical construct, as we are seeing in certain parts of the world, where freedom is being abused ... (1)

SG: Can you elaborate? (1)

AK: We're seeing it in a number of areas. For example, the whole banking system, which was allowed greater freedom than ever before ... What's happened? I think we've seen it in the media area, where there is a continuing debate on what's freedom, particularly in the social media. And we may be seeing it in social traditions also. Social relations are becoming much more fragile. So we're seeing an issue where civil society has an extraordinary role to play but it has to govern itself. You see it also in the area of NGOs ... if there were no governing concepts, it could be misused. (1)

SG: Are you also saying it has been misused? (1)

AK: I'm saying it has been misused. (1)

SG: So to go next door to Syria now, from Egypt.

AK: Well Syria is really a crisis situation for so many communities. Let's first of all recognise the fact that Syria is an immensely complex social product or civil product, if you want and it's been like that for centuries. It's not new. And so you have Christians, you have Muslims, you have Jews ...

SG: Different tribes ...

AK: Different tribes, you have Druze, you have very complex demographic make up, first of all. And ...

SG: Very complex neighbours.

AK: (Laughs) Yes!

SG: Very complex neighbourhood.

AK: Very complex neighbours and I think that we've seen a certain amount of proxy presence, if I can call it that, and what I'm hoping is that whereas the proxies — up until a few days ago — appeared to be unwilling to find a consensus solution, there maybe some opportunity now for that to happen.

SG: Particularly with Vladimir Putin and Obama talking.

AK: Yes and the change in Tehran which maybe there. I think there's some Gulf states who are beginning to become less concerned with where all this is going so there maybe the beginning of a — how would I call it ... melting. The issues are not quite as rough so ...

SG: Melting but not melt-down!

AK: (Laughs) Not melt-down! So I'm saying to myself, maybe we have an opportunity here not only to solve the Syrian situation, but to do more than that. I like to be optimistic.

SG: And then come closer home, to us ... Pakistan. You have such a wide network of activity there ...

AK: Yes, yes.

SG: And it's the one country where the Sunni/Shia conflict is today most pronounced.

AK: Well no, I wouldn't say it's most ...

SG: Well the targeting of Shia is the most pronounced, let me put it like that. At an ordinary level, frankly, I travel to Pakistan [and] I find no problem.

AK: Right, right.

SG: The Pakistani army itself hasn't had a problem.

AK: Well these tensions are much more omnipresent in the Ummah than just Pakistan, frankly. If you look at Bahrain, you look at Iraq, it is far from being restricted to Syria, so this tension is a tension of great concern to me and I hope that as the Syrian issue — if it does get resolved the way its going — will also reduce the tension in that relationship also. Because it's unacceptable to me, frankly. It's quite simply **unacceptable**. [Emphasis original]

SG: So do you have a message for the leaders of Pakistan? Because it's a very large Muslim population.

AK: Well I'm not sure I can blame this situation on the leaders of Pakistan ...

SG: No, I said do you have a message, do you have advice for them?

AK: Well my simple message is that in any country, my view is that people have the right to practise their faith. Whatever it is. So that is, to me, a human right. And I'm interested, for example, to see how a Western government has recently taken that issue on its agenda for economic support, such as the Canadians.

SG: Right, right. Yes absolutely.

AK: So there is an awareness in the industrialised world that this has become a serious global problem.

SG: And do you have a message for the Shias in Pakistan?

AK: Well I would have it for all Pakistanis, not just the Shia, I would have it for all Pakistanis. Which is to say, look you are Muslims. Full stop. And so long as you are Muslims abide by the basic identification of what makes a Muslim — which is the Shahada — well that's where it stops.

SG: So where's the space for conflict?(1)

AK: The conflict can be generated by things other than theology, unfortunately. Other forces come into play ... politics, economic opportunities ... (1)

SG: I feel sort of a little bit ashamed asking this question, knowing how liberal and how Catholic you are in your outlook, and how much a citizen of the world you are, it's a question I cannot help ask. Why do we find that the angriest Muslims in the world come from Pakistan. Not all Pakistani Muslims, but still if you look at the record of angry Muslims discovered around the world — post 911 [and] even before that — how come so many of them come from Pakistan. Whereas Iraq was invaded, Afghanistan was occupied — continues to be so in many ways, Palestinians have a grievance, but the angriest Muslims are in Pakistan.

... I think the Ummah feels targeted — and targeted essentially for 911 — and the Ummah as a body of millions and millions of people around the world had nothing to do with that.

AK: I wouldn't agree with that. I wouldn't agree with that. I think there is anger that is in many, many Muslim countries today because I think the Ummah feels targeted — and targeted essentially for 911 — and the Ummah as a body of millions and millions of people around the world had nothing to do with that. So I don't think that comment is, if I may say so, is fair.

(Both laugh.)

SG: No, no. It's wonderful if you disagree with that because it's easy to agree with those formulations these days.

AK: But in my view that's really not the sort of ...

SG: I'm happy if you agree with me, but I'm happier if you don't agree because it's a better story frankly ...

AK: No, no ...

SG: Because then we get into an argument, an intellectual argument.

AK: No, I don't think that [the angriest Muslims are from Pakistan] is correct. I don't think that's correct. And I would go further and I would say many of the conflicts we see today have got nothing to do with faith. They are the children of political mismanagement or worse.

SG: Or frankly, lack of intellect in questioning.

AK: Or lack of intellect. The driving background in many of these situations is political but then what happens is that there's a faith dimension that is attached to it, but it's not **borne** ...

SG: It comes sort of handy.

AK: It comes handy. You can mobilise more people. You can argue the case differently.

SG: If I may use a sort of short-cut, it's a force multiplier, or a fuel.

AK: Yes, yes, yes. So I tend to stand back and say, if I really analyse these situations, were they issues of faith? No, they were generally political issues. And you can take most of the issues that are there today and you can track them back to a political dimension.

SG: As in Afghanistan — and before we get into Afghanistan I have to say how grateful people like me are that you built this wonderful hotel in Kabul.

AK: Thank you.

SG: I used to cover the war, when the good jihad was on in the past, and I remember Hotel Kabul as it used to be in the past. It was just a Stalinist structure and the only reassuring thing about it was that it's walls were so thick that we thought a bomb will not go through it.

AK: (Laughs)

SG: And I think the menu was roast chicken at lunch and chicken roast at night.

AK: (Laughs). Anything we could breed in the basement.

SG: Well no, I think the joke was that one of Najibullah's [inaudible] lost it's way and hit a poultry farm ...

AK: (Laughs)

SG: And not until they finished that inventory, that's all you would get. But now you've build that great hotel and what that makes sure of is that people other than soldiers, spies and journalists and crooks and arms dealers visit Kabul.

AK: Well I remember very well, very early on Karzai came to me and said,. "Look, I can not even **attempt** to rebuild Afghanistan unless I have a place for people to stay. Pleeese help us to put in place something."

SG: And thus came the Serena.

AK: And thus came in Serena.

SG: As in Islamabad, Peshawar.

AK: Part of reconstruction is bringing different forces to come into the country and play their role.

SG: And you be the enabler.

AK: Well he asked whether we would do it and I said we would do it.

SG: Because when politics hurts, you need the apolitical type and there comes our favourite Imam.

AK: (Laughing) Well you're very kind to say that, but to us it was a contribution to reconstruction.

SG: And I know that you like to reconstruct and build things which then become self-sustaining.

Part of our institutional, lets say philosophy, is to carry risk. We can't do our work if we don't carry risk.

AK: That's right. That's right. That's right. Part of our institutional, lets say philosophy, is to carry risk. We can't do our work if we don't carry risk. But what we try to avoid is that the risk becomes so severe that we jeopardise the future of an institution.

SG: Or goes into the realm of gambling.

AK: Absolutely. No, no, no. (Laughs)

SG: Another thing I remember that you've said some place — and you keep saying — is that you've learnt not to express your feelings in public, if you're unhappy. Why the reserve?

AK: Because I think that a country, a community, and individual have to have continuity in the way they look at things. It's very difficult to build something which is solid with a magic wand. It takes time. You have to be consistent. You'll have your ups and downs, but if you wander, you don't get there.

SG: But you have learned to keep your feelings to yourself, but I have to express gratitude for the joy and happiness you brought to so many faces, in this country and elsewhere, and even the faces that'll come from now on including, particularly, in this academy.

AK: Well, I think that if people are happy, that's part of my role.

SG: [Well] I think you [should] keep coming back ...

AK: Thank you very much.

SG: Your Highness, people will be very happy. Thank you [inaudible]

AK: And thank you for this nice conversation.

NOTES

1. Additional content published in *The Indian Express* but not in the video or audio.

SOURCES

- [Video \(and audio source\): http://www.ndtv.com/video/player/walk-the-talk/walk-the-talk-with-his-highness-aga-khan/293281](http://www.ndtv.com/video/player/walk-the-talk/walk-the-talk-with-his-highness-aga-khan/293281)

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- [Public Address \(Djenne, Mali\) .. \(11 October 2003\)](#)
- [Ottawa Citizen Interview, Chris Mikula and Hayley Mick \(Ottawa, Canada\) .. \(7 June 2005\)](#)
- [Press remarks with an unidentified media outlet \(Central Asia\) .. \(?? 2008\)](#)
- [Pakistan Television Corporation Interview \(Karachi, Pakistan\) .. \(12 November 1985\)](#)
- [NPR News report of Press Conference in New Dehli, Philip Reeves \(New Delhi, India\) .. \(25 September 2006\)](#)