



ASGHAR ALI ENGINEER
Reformer and writer

ONE-ON-ONE

We had a Sir Syed, we need an Ambedkar

Asghar Ali Engineer talks of social justice and the centrality of secular democracy to the lives of Indian Muslims

By SUPRIYA NAIR
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MUMBAI

Born in 1939 as the son of a Bohra Muslim priest in Rajasthan, Asghar Ali Engineer, 72, went on to become an engineer, but also chose to study Islam alongside, becoming a scholar and, eventually, a reformer. His intramural arguments for reforms have made an extensive contribution to an Islamic liberation theology, the phrase first mooted by Latin American priests to describe an interpretation of Christian teachings in the context of social justice. An advocate for gender equality and secular democracy, Engineer also leads the Progressive Dawoodi Bohra reform movement, critical of authoritarianism in the Bohra priesthood.

His most personal book, the autobiography, *A Living Faith: A Quest for Peace, Harmony and Social Change*, released earlier this month. Engineer, who received the Right Livelihood Award in 2004 for promoting communal and religious coexistence in South Asia, spoke to *Mint* about his life and work as a reformer and the state of Indian secularism. Edited excerpts:

How did you begin your work as a scholar and a reformer?

I am the son of a priest. I was brought up in a very orthodox atmosphere, and studied Arabic, Persian, began to study Quran. I was very rigid in interpreting Islam, but I had non-Muslim friends, and always thought of mercy and justice as important values. So when communal riots took place in Jabalpur in 1961, when I was studying engineering in Indore, I was seriously dis-

turbed and decided to investigate. I came to understand that it was a clash of interests, not of religions, that led to violence. All the subsequent riots which I investigated confirmed my conclusion. I came over to Mumbai in 1962, and it became my mission in life that communal harmony should prevail.

You've been called an Islamic "modernizer". Is that a word you accept?

Yes, in a way. I believe we have to revise our understanding of the Quran. I divide all religious scriptures into what I call contextual and normative parts. The values of the scripture, which are normative, remain constant and universal. But because rituals are specific, if you want to be known as Muslim or Hindu or Christian or Buddhist or Jain, it is possible only through rituals, not through values alone. The contextual interpretations of scriptures must be subject to change.

So there are definitely contextual statements in the Quran, though its values are permanent. It talks, for example, of gender equality, but this was never accepted in practice by Muslims because of their patriarchal or feudal societies, in which gender equality was unthinkable. We often mix culture with religious thinking, which is what many attacking Islam confuse.

What has your own experience working for gender equality within Indian Islam been like?

Nobody can deny that there has been a lot of progress. Things are changing fast. There may be readers or TV watchers who notice the media's focus on fatwas issued by mullahs and believe that Muslim women are still as backward as they were 1,400 years ago. It gives the impression

that Islam is inherently orthodox. That, I challenge.

A middle class and upper middle class among Muslims is being educated fast, and challenging priests. In Mumbai recently, when a priest issued a fatwa that women should stay at home and not participate in public arenas, they called a press conference, put up a photograph of that priest and beat the photograph with shoes. I don't approve of such violent expression, but nevertheless the sentiment was obvious.

But is that true of rural India as well?

No. It's largely in urban India, and within that, only the educated middle class. A large number of Muslim women in cities today earn a pittance as domestic help or in manual labour.

What do you see as the primary instrument in driving social change for women?

I would say proper education. I consider Indian formal education part of the problem rather than the solution. Look at the way medieval history is taught—that all Muslim rulers did was sack Hindu temples. Children grow up with those prejudices. Take gender relations. We just saw a textbook in which it is written: a good woman is an obedient wife, serves her husband, cooks food in time to give children breakfast so that they can go to school.

Madrasas are very rigid. They teach syllabi devised during Aurangzeb's time and mullahs refuse to change. I have been an advocate for the modernization of madrasa education, but for mullahs, modernization means what? Computers? But computers are a tool. The computer is not a sign of modernity if you are

not modernizing knowledge.

Are there any madrasas which are experimenting?

There are. Not only have they modernized, they have secularized the population of their madrasas. There is a madrasa in Allahabad where 40% of the children are Hindus. Parents send their children there because the standard of teaching is much better than in a government school. Muslims produced a Sir Syed (Ahmed Khan, who established the Aligarh Muslim University in 1875). Sir Syed's main thrust was for zamindars and the children of zamindars. Ambedkar worked for the poorest of the poor. I say Muslims now need to produce an Ambedkar.

How do orthodox and secular democracy interact in India?

Here, all ulema, even the Jamaat-e-Islami Hind, very different from its Pakistani counterpart, welcome secularism. They can exercise their freedom only in secular India. Somebody in Malaysia once asked me after a lecture, "Brother, are you a Muslim?" I said yes, very much so. He said, "How can you support secular democracy? Secularism is *haram* (forbidden) in Islam." I said, you live in a country where Muslims are in an overwhelming majority. Come and live in India with me and you will realize what secularism means.

In the game of interests, modernized Muslims, led by Jinnah, thought that in independent India they would get no power, justice or jobs, and that it would be better to have a homeland in the name of Islam. For the ulema, the priority was to live in a country where they were free to follow their religion. The Jamiat-Ulma-i-Hind officially rejected partition and supported the Con-

gress and secular democracy.

That is why personal laws persist. Of course, the Uniform Civil Code is one way to achieve more gender justice, but then it has other dangers. I think that rather than wasting time promoting a code that will never be accepted by minorities, it is better to work for gender equality from within the culture itself.

You've written extensively on Islam's compatibility with pluralism and democracy. What did you think as you watched the Arab Spring begin?

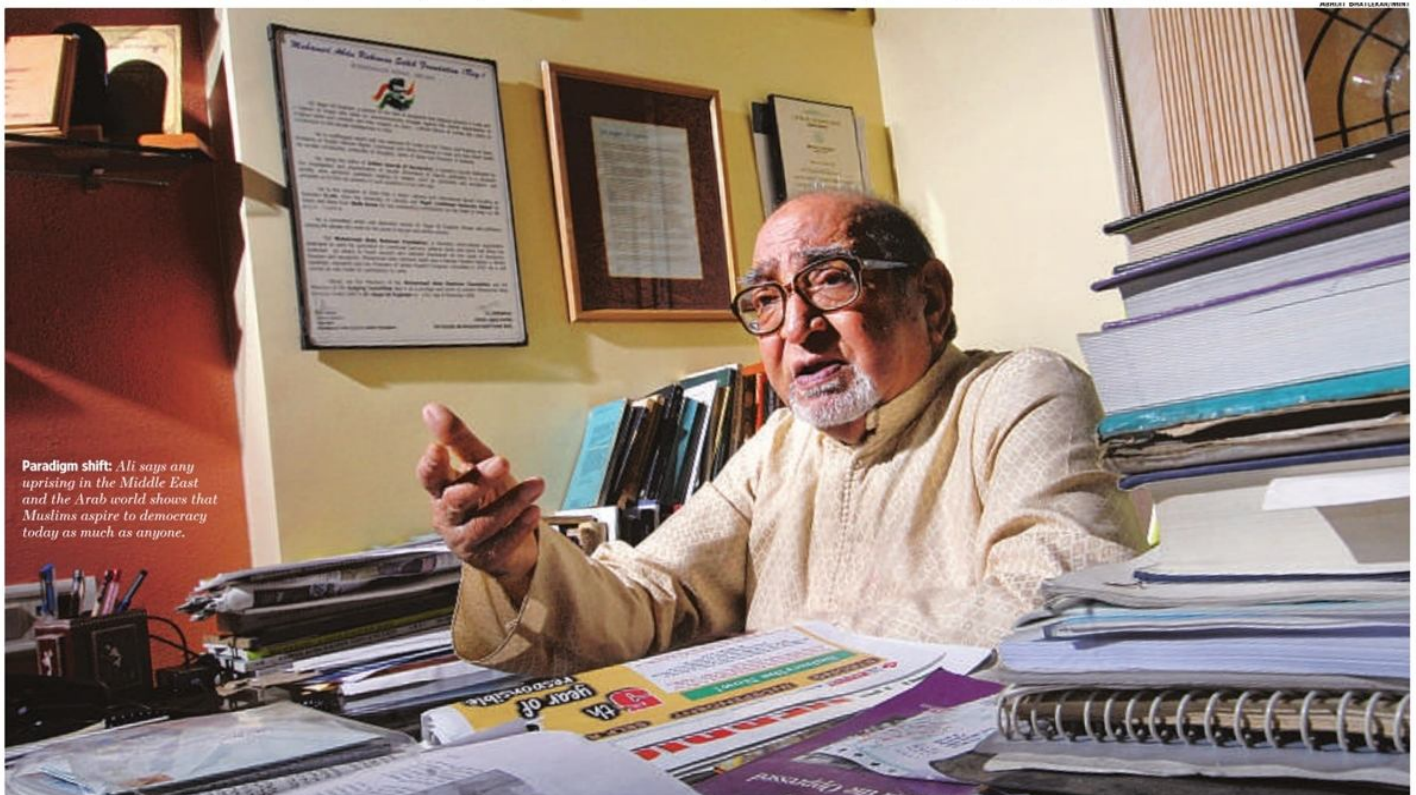
It is a welcome sign. A people's uprising in the Middle East and the Arab world shows that Muslims aspire to democracy as much as anyone might. It also refutes the charge that Islam is an inherently violent religion; if the protests turned violent, it was because of the dictators' supporters, or Western intervention.

Don't you think India has shifted more sharply towards majoritarianism in the last two decades?

Yes, it has become more majoritarian. The Congress' principles are secular and democratic, but for every policy decision it now looks towards the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) to gauge its reaction.

You see, the middle class is becoming more important in policymaking and the middle class tends to go with the BJP, first because of support for Hindutva, and second because they feel threatened by reservations. Look at this anti-corruption movement of (Anna) Hazare. It began as a purely upper-caste, middle-class urban movement. Perhaps consciously or unconsciously the thought is that today, if you can bring pressure on this (Lokpal) Bill, tomorrow we can do this for reservations.

Indian formal education is more a part of the problem rather than the solution



Paradigm shift: Ali says any uprising in the Middle East and the Arab world shows that Muslims aspire to democracy today as much as anyone.

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