

# 'The most misunderstood word in Islam is jihad...it means to strive, struggle to make society better'

For Dr Zakir Naik, the tele-evangelist who preaches Islam in its most pristine form, Osama bin Laden is neither a terrorist nor a saint. And he sees Sadhvi Pragya the same way. In this interaction with *The Indian Express* Editor-in-Chief SHEKHAR GUPTA on NDTV 24x7's *Walk the Talk*, he says some young Muslims have been brainwashed with wrong information, but they are few in number

■ My guest this week, 43-year-old Zakir Naik, preaches modern Islam, and not just Islam but his own interpretation of all the faiths around the world. Welcome to *Walk the Talk*.  
It's a pleasure.

■ You are an Islamic preacher who is dressed in a suit and uses television as a medium. In these times of a sort of Talibanisation, people would think that Islamic preachers would be telling Muslims to throw their TV sets away. But you are a different kind of preacher.

I believe in the interpretation of the *Quran* and the *Hadith*. When I speak about religion, I go back to the original scriptures. When I speak about Hinduism, I go back to the *Vedas*, when I speak about Islam, I go back to the *Quran*.

■ By doing so, you build a following of crores of people from around the world. It's all God's grace.

■ You said that you go back to original sources. Are you suggesting that those who use the medium of Islam to put restrictions on watching television, going to a school, particularly for women, are not reading the original scriptures?

They may take a verse of the *Quran* and misinterpret it. Perhaps a scholar misinterpreted it 50 or 100 or 200 years ago, but they believe in his view entirely. Whenever I read the statement of a scholar, I go back and see why he has said a particular thing. Most people just believe and quote the scholar without checking from where he has got it. I believe that there is no verse in the *Quran* or the *Hadith* that says that television is prohibited. There is a statement in the *Quran* which talks about *tasveer* or portrait. But that doesn't mean it talks about photography and videography. At the time of the Prophet, photography and videography didn't exist. There is no verse in the *Quran* or the *Hadith* which says that watching television is *haram*. But watching pornography is definitely *haram*.

■ So do you believe that Islam has underservingly got a bad name, because of the wrong interpretation of the original scriptures?

That's right. It is the most misunderstood religion. The most misunderstood word in Islam is *jihad*. The Arabic word comes from the word *jihduh* *jihad*. It means to strive and to struggle.

■ Does it mean holy war?

No, it doesn't. In the Islamic context, it means to strive and to struggle against one's own evil inclinations, to strive and struggle to make society better. Even if a person is striving and struggling in a battle to defend himself, it is called *jihad*. This word holy war was first by the Christian crusaders. And now it's used for the Muslims. This is unfortunate.

■ There are invocations for Muslims to rise in *jihad* either against the West, or in some places, against India. So, people who give these invocations haven't read their books right.

Some may be right, some may be wrong. If someone says that I am going to do *jihad* to clean up the society and that pornography should be removed from society, he's right. So he's striving and struggling to remove obscenity from society. But the *Quran* says if any human being kills another human being, whether Muslim or non-Muslim, it is as though he has killed the whole of humanity.

■ That would apply to those who killed people on 26/11.

Yes, definitely. It is against the teaching of the *Quran*.

■ And to kill in the name of Islam is unfair to Islam?

Unless, as the verse says, he has killed someone for justice; unless it falls under these two categories of murder against murder or spreading corruption...

■ ... I am looking at specific examples

like 26/11.

Even if some non-Muslim has done harm to you, you can't go and kill him. It's totally against Islam.

■ I have been watching your DVDs and I was fascinated by the fact that you make a distinction between 9/11, which you say was a terrible thing, and Osama bin Laden. You are hesitant to accept that he is a terrorist.

I am hesitant to accept him as a terrorist or a saint. Personally, what I have learnt about Osama bin Laden is from the news channels, from the BBC and the CNN. So if you ask my view on Osama, it will not be doing justice, because the *Quran* says whenever you get any information, you should cross-check it before passing it onto the third person.

■ That's what we teach in journalism schools.

So, if you ask me about Osama bin Laden, I would say that he's neither a terrorist nor a saint. I haven't interviewed him, I haven't done a survey. And if people say Zakir is supporting Osama, I say that's not the case, I am being neutral.

■ But at the same time, you will say that the destruction of the twin towers was...

...The person who destroyed the twin towers was wrong. He cannot be a practising Muslim, he has to be condemned.

■ But you are not sure if it's Osama bin Laden?

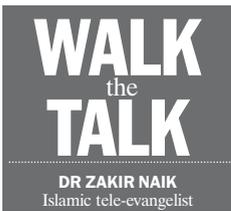
Yes, because I keep travelling and get information from documentaries, which say that it was an inside job done by George Bush himself. I get conflicting news and the evidence I saw in that documentary was far superior to the evidence against Osama. But in the same way, if someone asks me, if Sadhvi Pragya Singh Thakur is a terrorist, I say, that is what the Mumbai police are saying. For me, she is neither a terrorist nor a saint. She has to undergo a trial. I respect almost all the judgments of the Indian judiciary. Only once or twice I have disagreed. I am a person who observes things objectively, rather than emotionally. I see innocent people, whether Muslim or non-Muslim, are harassed by certain people for their own motives, and finally the judicial system comes to their rescue. I have faith in the judicial system. That's the reason when they ask me about Sadhvi Pragya, I say she is neither good nor bad. I use the same scale for a Muslim and a non-Muslim.

■ What about the Constitution? The Constitution is what gives every citizen equal rights, but there are many in the Muslim community who complain that the Indian system is not good enough.

I am proud to be an Indian. India is one of the few countries in the world that gives a right to its citizens to preach, practice and follow the religion of their choice. I don't know a single rule in the Constitution that forces Muslims to do something that's prohibited in Islam or prevents them from doing something that's compulsory in Islam.

■ When you say this to your audience, particularly young Muslims, do they doubt it?

Some people don't like it, but the majority is happy, because I give them reasons. For example, according to Indian law, people have a right to consume alcohol, but it doesn't say that every Indian should have alcohol compulsorily. So, the law gives you the liberty to follow Islam, a practising Muslim, which you cannot do



in America or in the UK. India has special rules like the Muslim Personal Law.

■ Dr Naik, if I may call you that, you didn't practise much. We know that you are an MBBS doctor.

Yes, basically.

■ Why are some young Muslims angry in India?

Maybe some of the youngsters have been brainwashed with wrong information. But they are very few.

■ And you tell them for an Indian Muslim there is no conflict between Indian nationalism and Islam?

Nationalism has different meanings. If nationalism is following the country, I am all for it. The *Quran* and the *Hadith* say as long as it doesn't conflict with the law of the *Quran* and the *Hadith*, and the law of God and the Prophet, you have to follow every law of the country you are living in. There's no contradiction.

■ India has a large Muslim population.

Second largest in the world. India was ruled by Muslims for a thousand years. During the time of the Mughals, India was at the top of the world. The British took away the wealth, and created a divide between the Hindus and the Muslims. The Hindus and Muslims used to live harmoniously. It was the British policy of divide and rule that caused all this friction.

■ What's your view on the two-nation theory? There is a view that if India had not got divided, it would have been a country with 45 crore Muslims.

I believe the worst thing that happened to this country was the Partition; it shouldn't have taken place. It was better for the Muslims, if they lived as one country. Imagine the resources of India and Pakistan put together, whether it's sports or intellectual. It would have been far better and we would have been a bigger force. India is supposed to become a superpower in the next few years. If it had been joined together — imagine, Pakistan, Bangladesh...

■ ...And Muslims would have had much better political power.

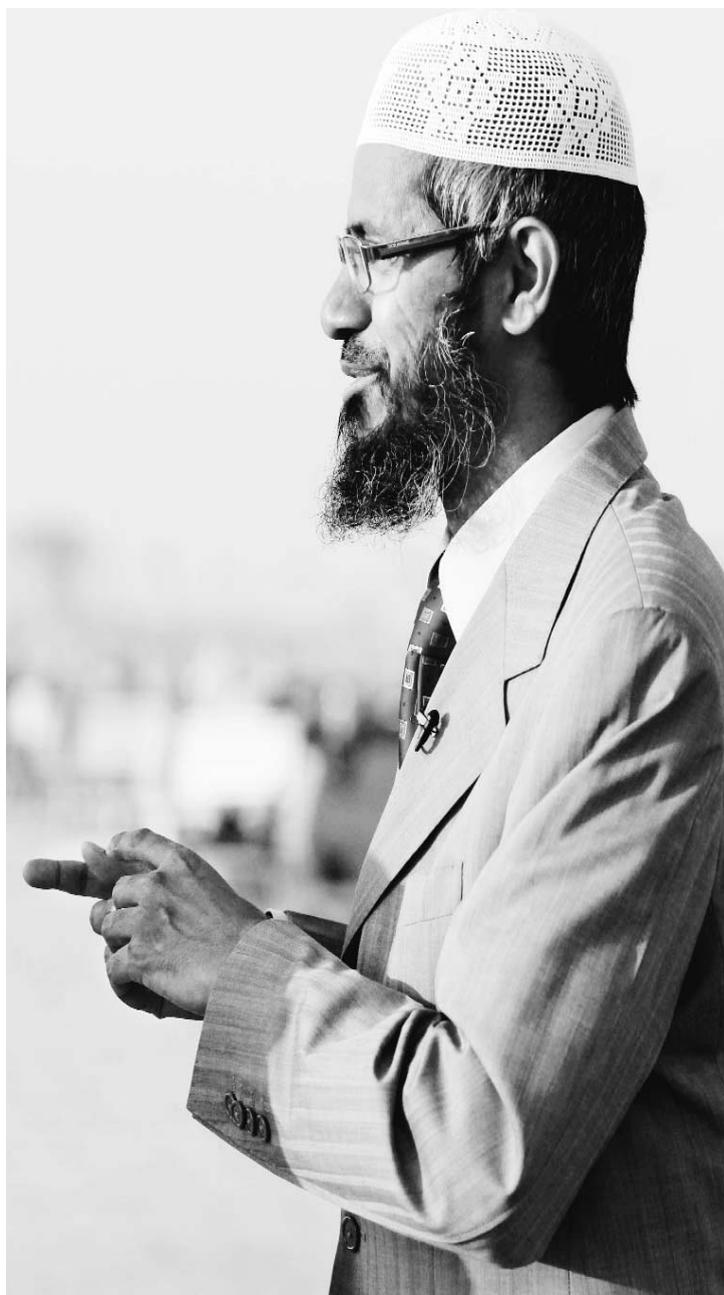
Undoubtedly, it would have been more of a gain. There are many theories why the Partition took place. I don't want to go into the details. It was engineered. It was more of a pressure tactic used by some of the Muslim politicians to get their rights and it backfired.

■ The Partition harmed the Muslims of the subcontinent.

That's my view. If they were together, they'd have been a bigger force, lived harmoniously as before, and better in terms of economics, education.

■ Maybe the Partition was accepted too easily by the Congress?

These politicians weren't really prac-



tising Muslims.

■ It was said at that time, that all well-to-do Muslims, Muslim intellectuals, the Muslim upper crust went to Pakistan.

The majority of the Muslims stayed in India. The population of Indian Muslims is much more than that of Pakistan. If you give me a choice, I'll prefer to be in India. It's a much better country.

■ Look at the Oscars for example, two Muslims won Oscars for music. So, there is something to be said for a multicultural, pluralistic society.

If we had been together, we'd have been a much better force.

■ You have followers in Pakistan.

The number of viewers in Pakistan is much more.

■ So when you study a situation like Kashmir, the key to permanent peace in the subcontinent, do you have a solution?

I don't have a solution. I was called to give a talk in Kashmir in 2003. The Governor called me and said you have a large following. The people of Kashmir are fed up and this conflict is mainly due to politicians. If there is some problem in India, the politicians create a problem in Kashmir and the entire attention is diverted to Pakistan. This is used as a trump card. The same thing happens in Pakistan. When I spoke to the people there, they said, we don't want to be with Pakistan and neither with India, we want to be independent.

■ Given that may not happen, what is the solution?

The Government should uplift the peo-



ple of Kashmir, give them good education and win their trust, give them more facilities so that they are happy to be with India. We use Kashmir as a political vote bank.

■ You run an English-medium school and did your schooling under the ICSE system.

That's right.

■ So I could describe you as an odd *maulana* — you are talking of English-medium education, you are talking of sending girls to modern schools, you defend Samia Mirza.

I defend her for whatever good she has done. The word *maulana* is used for a religious person or a scholar. I don't consider myself to be a scholar. I consider myself to be a student of Islam and comparative religion.

■ Tell us your views on modern education?

The first guidance the Almighty God gave was to read. Our Prophet said it is obligatory on the part of every Muslim, man or woman, to acquire knowledge.

■ So you disapprove of this business of shutting down schools, driving girls out of schools, in parts of Afghanistan and Pakistan?

Anyone doing that is wrong. If there is any wrong practice going on in school — like what we read in the newspapers now, that by the time a girl leaves the school, she loses her virginity — and you want to stop it and create an educational system where these obscene things do not take place, I am all for it.

■ But you can't shut schools, you can't bar girls from going to schools?

No, you can't. You have to create an environment where they get better education. You cannot stop them. If you feel that this education system is wrong, create a better one.

■ If you look at the Sachar Committee report, you can see that one of the reasons that Muslims got left behind is insufficient education and, second, the emphasis on Urdu. If you have an Urdu-medium education, it becomes very difficult for Muslims to find jobs.

That's right. Justice Sachar has blamed the Government for not giving adequate facilities. If you see the prestigious colleges, Muslims students comprise only 4 per cent. In the IIMs, he says, the Muslims comprise only 1.3 per cent, and in the IIT 3.3 per cent. I am not against Urdu-medium education, but at the same time we should realise that today the international language is English. Personally, I give more importance to Arabic — to understand the word of God — and English.

■ You have a very popular channel, Peace TV, and you keep talking about a news channel.

In June, we plan to launch Peace TV Urdu, mainly for the non-Muslims. It will be 25 per cent in Hindustani and 75 per cent in English. Then next in the pipeline is a news channel.

■ One of the fascinating things you do is to have religious debates with leaders of other communities. Which one did you enjoy most of all?

In America, there was a Christian missionary who wrote a book saying there are 30 scientific errors in the *Quran*. I went to Chicago and we had a dialogue on the *Bible* and the *Quran* in the light of science. That I enjoyed. In India, it was with Sri Sri Ravishankar when we launched Peace TV. The topic was the concept of God in Islam and Hinduism in the light of the sacred scriptures. My main purpose was to tell people that the basic concept of God in Islam and Hinduism is the same — one God, no idol worship. I don't say that all religions are the same. Any person who says all religions are the same, doesn't know about religion. I know there are differences. God is the same. There are similarities in different religions. I work on the similarities and get the people together rather than divide them.

■ Getting people together is a wonderful note to end this conversation on. So nice to have you on *Walk the Talk*.  
It's a pleasure. Thank you.

Transcript prepared by Sharika C  
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