

Sushmita Sen
Actress and Miss Universe

YT: So our first question is, with the rise of digital platforms and audiences, embracing more of a layered and unconditional narrative, so this Indian entertainment industry has taken a bold new turn. So as an actress, what is one turn that you think is the most creative in this landscape?

SS: Brilliant question. For one, I think, you see, there's always been unmeasurable potential in all aspects of storytelling. And I'm not even talking about platforms right now. I'm purely saying in terms of actors, directors, editors, music directors, sound recordists, everything that go into making a film, writers, the list is endless. But all of this potential, especially in a country like ours, where you have such a young population, They were not getting, they were not being able to break through the ability that they possessed but not be able to get into the market where all of these people, the big names that you know for the last 25 -30 years, they had a monopoly over the market. Today, creativity has gone past that market. Now there is true potential that is getting an opportunity to explore. That's why also with digital and the internet and the globe becoming such a small place, All of you young people are absorbing and taking in content from around the world. I mean, you guys are watching Korean soap operas for crying out loud. So you kind of know now the kind of content that you would like to watch. And then when you see Indian cinema or the American platforms or any platform, including YouTube, coming up with short films to full -length films to any format of storytelling, where we are exploring new concepts and trying to dare to be different. that was not acceptable earlier but today that has become a global phenomenon and India at the Oscars, India at Emmys, India in everybody's fingertips today is watching content that they like and you cannot monopolize creativity. So I think long enough answer but in a nutshell I think that's been the biggest move is the fact that there is innovation and global presence. Like we have seen there are a lot of different films on YouTube that have progressed and moved on to OTT platforms because of their popularity. And that is a very good answer. So moving on with the next question.

YT: Ma 'am, we have seen that you have balanced big blockbusters with powerful character -driven roles across decades. However, you could slip into a genre that has always tempted you, maybe something you rarely explored. What would it be and why?

SS: Well, thank you for the compliment. So basically, I started my life and career at your age because I won Miss Universe when I was 18. But if you ask me, I feel like as an actor and a creative person, I have just started. Like when I get into a workshop before filming something, doesn't matter the genre. I'm like this excited kid who's been given the candy store and said, pick what you want from here and make what you want from here and do it to your taste and liking. But personally, I feel of all of the films I've done, I haven't even scratched the surface of

various genres. But the one that I really, really want to explore is action. And the funniest thing is, I will turn 50 this year. And this couldn't be a better time for me to get into, let's say, the official training mechanism of Maathai. I've always wanted to do action which is very hand-to-hand. It's raw. And to be able to not cheat it, but to do it myself. And so I am getting ready, and if you know the word manifestation, I have been manifesting that genre for a while, so we should get there soon.

YT: Ma'am, after sharing screens with so many remarkable co-actors, is there any one simple moment or piece of advice from a fellow actor that you still carry with you today?

SS: Okay, so my fellow actors are all very naughty people and all of them have been fantastic actors to work with also because they bring to the table very different kinds of strengths. Salman would bring the rawness of just being himself. Half the time I would joke that I couldn't hear the dialogue that he just said because he forgot it and he just mumbled the line. And then he would dub it so perfectly that you would think, I remember he mumbled, but it sounds like he said the line there. So you learn how to be a little adventurous, a little childlike when you work with a Salman. With a Shah Rukh, for example, you learn how to control the energy of a room. And that is a big part of uniting an entire team to give their best, to bring the best out of a film. So other than doing your lines and being stressed about your actions and your lighting and your everything, your performance, you also pay attention to the light dadas who are sitting on the roof and staring at you. You learn to have tremendous spatial awareness. This came from working with Shah Rukh. Ajay Devgn, I learned intensity from. Every actor didn't really have to say anything. They were just being themselves. And through that, as an actor like me, who is like a sponge, I absorb energies. I picked up a lot. But I think one of the best things I ever learned is from my director. who said, people always say, enter into the character, try and be this other person. But remember that if Vasu is playing a character and Vasu is not a part of that character, then he'll look like a caricature. He'll never look like a real person on screen. So Vasu or Rushabh or Emmanuel or Prisha, they have to bring themselves into a role. Therefore, when I learned that and I learned that pretty late in my career, Arya happened. And I allowed Sushmita Sen to be a part of her journey. And that's why she became so believable, because you never lied in that character. You brought the truth. So that's a huge learning as an actor. You cannot, you can lie to a friend, to your parents, to the society. You cannot lie to yourself and you cannot lie to a camera. It catches it.

YT: In so many ways, Arya mirrors strength and resilience. As a woman, a mother, and a fighter yourself, where does she end and you begin?

SS: Actually, that's exactly what I was talking about earlier. Arya is an extension of Sushmita. And I think this is also because of a brilliant director like Mr. Ram Madhwani. who realized very quickly that the way Arya was written before I confirmed it as an actor, was a very different

kind of Arya. In her character traits, in her arc as a person, everything changed the minute they casted me. Because Mr. Ram Madhwani said, no, we have to bring in the truth and the only way that's going to happen is our Arya was never vulnerable because we're getting a strong woman to play her. So let a strong woman feel vulnerable at times, but let her not be someone who was very vulnerable and then she found strength, which was the original script of Arya. So, yeah, she's definitely an extension of myself. As long as I begin, she never ends.

YT: So ma'am, as someone who has seen the industry evolve, how do you view the current opportunities and representation of female actors in Indian cinema today?

SS: I think it's fantastic compared to the 90s that I come from. At that time, we were like, You know you have in a frame the hero and some furniture, we were one of them. We were one of the furniture pieces that had to look very nice and pretty and dress up nice and do one song and maybe one sad scene in which you had to show all of your acting powers. 90s was like that. It was all about your look and that song. which I personally as an actor found very frustrating because I was not doing anything different. I was always just the sidekick of the hero. And so I gave up acting for about eight years. The reason I came back was because the world was changing. I would not say that the female actors today have it all. They don't. This is work in progress. I know for a fact that the Western world, who we seem to mimic many a times on a social level and creative level, they are still struggling with trying to get their women to have equal pay, equal positioning and opportunity, but they are a little ahead of us. We still have to get there, but we are work in progress. Today, okay, for example, From the time I've rejoined the film industry or come back to the art of cinema, I've seen a kahaani being released with Vidya Balan. This was unheard of back then, you know, because the distribution market and everyone would say, female -led films don't work. There was only one iconic actor who, for a period of six to eight months, that's it, back in the 80s and 90s, early 90s, had made a market for herself. And that was Ma'am Sridevi. Other than that, there was never a market for a female -led film or any content female -led. I think the biggest change today is what you watch with brilliant directors is usually led by content. It is not led by a gender. It is not led by the hero or the female lead. To have that I would have to say a big thank you to OTT and to the digital world, because if this was left only to single screens and multiplexes, you would still have the same five heroes with their market showing up as blockbusters. You would not have what you have on OTT, and you would also not have an occasional saiyyara, you know. This is all happening because this generation is open to so much more. So it's good. Good for women. I'm really happy to be still an actor and to be able to see this live. But honestly, in my lifetime, it would be wonderful to see women command the kind of creative freedom and the pay parity to be equal. So it would be lovely to see that. We have a long way to go, guys.

YT: If you could plan the most remarkable dinner, like just you and three other women who could be in the past or the present, who would you invite and what would you like to learn from them?

SS: You know what I would like? I would like to have lots of women there because you know I'm someone who's from when I was from when I can remember actually I remember being a person who's always been has lived an inspired life Like I often say this, from a paanwala to a president, everyone inspires me because I'm just someone who likes to observe life and learn from it and when I see people who, so that's why I say I would like a really big table with lots of women on it because I've met such incredible women and they're not necessarily famous. They're just women who've lived a very authentic life and made a difference to all of us. lives without making a big show show of it. But if I had to choose three, I'd go back to my childhood because I would go back to people who inspired me at a time when I was very moldable. But I'm going to be greedy and just add a few names, OK? So I was most inspired by Mother Teresa growing up. And I'm one of those lucky people who got to meet her before she passed away. So it was a big wish fulfillment. And I could not just meet her, I could feel her energy and the kind of contribution and the love of the idea that you can be Albanian and come and make a difference to millions of lives in a foreign country and make it your own. And so humanity has no geographies. I learned that from her. And I would love to learn more. So she's on the table. I would love to have Madonna, would you believe it? Because growing up, my kaku, my uncle, would send me, you know, VHS tapes of her from the US, of her shows. So she had done a documentary, which I had received. And I'm not going to use all of the language that was in it, but what amazed me about her at a very young age, when I was very young, was she was like five foot nothing, she is five foot nothing, but she could command 150 ,000 people with the power of her audacity, not even her voice, I'd say her audacity. I had not seen someone that hardworking in the ability, so I'm not even talking about Madonna the musician, I'm talking about Madonna the audacity. So I was very inspired by that because I could see a person who was so different and was celebrating the fact that she was different. She didn't want to belong to a crowd. So she would be on the table. And, oh my God, it's a long list, but I would from today's times also take Malala Yousafzai. Her life has inspired me in ways that a young person could have that much courage, that much courage. Whether she was conferred with a Nobel Prize or not is very secondary. What is incredible is that when my daughters go to school and they learn about her contribution to education and empowering lives through it, she could have so easily been consumed by what happened to her. Instead, she went and turned it on its axis. Now that inspires me. That kind of potential just totally inspires me. Jane Fonda. Huge, huge fan of this lady. And I met her when I was 18 years old, your age, in Egypt for a United Nations conference. And when I heard her speak and her husband Ted Turner speak, he doesn't count because this is a female table, but still, they inspired me to better my language and to be a better public speaker. So a lot of things that has allowed me to connect with people and make a difference in my own life have come from people that have inspired me along the way to do so.

YT: So ma 'am, at 20, we all believe the funniest things about ourselves. So what is the one belief that 20 -year -old Sushmita held that makes you smile still?

SS: So for me at 20, I think that hasn't changed. You know, have you heard of this term, the arrogance of youth? Have you? Okay, so when you're that young, you think you're invincible. And it may not be the funniest thing, but I promise you that idea that I was going to be invincible, like this, nothing's going to touch me. Anything I touch will turn to gold. My private jets, my this, my that, you know, when you are that age, you want to be doing so many things. And you know that you're going to do them because, you know, you don't even have to work for it half the time. So you just get it. But then you learn, oh, these are dreams worth having and making a difference with. They're only worth when you work towards them. Because you don't want anyone to ever tell you, I gave it to you. You want to say, I earned this. I made it myself. So I think at that age the funniest thing I believed about myself was I am invincible. Hence the arrogance of youth.

YT: Ma 'am, so the next question is decades from now when someone hears the name Sushmita Sen, what is the one word of feeling you hope instantly lights up in their mind?

SS: I don't think it'll be their mind, I think they'll smile. I hope and pray the first thing they do is smile and that's enough. I came into a world where I think we all have but in my awareness I feel like the one thing that I want to leave people behind which is true, you know, you'll do great things in your life, you'll have a very famous name, you'll have a body of work, lots of money, maybe you will be famous and both infamous, doesn't matter. At the end, the only thing people remember is the feeling. And I hope and pray to God that when that happens and they think of me decades from now, the first thing they do is smile. Even before they ask, who was she? What did she do? Where was she from? They just smile and then my job is done.

YT: Ma 'am, by embracing motherhood on your own terms, you have redefined it's meaning. So what is one lesson that your daughters have taught you that have deeply shaped your perspective?

SS: Thank you so much for the answer ma 'am. Moving on to the next question. Yeah. So ma 'am, by embracing motherhood on your own terms, you have redefined it's meaning. So what is one lesson that your daughters have taught you that have deeply shaped your perspective? Beautiful question again. So my daughters have at various stages taught me different things. And without trying to teach it, just by virtue of them being in my life, I was a very impatient teenager. And I became even more impatient in my 20s, because I was like, hey, time is going by, I have so many things to do and la -da -da -da -da, you know. Suddenly I became a mom at 24. And my Renee, she taught me, my elder child is called Renee, and she taught me patience. I learned that

at a very young age, not that I've mastered it, I can be pretty impatient even at 50, but it taught me that concept for the first time. Then I realized your heart can beat outside of you, that suddenly someone else can beat priority in your life. And all of that came through my children. But in a nutshell, to sum it up, they gave me purpose. They gave my life purpose. Otherwise, given how carefree and completely globetrotting I was, I would probably not be a very stable person. They grounded me in a way that I am so deeply grateful for. Of all the roles in my life that I've played and continue to play, being a mum is the one that comes the most naturally to me.

YT: Ma'am your unrivaled spirit and zeal to transcend all the boundaries has been an inspiration for so many of course including the people at St. Xavier's College Kolkata. What message would you like to give to them?

SS: Oh boy. Firstly, my first messages as it is you guys are way ahead of me for me to advise both in terms of the era you're living in and the fact that you're more educated than I am. I'm a 12th pass and then I graduated in life. I never went to a university or a college or so I am that prime example of you God chooses a certain path and you walk that path with absolute conviction, okay? So, I don't know about advice, but I would tell you this, that you have to always remember that there's a word called balance. And whatever you choose to do in your life, always strive to come to the center. When you go to right, come back to center. You go to left, come back to center. And the only way you can do that is to Shut out the noise of people and the world and even your parents, peers, the society, your best friends, everyone telling you who you are. Get to know yourself. And this is what I believe in the most, that if you are in touch with who you are, you become a rock solid support to yourself and to the people that you love and to the society and the world at large. So be authentic. Don't follow. You were born to be a leader. So lead yourself into that greatness. Don't wait to win something for them to announce you a leader. You're already one. Acknowledge that and Prisha, I hope you change the world in ways that we cannot see today. Emmanuel, I so pray to God that you and I, we can remain invincible forever. Vasu, when are we taking that picture? And Rusabh, you have a very, very, very, very deep soul, Rusabh. You're going to do great things in your life and you're going to come back and tell me these stories. And I'm coming for that game when you own that team. Thank you so, so, so much for this wonderful conversation. I was expecting it to be this marvelous because you guys are amazing. But yeah, if I could leave you with exactly what I was saying as a very loving message. This has helped me in really strong stead in the past and it's something I truly believe in which says that if you don't stand for something you fall for everything. So stand for something and that something has to come from you and once you find it hold on to it so that you're always in balance and then have a great life. Have an invincible life.