

Interview with Prof Siddiq Wahid

Vice-Chancellor, Kashmir Islamic University, Srinagar

November 7, 2006

Revue de l'Inde: Could you tell us something about the Kashmir Islamic University?

Prof. Wahid: The University was proposed by the Jammu and Kashmir Waqr Board and promulgated by an act of the State Legislature in 2005. The idea was mainly to have a private University, not affiliated with the Government, in order to teach Islamic subjects such as the Sufism of Kashmir, Islamic history, Islamic sciences and so forth. It was the basic intent.

Our first question was "Let us address practical issues such as providing jobs for those who will graduate". Although scholarships or research is quite exciting, we have decided to focus on practical aspects. Our other approach was to make the operational costs [of the University] financially self-sufficient. The idea is to generate ourselves the required funds: from the fees or from commercial activities that the University may take on, so that we are really independent.

There are few other things on the cards: for example, we would like to a Center for Comparative Civilizations.

Revue de l'Inde: Can you elaborate on this?

Prof. Wahid: Yes, let us have [different] civilizations talking with each other. When we talk about civilizations, we talk about the 4 or 5 major

civilizations of the world: one is the Hindu civilization; one is the Buddhist, the Islamic and then the Christian.

Revue de l'Inde: At least 3 of these 4 are represented in the State of J & K!

Prof. Wahid: Yes, exactly. We would like to have a place to hold constant and continuous dialogue. Another center that we will open soon is the Center for West Himalayan Cultures.

All these areas 'hang' together. We would like to explore how it hangs together. For example, they have mystic links, anthropological links, ethnic links, linguistic or ethnological links. What is the map of this place? I think that it will take us 5 years to figure this out. The languages [of these areas] are also linked; they borrow from each others, even some strangely different languages such as Kashmiri and Ladakhi. In our Ladakhi language, we have all sorts of borrowed words, they are borrowed from languages such as Uygur or Kashmiri. This is the general direction in which we are moving in.

One of the exciting things that we are doing and which is something new, is that we have introduced a one-year intensive English course. It will be a bridge to educate people who have been studied for a *maulvi fazal* which is the equivalent of a BA [maitrise] in Arabic. Usually they have no facilities in English and as a result they can not find a job, because nobody speaks [only] Arabic.

Revue de l'Inde: They graduate from madrassas?

Prof. Wahid: Yes, from madrassas, though fairly benign madrassas. The second problem is that they can not continue in the Kashmir

University because they need to be proficient in English to go beyond their MA. They are unable to consult secondary sources in English or any other western languages, [though] a lot a foreigners have done a lot of researches in the field [of Islamic studies].

Though we just introduced it, this course has become enormously popular because people want either to find a job or continue their studies. At the end of the day, if someone knows English well enough and is good at Arabic, he can get a fairly good job. That is our idea.

Revue de l'Inde: I understand that you have some project with the Archeological Survey of India (ASI). Can you elaborate?

Prof. Wahid: Today, when you speak of an Islamic University, there is immediately a problem, a prejudice, even sometimes bigotry. This is connected to the debate on Islam, where Islam is at during the 21st century and also the policies of some Western countries towards Islamic countries.

For the Islamic University, one way [to counter this] is to start doing things which in other circumstances would be considered completely normal. One of things that we have identified is to help restore the 2 Hindu temples in Avantipura. It is our intention to approach the Archeological survey of India and tell them: "Look, we will monitor (or whatever you want to call it) the restoration of these temples. We can find the funds and scholars [to undertake the project]." That is one of the projects that we have.

We are also thinking to have some healing process within the State. There are many Buddhist monuments in the Valley, a few Muslim monuments in Ladakh, there are Hindu monuments in the Valley and Muslim shrines in Jammu province. This idea is to involve the civil

society: to have for example, Buddhists from Ladakh, working here in the Valley [on Buddhist monuments] and Muslims going to Ladakh or Jammu and similarly for Hindu monuments. It is nice to say that we all have a brotherly [relationship] and that historically we never fought, (in fact, it is doubtful because there has been a history of fighting each other), but to give an institutional hold to this [type] of dialogue, our idea is to have this sort of extra-curriculum activity happening. I really believe that such institutions, given the right opportunity, can significantly contribute to normalizing the situation [in the State].

Revue de l'Inde: Could you tell us something about the debate within Islam? Is it part of what you intend to do in the University?

Prof. Wahid: Yes, very much. I have to tell you that next year, in May, we are going to have an International Conference, for which we already have the funds. It will be entitled: "Islam and its relations with the West". The idea is to bring a group from 4 to 6 non-Muslim scholars from various parts of the world who have worked on contemporary Islam and get 4 or 5 Muslim scholars, also from abroad who have worked on the same subject. France is a great center for this type of studies. It will be a platform for discussion. The format will be to call these 10 or 12 people and ask them all to speak. They will have a South Asian audience, Muslim and non-Muslim. This [interaction] will help us to see how scholars are thinking in the 21st Century. [Further] we are planning to invite 40-50 scholars from South Asia (India, Pakistan and Bangladesh). Papers will be presented but the debate will be between the 40-50 and the 10-12. The debate will go on for 2 days.

Revue de l'Inde: It will be on an academic level?

Prof. Wahid: Yes, purely academic. Following this, we would like to invite 100 people from the J & K State from both side of the LoC, they will be presented with the summary of the previous 2 days of debate. They will understand in which direction this large and profound debate is going and how it is going.

The idea is bring out the fact that South Asia has contributed for a long time to Islamic studies, theology, philosophy or mysticism. For the last 100 years, it has been dormant. We want the University to have this kind of debate, but further than that we would like to shake Islamic studies out of its stupor.

Revue de l'Inde: Is your University planning to go till the Doctorate level?

Prof. Wahid: Yes, in a few years time; it will take between 3 to 5 years. The idea is to generate debate and discussion and create a corpus of young people from this region who can [not only] contribute to the region but also go outside and speak for the region.

Revue de l'Inde: Recently there was some UN surveys stating that Education was a problem for the Muslim world, do you feel that your University could go a long way to help to solve this problem?

Prof. Wahid: Yes, I think so. There are 2 aspects. I do not think that Muslims are any less educated than the other traditions in South Asia. The perception that the current turmoil in the Muslim world is caused by non-educated (or not educated enough) people, is not correct. It is

based on the fact that [people believe] that the Islamic fundamentalists, for example the jihadists who go and blow up [people], are not educated. In fact they are by and large educated, but they have lost the facility to articulate their frustrations. They are reacting specifically to the modern world as modernists. It is a fallacy [to say] that they are traditionalists reacting to modernity.

The problem which exists in the Muslim world today is that there are a few Muslims who call themselves moderate or modern, but are secularist. They know very little about the religion, though they go out in the world. There are people, who are modern and had no compulsion of saying so. It is a very small sliver, perhaps 1% or 2%. The other 98% is what you could call the masses and who could not think of behaving as a Muslim should behave (praying 5 times a day, fasting do the Ramzani, going to the Hajj, i.e. following the 5 pillars of Islam). This Muslim 'intelligentsia' could not teach the masses, they would say: "It is because they are uneducated that they follow the rules of Islam", but in Islam like any other religions, you have to follow certain rules and you have to behave according to them. The gap between the modern intelligentsia and the masses (illiterate but not necessarily un-educated), was filled up by the mullahs who knew a little bit of Arabic and could talk with some fluency about the religion. They have influenced the masses for a long time. The closing of this gap has not happened. You create a lupper intelligentsia, (it is a leftist term used Olivier Roy), who are scientifically educated, but are not able to articulate the type of theological and psychological frustrations which crop up in a modern society.

Revue de l'Inde: We talked about identity. What do you consider yourself, a Ladakhi, a Kashmiri, an Indian, a Muslim?

Prof Wahid: All of them!

Revue de l'Inde: Is it possible to have several identities at the same time?

Prof Wahid: It is possible; [in fact] one has to accept to have several identities at the same time in order to live a healthy life. A few years ago, the Imam of Ladakh was here in this very room, he asked me: "Are you a Ladakhi or a Muslim first?" I was very offended by this question because it is none of his business, but I immediately responded: "The answer is not that simple". At least, it is not as he would like it to be. I knew the direction he was heading for. My point is that I feel that we have all multiple identities.

Revue de l'Inde: Is it enriching?

Prof Wahid: It is! For example, I am born a Ladakhi, I belong to a Tibetan culture area, I was educated by Jesuits in Darjeeling, I live in a country which is overwhelmingly Hindu, I am married a Lutheran Christian, for the sake of travel, I have an Indian passport, so it hard for me to reject any of these identities. When I am asked "from which part of India I come from", I say "from Kashmir". I have a photo on my table with the Dalai Lama, Karan Singh and one of the leading Muslim scholars called Sayeed Abdul Nasser. I keep this photo because [it represents] my three [main] identities. Intellectually, Nasser is my

identity, culturally I am a Tibetan, politically, Karan Singh is my identity.

Revue de l'Inde: Suppose that tomorrow you become Prime Minister of India, what steps would you take to solve the Kashmir issue which will soon be 60 years old.

Prof Wahid: To solve it, it will take a long time, but to put it on the road, what I would do is to expand the canvas. Let me explain. Instead of looking only at the India-Pakistan paradigm, let us look at the South and Central Asia paradigm. How can you benefit this region by bringing some peace, some articulacy and some freedom to its people that they can live the way the rest of South Asia does. Both sides of the LoC have not experienced democracy in its fullness. Of course, there is a bit more on this side [Indian side]!

Revue de l'Inde: Are you hopeful for the future

Prof Wahid: We have not any choice but to be hopeful. We have to plug away at it. If you become pessimistic, you will soon shift to cynicism which is just a breath away. We can't afford this.