

WAHID SALEH

Reaching Out

A prolific writer and community activist, he leaves no stone unturned in his commitment to foster Indo-Dutch ties. Smita Addy attempts to plumb the depths of Wahid Saleh, recipient of the Dutch knighthood

It is difficult to order one's thoughts into logical coherence and profile someone who is so multi-faceted a personality and is into so many different things at the same time that you just don't know from where to begin.

For Wahid Saleh, formerly a resident of Rajabari, Jorhat and now based at Rodenrijs in the Netherlands, the awards and encomiums have been many and the achievements even more. Therefore describing him simply as a social worker may sound blasé and limited besides such euphemisms as 'a businessman in social relations' and 'an Indian database on Indian official and semi-official affairs in the Netherlands'.

Yet in him is embodied the true qualities of a social worker, the quintessence of which has been distilled to such purity that it has been elevated to a much higher plane.

In Sir Wahid Saleh, social and community work has been crafted to such perfection that it has earned him a place among 100 achievers among the Indian diaspora abroad who "are making waves." He rubs shoulders with the likes of Amartya Sen, Economist and Nobel Laureate; Har Gobind Singh Khorana, Nobel Laureate; Sabeer Bhatia, Hotmail founder; Salman Rushdie, Novelist and Booker awardee; Sir V S Naipaul, novelist and Nobel Laureate; G K Prahlad, Management Guru; L N Mittal, Steel Magnate; The Hinduja, Swaraj Paul, etc. His name appears along with the others in the inaugural edition of Global Indians published from the United Arab Emirates in January 2004 under the article entitled, Global Indians: Making a Difference, and describes him as 'belonging to the category of community activists because of his devotion and untiring efforts in the field of NRI/PIO socio-cultural activities.'

Prior to that, in April 2002, Queen Beatrix of Netherlands knighted him with the Dutch honour of Ridder in de Orde van Oranje-Nassau or the Knighthood of the Order of Orange-Nassau. He was selected for this rare honour for his efforts due to his promotion of multicultural activities in the country. The citation to the award reads, '...a tribute to his commitment, devotion and years of dedicated work promoting knowledge about, and understanding between, the peoples of India and the Netherlands; of the culture, history, philosophy, religious and social structure of the two countries.'

And this year he was the only Indian from Europe among the four Indians residing abroad to be awarded the Pravasi Bharatiya Community Service awards by the Global People of Indian Origin (GOPIO) for his dedication and commitment to the overseas Indian Community and India.

"There are about 25 million Indians living outside India and I was the only Indian from Europe. The others were Charan Gill from Canada, George Abraham from Singapore and Nevin P Megchian, Middle East," Mr Saleh states. The awards were presented by Vayalar Ravi, Minister for Overseas Indian Affairs on January 6, 2007 at New Delhi.

In 1998 the Mayor of Zoetermeer and the Ambassador of India presented Wahid with The Golden Jubilee Community Service Award, so far the only person to receive this award. In April 2006 again, Wahid was presented with the Silver Jubilee Award by the Minister of Overseas Indian Affairs and the Ambassador of India on behalf of the Foundation for Critical Choices for India, a Netherland based think tank, for services to the PIO/NRI community.

The seeds of social and community service were sown at an early age in Wahid.

"Everything started in Jorhat, I remember being an active member of Moinar mel started by Hemanta Bordoloi here and participating in various other activities like the theatre, drama, etc.," Wahid Saleh narrates.

"My father was transferred to Nagaland, and I took an Assamese cultural troupe from

Jorhat to perform a programme for the public at Kohima," he recalls. Besides these Wahid used to present dramas also for All India Radio.

I met him a couple of months ago, when Wahid Saleh had come down to his ancestral home in Rajabari where his brother is residing at present. The previous evening he had been felicitated by the "the Jorhotiya raiz" (the people of Jorhat.)

"It was a very emotional reunion time for me. I met a lot of my schoolmates and people I had not seen in years and the memories just swamped my mind," he says. Narrating an incident of yesteryears, Mr Saleh says nostalgically: "I wanted to study in Guwahati very much. After reaching the place, I and a friend from Jorhat, whom I met only last night since then, had decided to go sightseeing and we went walking from the Engineering College and climbed all the way up the steep Kamakhya Temple Hill and back again down to the main road to catch a public bus. I remember my friend falling ill right after that. That was in 1957-58."

Mr Saleh studied Aircraft Maintenance Engineering in Kerala. "At that time there were only two places where this course was offered -- one at Dum Dum in Calcutta and the other at Ernakulam in Kerala," Mr Saleh enlightens. Higher training took him to West Germany and thereafter he studied Information Technology.

In 1968 Wahid Saleh went to the Netherlands and made it his home. Here he married Hannie, a Dutch national. In this too Wahid's monumental talent of communicating came to his aid for she was his pen friend with whom he was in contact through letters from India itself. The couple have two children and three cute grandchildren.

Working there as the Head of the Department of Quality and Research of a major Dutch company he proved himself indispensable by designing and implementing a datacommunication infrastructure involving more than 5000 users. But by this time Mr Saleh had got involved in the vast intricacies of social work as Board member of the Netherlands-India Association for 19 years, 15 of which he was the Secretary of the organization. In 2003, Mr Saleh took early retirement, and gave his entire time to organizing innumerable classical and semi-classical dance and song performances, art exhibitions and other programmes of Indian artists in the Netherlands, which he says was representative of the culture of India.

"Each of these shows were well received by not only the Indian community there but also the Dutch, bringing each closer to the other," Mr Saleh claims.

He was also instrumental in collecting a vast amount of data and designing the first website of the Netherlands-India Association. And it was under his guidance that the Dutch-Indian Youth Association was born.

"I also coordinated fund raising campaigns for drinking water projects, vocational education, etc.," says Mr Saleh adding, "my life is devoted to promoting India in the Netherlands – its culture, philosophy and lifestyle in anyway I can. I send more than 2000 e-mails with my cultural agenda every month and that too free of cost," he adds. A very tall order, indeed!

But if one were to think that all his activities are limited only to the Netherlands then one is mistaken. Whether it was the Orissa cyclone, Gujarat earthquake, floods in Bihar and Assam, Wahid has had a finger in every pie. His recent visit to his home state also saw him promising aid from his own pocket in setting up fisheries for the Prajnalaya in Titabar in Jorhat district and help to the Parijat Academy at Pamohi, Guwahati.

The former is a school with more than 180 students – some orphans and the rest coming from families whose pecuniary condition does not allow them a proper education. Parijat Academy too is a school for the underprivileged which covers seven tribal villages. "It was begun by Uttam who paid the village carpenter Rs 800 to make a pair of desks and benches for students from money he saved by giving tuitions to students outside the village," Mr Saleh said. Its URL is www.parijatacademy.org.

Wahid Saleh's biggest contribution to Indo-Dutch ties is, however, the Indiawijzer which translates into 'Guide to India' and is a totally online reference guide to India. The 2500 page directory with over 1000 photographs and 2000 external links is a stupendous feat of love, patience and dedication. "Not having been published in hardback, it is easy to maintain and entails little expense and can be accessed on the net at www.indiawijzer.nl by people from all parts of the world, free of cost," he says.

He describes it as a lifafa containing diverse contents which facilitate contact between the two countries as it also gives a comprehensive overview of Dutch organizations, institutions and individuals connected with India besides being an information portal on India.

"It took me more than 10000 hours and more than three years to put everything together in the Net and even more hours in study and contacting people with the know-how ; looking up numbers in directories, contacting them over the phone, writing more than 3000 letters before Indiawijzer became complete" Wahid Saleh states. "Even today I am constantly updating it and have to spend hours answering mail and seeking information for the compilation," he further says.

Explaining why he undertook this mammoth task, Wahid Saleh says: "Whenever I met Indians, whether residing in the Netherlands or tourists on a visa, I was asked a lot of questions, answers to which were not available at either the Indian embassy or the Indian Tourism Office. After UK, Netherlands has the highest Indian population belonging to two categories – the first wave being the progeny about of 10000 migrant Indians from Surinam in South America which was a Dutch colony about 150 years ago and the second being migrants from India and other European countries including illegal migrants notching up a count of about 18000--20000 Indians in the Netherlands, making this database a necessity," Wahid Saleh states.

The proceeds of the first edition went to the Netherlands-India Foundation and of the second revised edition in 1998 to an educational trust in India. The third revised edition on the net was uploaded in September, 2004.

Wahid Saleh has now started a special section on Assam in his Internet site. "I have put in the Stillwell Road, Wildlife sanctuaries, Brahmaputra cruises, architecture and anything else I could lay my hands on, but it is still in a nascent stage and there is still a lot to be put in," he says.

And talking about this State, Mr Wahid Saleh is passionate in his condemnation of changing the name from Assam to Asom by the Tarun Gogoi-led government.

"It could be said that I was behind raising the controversy of the name change," he states.

. "Three of us – two from the USA and me from the Netherlands started an internet campaign and among the signatories, four former presidents of the Axom Xahitya Xabha including Dr Bhupen Hazarika, supported us," Mr Saleh said.

In a petition to Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi in 2006 in this regard, Mr Saleh had requested him to have a discussion on the name change and the government was invited to put forward its arguments. If the majority accepted it the name change, then this could remain...

"There was no need to change the name as Assam had not been named by the British but was known as such by the Dutch East Indies Company which had come to trade here even before the British," Mr Saleh states.

Butressing his facts from ancient tomes written in the 17th and 18th centuries, Mr Saleh states that the Governor General of Batavia mentioned `Asam' in a letter to Mir Jumla, the Mughal General on August 29, 1663 and the letter was published in the book *Vervarelyke Schip-breuk van't Oost – Indisch jacht Ter Schelling* in 1667. Prior to that it was mentioned as `Asam' in a diary of a Dutchman who was forced to fight alongside Mir Jumla's army.

Wahid Saleh also narrates the interesting story of Clara -- a baby rhino which was captured in 1738 in Assam, then in the kingdom of the Mughals, and arrived at Rotterdam on July 22, 1741.

"The story was published in a newspaper from Lieden (Netherlands) in August where the State has been mentioned as `Asam'. In a Vienna newspaper published on October 30, 1746, the state is mentioned as `Asem'. A French cartographer in 1776 and an Italian cartographer in 1740 had both denoted the state as `Assam' with slight variations in spelling. Therefore it cannot be said that a heavy British accent changed Asom to Assam," he avers.

Wahid's marriage to Hannie, a medical specialist and now a social worker as well, was maybe the first step Wahid took to bond with a Dutch national and over the years he

has conquered the hearts of a much much larger population of the Netherlands, which has now become his home. As he himself has put it: Coming together is the beginning, keeping together is progress, working together is success.

1. Adviser, Anwar Qadir Mohammed Salehuddin and Najmun Nisa Memorial Trust for higher education, Assam, India.
2. Adviser, Netherlands Foundation for Business Process Innovation, The Hague.
3. Cultural coordinator of the Milan Festival, The Hague. It is the biggest open air festival of the Asians in European mainland.
4. Moderator, Indians in NL Yahoo Group..
5. Former Member of the Board and Founding member of the Euro India Centre, La Rochelle, France.
6. Former Secretary of the Federation of International Friendship and Cultural Societies in the Netherlands.
7. Former Trustee and later a Vice-President of the Foundation of Critical Choices of India.
8. Member of the Advisory Committee of the European Regional Conference of the first international convention of Overseas Indian held in London in 1989.
9. Member of the Board of Directors of the Europe –India Chamber of Commerce (EICC), Brussels.
10. Member of the jury of the Miss Hindustani of the Netherlands.
11. National Coordinator of the First Convention of Overseas Indians held in New York in 1989.
12. One of the organizers and coordinators of the seminar 'In the Shadow of the Nuclear Threat—A Dialogue between India and Pakistan.' It was the first meeting between the Pakistani and Indian communities living in the Netherlands.

MEMBERSHIP OF PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

1. Former member of American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics.
2. Former member of British Institute of Management.
3. Former member of the Institute of Data Processing Management.
4. Former member of the Institute of Engineering and Technicians.
5. Former member of the Dutch Register of Information Specialist.