

eminence

The Emigrant

RECIPIENT OF THE PRAVASI BHARATIYA SAMMAN IN THE YEAR 2011 MR. WAHID SALEH IS A 'DISTINGUISHED SON OF ASSAM'. INDYANA PAINTS HIS LIFE WHICH IS OF INSPIRATION TO ALL THOSE WHO MIGRATES TO SETTLE ELSEWHERE



Q When did you first come to the Netherlands and what was the reason for your migration?

The Netherlands was not in my radar when I left India for Europe. In order to answer that question I have to go back to the period before I left India. I went to study Aircraft Maintenance Engineering at Southern College of Engineering and Technology in Ernakulum in Kerala. The college selected me to join BMW Triebwerkbau GmbH, in Munich, Germany for higher training in Jet Engines. Before I went to Germany, In November 1963, I left Bombay by ship and after 14 day-long travel reached Genoa in Italy. In Germany, I not only got my training in Jet-engines but I also learnt how to survive in an alien environment, amidst a totally



different work culture and above all without knowing the local language. Anyway I survived. From Munich I went to Hamburg to work with the Lufthansa German Airlines. In Germany I wanted to change my profession from Aircraft Maintenance Engineering to IT. But I could not get the residence permit to work in the IT sector. So through a "Head Hunter", I applied for an IT job in the Netherlands and moved to the Netherlands in 1968. Why Netherlands? One of the reasons I applied for a job in the Netherlands was that as a student from India I was corresponding with a medical student from the Netherlands and she wanted to continue her study to become a medical specialist. Later I got married to her.

Q Dutch Queen Beatrix has honoured you, a prominent leader of the Indian community in the Netherlands, with the prestigious 'Ridder in de Orde van Oranje-Nassau (Knighthood of the Order of Orange-Nassau) in recognition of your many contributions to the promotion of Indo-Dutch ties and his efforts to encourage multi-cultural activities in the Netherlands. Tell us in brief about your commitments so far.

There are several areas where I contributed in re-establishing the cultural relationship between Netherlands and India. For example:

- **Making NIA an active, representative and lively organization:**

I am a member of Netherlands-India Association (NIA) since 1968 and was a Executive Board Member from 1982 to 2002. In the period from June, 1987 to June 2002 when I functioned as the Secretary of NIA, I considerably broadened the scope of its activities, increased its membership, consisting of many Dutch and newly arrived Indians as well as those already here.

- **Unique compiler of India related database:**

For the first time I started collecting systematically all data relating to India and Indians in the Netherlands and using my own time and financial resources to come out with a major compilation of India related information Indiawijzer – India in the Netherlands, first published in 1992. It is also to be noted that Indiawijzer is freely available to all concerned. It is also a source of all relevant information on Dutch public, private and voluntary organizations engaged in India related cultural, development, trade and other activities.

- **A Bridge Between the Indian and Suriname Hindustani Communities:**

Through my activities as Secretary of NIA and also in my personal capacity, I tried to bring the two groups together, encouraged more contacts between organizations of the two communities and facilitated active interaction between individuals and organizations for a common platform devoted to India. I am Member of the Cultural Committee of

the annual cultural gala of Surinamese Hindustanis – the Milan Festival in the Hague.

• **Examples of my catalytic role in bilateral relations in the area of nationality legislation.**

The Overseas Citizenship of India (OCI) is not a dual nationality but a lifelong citizenship without political rights but a lifelong visa pasted to a foreign passport, and not to separate OCI card. For the renewal of a foreign passport the OCI card holder either has to pay extra to obtain a new OCI visa, or has to carry the expired passport, along with the new foreign passport and the OCI card. I requested the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs to issue OCI visa pasted to the OCI booklet or a single document like the PIO card valid for lifetime, but issued separately. This has now been solved by merging both the OCI and PIO card into a single document.

• **Encouraging Indian Diaspora from Assam in service of the State:**

Along with a few Assamese Friends in different countries, I had set up a virtual organisation of Assamese Diaspora called Friends of Assam and Seven Sisters (FASS). I was one of the International Directors of FASS and a driving force of the organization. An eye catching example of this is the spectacular long, live interactions of school children from the North East (Assam, Meghalaya, Manipur) with Space Astronauts from their shuttle, particularly the live interaction with astronaut Mike Fincke with different school and college students in Assam and Meghalaya, who during his visit to Assam laid the foundation stone of a guest house at Parijat Academy near Guwahati. This was made possible by the work of many volunteers of FASS International.

Q Your contributions towards paving a better life to the Asamese people in India are known to all... Your comments on the present day political situation of the country... Is it more of politics than social welfare these days?

Mao once said “Politics is war without bloodshed while war is politics with bloodshed”. In Assam we are used to both the situations. According to the South Asia Terrorism Portal there are more than 30 Terrorist/Insurgent Groups active in Assam including one of the oldest insurgent groups in the world the ULFA. There is a conflict of interest in almost all areas where politics is involved be it land, language, religion, corruption, economic development, flood control, illegal immigrants, civil unrest, bandhs (strikes), etc. On top of that there is also cross boarder problems with the neighbouring countries. In order to face these challenging problems we need strong leadership. We need politicians with vision and courage. We need politicians with ideas, policies, motivation and action to set right the flaws in Assam’s institutions of



governance. Unfortunately in Assam they are in short supply.

Q A few words to the expats of the Netherlands about integration ...How important it is for a migrant and the country?

The expatriate Indians have mixed up loyalties – to India and to their adopted country- the country of residence. The question for even those with a Dutch passport is: which is preferable - complete acceptance of the new home by integration and assimilation, or rather remain aloof and keep a cautious distance? Should one enthusiastically thrust oneself into the Dutch society? Or should one remain a guest worker, who has the intention of going back ‘home’? The Surinamese Indians don’t have this problem. They know that their forefathers left India and they belong to their present country of residence. As India is the centre of their religion, for the Surinamese Hindus, India has a special meaning. It gives them a special identity. If one speaks of an Indian Diaspora in the Netherlands, it is because other forces have emerged to cement the widely different elements from India into an “Indian community”. This is a combination of “nationalism” which can be translated as patriotism combined with love for the country, its heritage and its culture. They might be the holder of Dutch, English or American passports; they are from the first, second and third generation; but during the flag hoisting ceremony at the Indian Embassy, they all sing very proudly the India’s national anthem. Indians in the Diaspora routinely mention Indian civilization with self-assurance that would be both ridiculed and challenged in India itself. It seems one is more easily an Indian abroad than in India. Neither language nor religion binds the Indian community in the Netherlands together. No matter how they dress or where they were educated or from where they come from: the Tajmahal, the Indian flag, Gandhi, Nehru - their icons - belong to them all. One speaks Bengali, Hindi, Tamil, or any of the Indian languages or one follows one’s own faith, but still they preserve their “Indianness” – their “Diasporic Identity”. In their heart they are still Indian.