



INSTITUTE OF CHINESE STUDIES

ICS Special Lecture: Notes from a recent trip to Xinjiang: Nation, State, Surveillance & World Order

Speaker: Dr. Siddiq Wahid

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Venue: Indian Council for World Affairs (ICWA)

There has been increasing media focus on the Chinese state's governance of its north western Xinjiang province, with reports of hundreds of thousands of Uighurs being sent to 're-education' camps. Siddiq Wahid made sense of these reports by experiencing the climate firsthand, during a recent trip he made to Xinjiang, and spoke at length of his subsequent impressions during this lecture. The Special Lecture was organized by the Institute of Chinese Studies (ICS) in association with the ICWA. Amb. Ashok Kantha, Director, ICS, started off the lecture with a brief introduction of the speaker and invited him to share his experience during his visit to Xinjiang.

Siddiq Wahid professed that the quest to understand the current circumstances of the region has been more of a recent pursuit of his. This is even though his background as a professional historian focused on the Central Asian region, gives him a fair bit of expertise in medieval and pre-modern history. Wahid stressed that his recent trip to Xinjiang has left a very strong impression on him which has spurred this pursuit on. He sought to share his impressions with a slideshow of several personal photos taken during the trip that he deemed illustrative. At the outset Wahid stated that his account of his trip would be centred on understanding who the Uighur people are, where they stand today vis-à-vis the Chinese state, and lastly what their current condition could tell us about the future of states and the new world order in the making. Having spelled out his motives, Wahid started his narrative by introducing the audience to the Uighur people, and highlighting his own personal connection to the Uighur refugees he used to see as a young boy in Kashmir.

Uighurs are a Turkic-speaking people, who have traditionally been nomadic pastoralists in the Central Asian and Eurasian plains for the better part of the Common Era. The breakup of USSR, roughly thirty years ago, was a landmark event, as with it sprung up several independent Central Asian states along the Westphalian-state model. This introduced differences between the Uighurs and fellow Turkic-speaking groups which were not apparent before. This unseemly delineation can't be expected to obviate deep historical and cultural ties across the border. Wahid brought this point home, by explaining why he chose to travel to Xinjiang via Uzbekistan, in place of an implausible route via Beijing. His travels through Uzbekistan were punctuated by stops at Tashkent, Bukhara and Samarkand. His slideshow included several photographs from Bukhara and Samarkand that limned a sense of Uzbek art, architecture, and people.

The second part of the slideshow recorded Wahid's landing in Urumqi, Xinjiang. Depicting state-of-the-art infrastructure, and all the fruits of industrial modernity, Urumqi presented a completely different picture to Wahid, in comparison to the town he had visited 8 years before. Flummoxed by the pace of change, Wahid reasoned that perhaps it wasn't the changes themselves, but the pace of these changes that is subjected on a people which renders it close to cultural genocide. Wahid's trip to Xinjiang was strictly organized, as his group was assigned a Uighur tour guide, who seemingly chaperoned them along the sites. These sites spanned several towns in Xinjiang including Hotan, Turpan, Yarkant and Kashgar. He found the tour guide to be very careful in ensuring the conversations steer clear of politics. Wahid also gave instances of the tremendous surveillance and data collection undertaken by the Chinese state – such as regular checkpoints and entry/exit registration of the tour bus driver, periodic headcount of Wahid's posse to keep track of absence between visits to different sites, and keen perusal and subsequent censorship of all photographs clicked during the tour. Wahid also showed pictures of the Kashgar Bazar, a famous market that brings many Uighurs out together in the town of Kashgar. His pictures indeed show the market to be a cornucopia of fruits, nuts and bread. Alongside this plenitude, there were also pictures of 'flagged' mosques (mosques which had the People's Republic of China flag waving atop), propaganda wall posts that exhorted the public to 'love the party, love the country', and people Wahid met who removed traditional clothing items before agreeing to be photographed. He was of the opinion that the people in general seemed dispirited and reticent.

Wahid found out, that even the simple task of daily prayer required proper registration with the authorities, as Uighurs couldn't simply enter and visit mosques during prayer time. They

were discouraged from wearing traditional clothes. This stringent intervention by the state in the personal realm seems to have taken a toll on the people there. Wahid likened it to a phrase used by the Polish poet, Aleksander Wat, to describe life under Stalinism: “killing of the inner man”. According to Wahid, all the material benefits of infrastructure, food and comforts have not been able to veil the ‘hollowing out’ of the Uighur people through the excessively intrusive surveillance and control maintained by the State. He compared two pictures of the Uzbek people in Bukhara, and the Uighur people in Kashgar and stated that even though democracy is struggling in the former, it was heartening to see a variety of opinions and personal styles among the people instead of the imposed uniformity in the latter.

What does all this surveillance and control forebode for the future of the Westphalian-state and the consequent world order? Wahid admits that surveillance is unavoidable in the prevailing conditions. It is an ineluctable characteristic of governance in this day and age. China couldn’t be singled out on its surveillance efforts, as each and every state is spying on its own people in one way or another. England purportedly has a surveillance camera for every eleven citizens. Although convinced that the emergence of surveillance states poses a powerful impact on the world order, Wahid can’t quite clearly say what the impact is, and posed the question to the audience as something to think about, and concluded his presentation. With this, Amb. Kantha thanked the speaker for an illuminating lecture, and invited questions from the audience for further discussion.

Wahid was asked whether any signs of religiosity prevailed in Xinjiang (e.g. was pork served in restaurants), and whether he found many Han Chinese there? He found that sporting an overly religious mien attracted trouble from authorities. Women were proactively discouraged from wearing head scarves, and men from sporting beards. Pork was served in restaurants throughout the region. Wahid had also heard instances, where pork was forcefully fed to anyone deemed an overly devout Muslim. It was notable that big cities like Urumqi and Kashgar were dominated by Han Chinese, while smaller towns like Hotan, Turpan and Yarcant still have the traditional Uighur demographic majority. Wahid was also asked whether the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was very visible in Xinjiang and whether there were any mention of re-education camps during his time there. Wahid admitted that while he didn’t find BRI to be very visible, it might have slipped his notice because it was not an aspect that he was actively thinking about. He added that while re-education camps have been receiving considerable media attention, his interaction with local Uighurs was too stultified under the pall of Chinese state surveillance for it to be a conversation topic.

About the Speaker

Prof. Siddiq Wahid is a historian of Eurasian political history, with a focus on Central Eurasia and Tibet. He is an academic in temperament, an historian by training and an activist by compulsion. He is at present an Adjunct Fellow at the Institute of Chinese Studies (ICS), Delhi.

Prof. Wahid began his academic career with a B.A. in political philosophy from Gustavus Adolphus College, and a Masters and PhD from Harvard University in the United States, where he also taught until his return home to Jammu & Kashmir. He is the Founding Vice Chancellor of Islamic University of Science & Technology. Since then his appointments have been as Senior Visiting Fellow at the Centre for Policy Research (CPR); Director, Institute for Kashmir Studies, University of Kashmir and the Maharaja Gulab Singh Chair Professor of Modern History, University of Jammu.

His most recent publications have been **Tibet and Its Relations with the Himalaya**, (2017), Editor, Academic Foundation, New Delhi, and “The Epic of King Gesar” in **Sources of Tibetan Tradition**, (2013), Ed. Schaeffer, Kapstein & Tuttle, Columbia University Press, New York.

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