

Islam is a belief, not a geographical phenomenon

Noted Islamic scholar and peace activist Maulana Wahiduddin Khan speaks to Jyoti Punwani about the issues agitating the community and the way forward



What is your analysis of the Assam violence?

It is a very complex problem, which started even before Independence, and continues after the creation of Bangladesh. We are paying the price of that past. A large number of Bengali Muslims migrated from Bangladesh and settled in the area. It is strange how the government failed to check this illegal migration. Basically the blame goes to the administration. But the problem persists. I can only say that it is not possible to send those Muslims settled there back to where they came from. My suggestion to the Muslims of this

area - ie, those who are immigrants - is that they have to find some adjustment with the community among whom they have settled.

It is Muslims' tendency to maintain their cultural identity wherever they settle. I think this is not a correct practice. They do this in every country; in Europe, they insist on wearing the burqa. According to me there are two options to these immigrants: either they go back to their homeland, or they find ways to adjust with the locals in Assam.

Over-emphasis on cultural identity is not Islam. I don't think the Bodos are wrong. The blame goes to Muslim leaders who fail to teach the immigrant Muslims this fact. If you want to live here with honour, adopt the local culture. It is not always wise to over emphasize cultural identity.

The same thing happened in Bangladesh and Pakistan. In Bangladesh, the Urdu speaking Muslims insisted on retaining their cultural identity, and the Bengali Muslims were not willing to tolerate this. In Pakistan, this happened between the Muhajirs from UP and Bihar who settled in Karachi, and the Sindhi Muslims. The former insisted on retaining their

identity; this was not acceptable to the Sindhi Muslims. The same history is being repeated in Assam.

In this situation, it's not good advice to tell the immigrants to Quit Assam. That is practically not possible. You can check more people from coming in but you can't say, 'Go back'. My advice to Bangladeshi Muslims living in Assam is to stop making the same mistake as the Urdu-speaking Muslims did in Bangladesh and the Muhajirs committed in Pakistan. Both those groups failed. If you insist on maintaining your cultural identity, it will be unacceptable to Bodos. The immigrant must know this. They must abandon the concept of cultural identity. Islam is a belief, while culture is a geographical phenomenon, not a religious phenomenon.

If you want to live here with honour, adopt the local culture

But doesn't everyone have the right to maintain their cultural identity?

If doing so creates no problem, you can. But if it is a problem, abandon it. It's a practical question, not a religious question.

What's your opinion on Asaduddin Owaisi's statement in Parliament warning the government about radicalisation of Muslim youth in Assam if they are not rehabilitated properly?

If he has said this, it is a very irresponsible statement. You have to go to Assam, study the facts, analyse the reality objectively. If there is injustice, try and remove it. But radicalisation is another name for terrorism.

In Mumbai today, speeches were made about atrocities on Muslims. There was violence and two people died.

It is not leadership to issue emotional and fiery statements and arouse people's sentiments. Study the facts first. In every Muslim country, Muslims are paying the price for this kind of radical extremism. It is the primary form of terrorism.