

Context and Summary

The transcript covers the life experiences of Abdul Wahid, a Pakistani doctoral student at the University of Oxford. Wahid grew up in a small village in northern Pakistan, in a close-knit Ismaili Muslim community. He describes his religious upbringing and the role of the Jamatkhana (Ismaili mosque) in his daily life. Abdul Wahid experienced some challenges practising his Ismaili faith openly while attending boarding schools, as there was sometimes misunderstanding and lack of acceptance from the Sunni Muslim majority. Abdul Wahid spent time as an exchange student in the U.S. during his teenage years, which exposed him to greater diversity but also some Islamophobia in the aftermath of 9/11. For his university education, Abdul Wahid attended Habib University in Karachi, where he was able to engage in more open discussions about different interpretations of Islam. Abdul Wahid's graduate studies have taken him to London and Oxford, where he has found a diverse academic environment. However, he has sometimes felt that Muslim student organisations did not fully represent or accommodate his Ismaili identity. Overall, Abdul Wahid's experiences highlight the diversity within the Muslim community and the challenges of balancing religious, cultural, and academic identities as a minority Muslim in different contexts.

Aasiya Kazi:

So, just a little bit about, let's start with what you're doing here. So, you're doing the DPhil here?

Abdul Wahid:

Mm-hmm.

Aasiya Kazi:

And you're from-

Abdul Wahid:

Chitral.

Aasiya Kazi:

You're from Pakistan?

Abdul Wahid:

Yes, yes.

Aasiya Kazi:

And do you want to tell us a little bit about where you're from and about your childhood?

Abdul Wahid:

Sure, sure. So, I basically come from a very small village in north of Pakistan. So the place called Chitral, and specifically my village is even up north, it's called Meragram, in Chitral. So I grew up there. I studied from a local school, in a boarding school, and then I did an exchange programme in

the US, and then I went back to Pakistan and spent most of my time there. So basically, I also did my undergrad in Pakistan in Karachi.

Aasiya Kazi:

Where in Karachi?

Abdul Wahid:

It's called Habib University.

Aasiya Kazi:

Of course, I know it.

Abdul Wahid:

So it's a new university. We were the first kind of cohort of that university, and I did social development and policy there. And then I came to the UK for my masters. So I have done kind of two masters. So I did a Master's in Islamic studies and Humanities actually in London as part of the scholarship programme for a very specific community within Islam called the Ismailis. So it's for them.

So it's a two years degree in London in the Institute of Ismaili Studies. And then after that, so you get to choose wherever in the UK you want to be and wherever you get accepted. So yeah, I applied to Oxford, I got accepted here in the geography department. I did my masters here and then I went on to do a PhD. So this is my third year of my DPhil in the School of Geography and the environment. And I am working on Indigenous pastoralist land rights in north of Pakistan in Chitral.

Aasiya Kazi:

Okay, thank you. So, how about we start, just go into a little depth with your early life in Pakistan, your childhood. If you could tell me about your family, siblings.

Abdul Wahid:

Definitely. So yeah, as you know, in a lot of places in Pakistan, we usually live in a joint family. So, in my immediate family, I have a brother and a sister and my parents. So my father passed away in 2012.

Aasiya Kazi:

I'm sorry to hear that.

Abdul Wahid:

And yeah, now it's my brother, his wife, and he has a daughter and my mother. But growing up, obviously we used to live in a big family, so it was all of my family and then my [inaudible 00:03:52], so uncle, the elder brother of my father and his family. So he has lots of kids, he has 11 kids, so all

of my cousins. And then my uncle who is younger to my father and his wife and my grandparents and an aunt. So we all used to live together in the same house.

So that was kind of a very peaceful area, a very kind of rural village, basically. So, I think I had a very lovely childhood when I reflect back today. It was different from how kids grow up these days. So obviously, we did not have any technology, we did not have... Growing up, we did not have electricity in my village. We did not have obviously no cell phone reception or telephone, no such direct contact with technology at all. No TV, no nothing.

Aasiya Kazi:

And when was this, if I can ask?

Abdul Wahid:

This is literally up to, let's say, when I was in grade 10th. So even in my high school, we were living this quiet, peaceful kind of different for form of life.

Aasiya Kazi:

And which year was this?

Abdul Wahid:

So this would be up till 2010.

Aasiya Kazi:

Right.

Abdul Wahid:

Yeah. So this was how life was. But I also, because there aren't a lot of educational institutions in my own village, so I had to move to a different town. So my father was in the military, in the local scouts, so that's trial scouts. So myself and my brother, we lived with him for a while, and then he retired and then we lived in the hostels, the boarding schools of the army school.

Also, my childhood then was living in a hostel, studying till grade eighth. And then I shifted school, I went to the Aga Khan Higher Secondary School. Again, a boarding school. So, we would only go home once every, let's say four months, five months during vacations.

But it was quite common for people in smaller villages to do this, because obviously there weren't... There were some schools, obviously, like government schools, but they were not that good, which is why every people who had option to go to a little bigger town, a little bigger school, they could do that. So because of my father being in the military, we had that opportunity in the beginning. So yeah.

Aasiya Kazi:

Can we talk a little bit about the role of religion in your house and community growing up? From everything from a religious education to what festivals and rituals were like from [inaudible 00:06:53]?

Abdul Wahid:

Yeah, yeah. So, this might be a bit different in a sense that, so the sect of Islam that I come from is really closely knit community. It's also obviously minority in Pakistan, even. So, growing up, definitely religion had a huge, huge role to play. So, especially doing the rituals, prayers and the daily kind of engagement with the religion was always there. So, we would go to what we call Jamatkhana, basically the mosque for Ismailis. So we would go to Jamatkhana every day pretty much, and if you miss it, my father would be quite mad if you miss it. And also, he was my father and mother because in Jamatkhana, both male and female go. So they were kind of similar to what would be an Imam of a masjid. So he was the leader of that prayer hall or prayer room. So, you also had that kind of expectations that you are a son of the mukhi, what we called, which is why I had to keep up with the religious practises.

And then we would also, my father would teach us Quran growing up, but then there were also what we called religious education centres. So, where we go in villages, we used to go every evening, and when I was in boarding school, we would've a class every weekend and so on. But we were always in touch with the religious education centres. So they have their own curriculum. It's quite an organised way of teaching religious education. So it's a bit different again. But also, in schools, obviously we had Islamiyat and then we also had Nazra, which is Quran class, and we would be taught different duas and prayers, and we would've have Quran recitations and so on every day.

So in a way, obviously it's a society. The place, especially where I grew up, is quite embedded in religion, which is why obviously Ramazan would be such an interesting time of the year where everybody's really excited, really good food everywhere. And similarly for Iftar, when I was in boarding school, people from my class who were local to that town would bring us Iftari, different meals and things to eat and so on. So it's not just the practise of it, but also this bonding with your friends also was being constructed in a way through that practise of fasting.

And then every Eid, we had to go home. So again, a really exciting time and the whole community is engaged. And in smaller villages, it's even better because then the tradition of Eid is on the day of Eid, you literally go to every person's house in the village and they visit you. So it's really a day off, taking a day off of work and then meeting people, visiting your relatives and so on. So, there's the culture and religious perspective kind of move together in many of these occasions. And then there are all these different other festivals and different rituals that are maybe more specific to my sect of Islam, and then we're used to those.

Aasiya Kazi:

You want to talk about a little bit about it?

Abdul Wahid:

Yeah. Sure. Let's say, for example, the day when obviously in our sect there is this whole idea of Imammat. So when the current imam came to be the imam on the 11th of July, it celebrated across the world by Ismailis. So we kind of celebrate the coming of the imam. And then similarly, it's kind of like Eid as well, where we go to the Jamatkhana, we have different events there and then we visit each other's houses.

Then there is the Navroz festival, which is kind of the coming of the new year. And although it's, again, a very cultural event, it is celebrated widely in Iran, north Pakistan, even Turkey and other places. But somehow, it has been associated with the Ismaili community in the north of Pakistan. So this is also an interesting phenomenon I think that can be studied in further detail, of how festivals that were more cultural or assigned to a certain sect or religion for that matter. So, that's another day we clean our houses, it's kind of a new beginning, a new season and so on. So we would also again visit each other houses and so on. So, there was that, which kind of became a religious festival as well, so things like that were being celebrated when I was growing up. And I guess the idea was really, again, having that community.

Although I mean, honestly, in my village, we also have quite a mixed community. So there are also from other sects of Islam, like Sunni Muslims as well. Mostly, it's been really interesting to live in such a diverse kind of environment. But also, people are relatives of each other, they know each other. There's friendship beyond the sectarian divide and so on, but there are also times when you are celebrating with your own community. For example, Eid, you would celebrate with everyone, but then there are specific events that you celebrate only with your community. And obviously other times they would also come to celebrate with us and so on.

Aasiya Kazi:

And living in such a diverse environment, were there any challenges in practising your religion or?

Abdul Wahid:

Yeah, I guess with any sort of pluralism or diversity, there always comes the challenge of acceptance, especially for minorities. When I was growing up, especially in the hostels, which were mostly areas that were dominated by Sunni Muslims population. And yeah, sometime we would kind of hide our identity in a way or we wouldn't practise so openly. And obviously, there are different interpretations, and some of them wouldn't really agree with your interpretation of what Islam is or how you see things, what your prayers are, what your practises are.

So there were those disagreements and those matters where we would like to not practise it so openly. But other times, because eventually you become friends with people around you and you try to understand them, they try to understand you, and at the end of the day, you want everybody to be able to do what they want. So, sometime we would have trusted friends who we are fine with us expressing ourselves or doing our prayers and so on. But generally, I would definitely say it was a bit different than even like today. So, the place that I used to go to school, at that point, we couldn't really even identify ourselves as Ismailis because of various reasons, social and acceptance.

Aasiya Kazi:

And the school was in?

Abdul Wahid:

In Drosh, in Chitral as well. But now, things changed. Now all of my friends back then now know who I am. I'm from Ismaili community and so on. And a lot of these things were definitely because of misunderstandings, and in a way, ignorance to some extent of each other's beliefs. And there weren't a lot of platforms where we could have those discussions. And then there were

misconceptions building up, but with media and with things changing, I guess people got to learn more about other communities and then all these misconceptions are reduced in a way.

Aasiya Kazi:

If I can ask you this, if you're comfortable answering this, how did this, an environment where you often had to hide your religious identity, how did that shape your sense of self as a Muslim. And otherwise, just how did that shape your everyday life in these spaces?

Abdul Wahid:

Yeah, no, definitely. I guess it was a practise of continuous struggle of hiding. So that was always there. My father used to say, because obviously we were kids, I was in grade one or two or so, and he was obviously concerned that we might tell people about our faith and so on, might create issues. So he would always quote this saying from the imam that, "Your prayers and your practises are like gold. So you have to maybe hide them, not show them to everyone." So in a way, it was our training in becoming that sort of people who are not risking many things for just because of showing your prayers or showing your belief system to others, in that sense.

So, I guess it helped us kind of fit in in many places. So when you hide, basically when you don't tell people who you are and what your beliefs are, you were easily acceptable. You were not being treated in a different way, in that sense. So, I'm not saying there weren't any, let's say, risks of you losing your life or something like that, but it was minor unacceptance or social unacceptance more so. And then again, like I'm saying, it's a lot of misunderstanding, even between the kids who were in my class, they would say things that would be obviously not true about my faith, and what can you do? There's a whole population who thinks like that and you just, "Okay, fine."

So, I guess I wish there was discussion around these things at that time. I wish there was an opportunity to reduce these misconceptions somehow, to eliminate them, but obviously any societal change takes time. And I think the process has definitely made me as a person more patient in a way, more really always be able to see what the situation is and how do I express myself in an environment, in a society and so on. So, it's a continuous practise of that, but also obviously sometime you feel frustrated, sometime you feel misunderstood. So all of those human emotions were there.

Aasiya Kazi:

Okay. So Wahid, this is mostly your school life and your childhood.

Abdul Wahid:

Yes.

Aasiya Kazi:

And then you moved to Karachi from Chitral, is that correct?

Abdul Wahid:

Yes.

Aasiya Kazi:

And how old were you at the time?

Abdul Wahid:

So, basically from Chitral, when I was in grade 10, let's say I was, what, 16? I went to the US on an exchange programme, so that was for a year. And then I came back to Chitral when I was, let's say 17, and then I moved to Karachi. So that was when I was 17, and I think it was in 2012.

Aasiya Kazi:

And so when you went to the US on this exchange programme, you were a teenager and this was your first time in an environment where people from different races and cultures. Right?

Abdul Wahid:

Mm-hmm.

Aasiya Kazi:

At that level.

Abdul Wahid:

Yes.

Aasiya Kazi:

I mean you've already lived in a diverse environment, but also outside of the country of your birth?

Abdul Wahid:

Right.

Aasiya Kazi:

Right? So, A, how was that in terms for you in terms of community? Were you able to make friends, were you treated a different way? Because we are coming from South Asia?

Abdul Wahid:

Yes.

Aasiya Kazi:

Just your early experiences sort of in America as an exchange student?

Abdul Wahid:

Yeah, that was really interesting time actually when I went to the US, because the day I had my interview for the US visa, Osama bin Laden was killed in Pakistan, so that was that same day. So you can imagine when I was going there, what was happening globally after 9/11 and this whole situation, and then Osama bin Laden being spotted in Pakistan and so on.

So it was very, in a way, there was definitely Islamophobia on the rise in the US at that point when I went to the US, and I definitely came across it the day I arrived there or the second day or third day. So we used to live with the host family, so I was living with my host family, extremely nice people. So obviously, these people are well-educated, they have their own exposure and so on that's-

Aasiya Kazi:

And which part of-

Abdul Wahid:

It was in Wisconsin.

Aasiya Kazi:

Wisconsin.

Abdul Wahid:

So these are people who obviously know the context and they are there to learn from you, as well as you are learning from them. So, I didn't feel any kind of discomfort from them. They were really open to learning about the culture of the religion and so on. It was a really kind of white population. Wisconsin is mostly not super diverse in that sense.

So this community, generally, was really open to our ideas. I gave more than 50 presentation across different schools and so on. But I definitely, like I was telling you about this third day when I went to get a SIM card. So my host family knew someone who we ran into in the shop and then they were introducing me on this, "Oh, this is our exchange student from Pakistan." It's like, "Oh, Pakistan, where they shoot," things like that. So this is one example.

There were definitely those kind of instances where you would definitely feel, again, a different kind of misunderstanding. Now you are no more that Ismaili student in Chitral, but you're now in Islam. You are kind of representing a Muslim community in the US.

So, I guess there were instances of both. There were instance of understanding, there were people who were open to your experience, open to learn about, especially in this charged environment when things are changing globally, people are trying to basically place Muslim in a very different scenario and so on. So I guess it was a really interesting experience for me to be able to, as a teenager, what do I know about Islam at that time anyway. But I tried, I guess I was given this space, which I'm grateful for.

Aasiya Kazi:

From what you've talked about, and the Jamatkhana is also not only, and correct me if I'm wrong, a piece of religion, but it's also an everyday community.

Abdul Wahid:

Yes, definitely.

Aasiya Kazi:

And when you are sort of coming out of the space where you have that on a daily basis, and so your religion and your community very much part of your everyday life. And then going from that to these spaces, where you're with a bunch of kids from different places. How is that for you in forming sort of new friendships and relationships?

Abdul Wahid:

Honestly, if you look from a wider angle in the US especially, it didn't really matter as much for me to be an Ismaili at that point, like I'm saying. People, if you just tell them that you are Muslim, I guess people weren't interested if you're a Sunni Muslim, if you're an Ismaili Muslim or whatever. But definitely then I had some other exchange students from let's say Morocco and so on, and I could see a kind of disagreement when we would discuss different things. So that was there with other exchange students from Saudi Arabia and so on.

But otherwise, honestly, because of living in boarding school and so on, boarding school and hostels gave you that kind of opportunity to live in a different environment that's not one of your super comfort zone as such. So I guess I had that experience already, which helped me when I went to the US, but also having the family, the host family, and then host community overall who are quite generally really nice people, very understanding, they knew where you're coming from, and then they were open to listen to you.

So, in many ways, I felt more understood or more having, like I was telling you about, that space of having the place for discussion was happening for me more in the US than it was happening, let's say, in Chitral, in the boarding school. So there I could explain to the people that, "Okay, so I belong to this specific sector of Islam, but then these are the differences, and these are the things that happened." So, I found that space definitely there and people were more open, generally.

Aasiya Kazi:

Okay, so you were an exchange student and then what happens next?

Abdul Wahid:

And then I come back to Pakistan.

Aasiya Kazi:

In where in Pakistan?

Abdul Wahid:

So I went back to Chitral initially, so then that's when I was starting my college, basically first year and second year or 11th and 12th grade. So from Chitral, I moved to Karachi at that point for my college.

Aasiya Kazi:

And you were at-

Abdul Wahid:

Yeah, I was in Aga Khan Higher Secondary in Karimabad, in Karachi, yeah.

Aasiya Kazi:

And could you tell us a little bit about, that was again a boarding school for you? Then you lived in a hostel, sorry.

Abdul Wahid:

So, in Karachi actually, yeah, so this is, as you can see from the name, the Aga Khan, it was again a community school, which doesn't mean that it's specific to Aga Khan. You know what, in Karachi, Ismailis are usually referred as Aga Khanis. So, they're not just for the Ismailis, it's open to everyone, and one of the best schools in Karachi, for sure.

But having that kind of a different community sense there was extremely interesting. So, I did not live in hostel when I was in Karachi. I lived with other friends. So, we would usually, people from the north and they go to Karachi, Islamabad, we kind of rent a room or two, and then we live there as a group of friends. So yeah.

Aasiya Kazi:

So, you had people from your community back home?

Abdul Wahid:

Yes.

Aasiya Kazi:

And you were living together?

Abdul Wahid:

Yes.

Aasiya Kazi:

And then after that you went to university in Karachi? That's my understanding.

Abdul Wahid:

Yes, yes.

Aasiya Kazi:

Do you want to tell us about-

Abdul Wahid:

Yeah, so after second year, I went to Habib University. That was a new university at that time. I really liked their programme. And yeah, so then we started there. University in Pakistan are usually a four years, so I did my undergrad there. It was a really interesting journey throughout the university life there. It was honestly a bit of, how to put it, it is a definitely elite university in that sense. So it's super expensive, but there are scholarships and so on for people like us who cannot afford it, so that was nice.

And also we were the first batch, so there was this huge importance on the first batch of students, but really interesting curriculum, especially coming back to this question of these discussions. Then that was the space where I could actually discuss anything with anyone. People were more mature, they were more open, there were Sunnis, there were Ismailis, there were Shias, Ahmadiyyas, and so on. So there were people from all different school of thoughts in that university.

But also, I guess what I really liked about my experience in the university, in specific reference to this whole interview series that you're doing is, I guess Habib definitely has a very interesting curriculum. And it has helped me a lot in developing my understanding of Islam generally.

Because it's a liberal arts college, so everybody in the university has to take the core courses. And one of the core courses called Hikmah, which talks about Islamic taught, or in a way the traditions, Islamic traditions in different ways. And there, we read different scholars like Shahab Ahmed, for instance, and many different of those scholars. And it helped me really see things from an academic perspective. And that shift started happening there, I guess, which is why it was easier for me to get into the Islamic studies programme in London. So yeah.

Aasiya Kazi:

You talk about the shift, what do you mean by the shift? It was a shift in thought or the way you practise your religion or think about it?

Abdul Wahid:

I think it was mostly about how do you perceive Islam for yourself, and it was kind of a shift from the understanding that even I see from the, let's say, mainstream media or grey sources, to actually looking at work that are more deeply researched, that are more open to critique of it as well, of Islam, of Muslim scholars and so on.

So I guess that shift, by that shift I mean definitely that approach of reaching how you understand Islam, and to see the different openness that you can find within the Muslim cultures, which you don't come across in your daily lives, but unless you actually read people Shahab Ahmed, then you see there is this whole possibility of interpreting Islam in so many different ways. So, that shift is what, I guess, what's interesting for me.

Aasiya Kazi:

Let's talk about Karachi for context, is obviously the most diverse city in Karachi in terms of ethnicities. Right?

Abdul Wahid:

Definitely. Yeah.

Aasiya Kazi:

And so in Karachi, just for context, and please correct me if I'm wrong, in different spaces and classrooms, you find people from all over the country and also people from the region. So, how was that for you in terms of were you able to make friends with people from ethnicities? Let's start with that, forging this new community with your fellow students, with your peers.

Abdul Wahid:

Yeah, certainly, I guess Karachi is a big city, which means you have definitely a variety of people you interact with every day. And as compared to, let's say, my village where you know everyone in a way, it's a very small community, everybody knows which sector you're from, blah, blah, blah. So here, people didn't know. You just meet people and then you meet them for who they are, more importantly.

And everything else maybe is a bit in the backdrop. So it's not like, "Should I make friends with this Sunni guy?" Or, "Should I become friends with this Ismaili girl?" And I think it's also to do with this age where I am in a university and so on. So, I guess at that point, it didn't matter as much as it was in my primary school or so on, where because of the small close-knit community, you had to be more careful.

But in Karachi, I don't think it was such a big deal which sect you are from, which even religion, I had Hindu friends, Christian friends and so on. So I guess at that point also, personally, I had more exposure by now because of going to the US, and then being in Karachi and interacting with different people, I guess I found that more space in Karachi, for sure.

Aasiya Kazi:

So you were able to have this social life with people from different religions and ethnicities?

Abdul Wahid:

Yes.

Aasiya Kazi:

What about, and again, if you're comfortable in answering this, what about your religious life? How did it change in Karachi? Were you able to go to the Jamatkhana, did you want to go to the Jamatkhana?

Abdul Wahid:

Yeah, that's an interesting question, especially because now you're living away from your family and the word used in Karachi is Chadha, which is just boys living together. So now, obviously don't have

any control on you, but I think the good part was my school was really close to the Jamatkhana and what do we call the religious education school.

So I would usually go to religious education schools after my college. So in first year and second year, I would come, because I was in the evening shift as well, so I would come out of the school and then go directly, and there were other friends who were coming along as well. So we'd go to religious education school every day. And sometime, we would go to Jamatkhana, and especially Fridays or there is the Chandraat, which is the first day of the month is celebrated in the Ismailis. So yeah, definitely wouldn't miss a lot of those special days. But then obviously, because of being in the evening shift, it wasn't like a regular going to Jamatkhana. But yeah, I was still in touch with the general belief system.

Aasiya Kazi:

And what was that? I mean, that is something that has carried on for you?

Abdul Wahid:

Yeah. And I think it is definitely the different things that happened as well. When I was teaching also when I was at Habib, I would teach in the night in the religious education centres after I completed my education there, because it's up to 12th grade if you convert it into a normal school. So after that, I started teaching there as well. And then, so the programme that I applied to in London is specifically Ismailis. It's a scholarship. The scholarship is only for Ismailis. And when I applied there in the Institute of Ismaili Studies and I got in. So that was, again, having that community all around you again, keeps you in touch with the faith system, but obviously reduced over time after I came to London, mostly because of time and we used to live... Hi.

Aasiya Kazi:

Hey, how are you?

Abdul Wahid:

Good, how are you?

Aasiya Kazi:

[inaudible 00:35:45].

Abdul Wahid:

Thank you.

Aasiya Kazi:

Almost didn't recognise you. Do you know where the West Wing is?

That's the West Wing.

Oh, okay. Thank you.

You're welcome.

Abdul Wahid:

So yeah, when in London, then again, it was hard to go to Jamatkhana. There is a Jamatkhana in London, so we used to go but on Fridays and on Chandraat and things like that. But definitely not every day. But at the same time, in a lot of our doing Islamic studies and humanities, we used to discuss a lot of this in our classes and everything, but not the practise of it as much.

Aasiya Kazi:

Okay. So let's now talk about your journey to Oxford by way of London.

Abdul Wahid:

Yes.

Aasiya Kazi:

What made you decide to, A, first come to the UK in particular? A lot of people, students in Pakistan want to go to the US. And then B, then we can just move on to how you got here.

Abdul Wahid:

Definitely, I think for one major reason is the scholarship. So the scholarship that I got is only for the UK, and the institute is in London. So that's one main reason, because of this scholarship, I decided to come to the UK. But also, I guess because I had been to the US twice. During my undergrad I did a semester exchange in UC Berkeley. So I guess I had some idea of the US and I guess I wanted to explore a different region, the UK and Europe and so on. So that was one reason. But mostly, I would say the scholarship motivated me to have this fully funded scholarship where you live here for three years at least, was a good motivation to come to the UK.

Aasiya Kazi:

And you're talking about when you came to London. Right?

Abdul Wahid:

Yes, yes.

Aasiya Kazi:

So then, A, let's talk a little bit about your experiences in London, and then what brought you to Oxford.

Abdul Wahid:

Yeah, so London, like I said, was even more a comfort zone because everything was paid for, it's a full scholarship, we have a really nice accommodation in King's Cross. You have your group of friends, a lot from Pakistan. Most of them are Ismailis again. So, it's a very comfort zone where you are living there. It was nice and so on.

So I had a really good time there, and then did more dive deep into Islamic studies there, which was nice. But I was always interested in the study of the theory of nature and environment and topics like that. So like I was saying, as part of our scholarship, you have to choose a university in your third year. So you study for two years in London through the institute, and then your third year, you're free to choose any field anywhere in the UK.

So yeah, I was applying to different places and I was really looking for a programme that would be more about the theory of environment and nature, rather than more of the carbon offsetting and more the, how would you say, the implementation part of it and so on. Because a lot of it has been overtaken by that part of study. In Cambridge, I was looking at programme in Cambridge, it was more about the climate sciencey part of it. Not as much about the theory of nature, the theory of environmental sciences.

So when I was looking at Oxford, I came across this really interesting programme called Nature, Society and Environmental Governance, which is exactly what I wanted. It was the theory, it was the philosophies, and it was the problematizing many things rather than the project, looking at climate sciences and environment and geography as a climate project.

So I guess biggest motivation for me was finding that programme. And then I found a professor who I'm still working with, and her work directly spoke to me. It's about pastoralism and smaller communities and so on. So that was another motivation. But then obviously, the Oxford, it's like the name, I guess it does make a difference. And when I applied and I got in, then I took no time to think and decide to opt for this programme. So yeah, all of those different factors were there.

Aasiya Kazi:

See you, Wahid.

Abdul Wahid:

See you.

Aasiya Kazi:

So, should we talk a little bit about the social aspects of the programme in London?

Abdul Wahid:

Mm-hmm.

Aasiya Kazi:

You say it was a comfort zone, you had people from back home. How was it interacting with people from your peers, from other religious, cultural, racial background?

Abdul Wahid:

Because of living, the accommodation is mostly for Ismailis, but there are obviously some different programme which is open to all, so there were some Sunni France as well, and obviously non-Muslim friends as well who are from other different faith and belief. But I guess within that accommodation, the Ismailis were... It was a building managed by the Aga Khan Development

Network. So at the end of the day, you are, in a way, in majority in that building. And we did not have a huge interaction with other people outside because we were really busy, the programme is quite hectic in sense, it's quite rigorous. But yeah, professors or most of our professors were non-Muslims as well, so they were just scholars who are good, prominent in Islamic studies.

Aasiya Kazi:

So, when you came to Oxford then, it was a very different kind of, and correct me if I'm wrong, education experience because it was not directly related. When you went to the US, it was very much related to your identity as a Muslim. Then again, this programme in London was also. And then you also, like you said, people there were mostly from your community. So this was the first time where you were here outside of your country, but also, where you came in contact with people from very diverse backgrounds. Is that true or no?

Abdul Wahid:

No, that definitely is true. When I came to Oxford, certainly at that point, I guess there wasn't a huge role of religion in my everyday life, in my everyday communication, and meeting with people and so on. So in Oxford, as you yourself have experienced, you are more based around your discipline and your colleagues and so on, so you meet different people. And then, yeah, I wouldn't say religious identity was such a big part of my interactions, social interactions and so on. So that was definitely different here.

Aasiya Kazi:

And how has it been? How would you describe the university culture, the college culture here? How was it like forming new friendship, et cetera? And you've been here since?

Abdul Wahid:

2021, I think.

Aasiya Kazi:

Okay. So you've been here for-

Abdul Wahid:

Yeah, '20 actually. Yeah. So this is fourth year. So I mean-

Aasiya Kazi:

You started your programme in 2020?

Abdul Wahid:

Yes.

Aasiya Kazi:

The fall of [inaudible 00:43:52] 2020?

Abdul Wahid:

Yes. Yeah, yeah. No, I think it's been really nice. Like I said, it's definitely a wonderful experience where you are basically more concerned towards your academics and things that you study, things that you do. My masters was extremely hectic. I was totally indulged in doing my masters. It was a really rigorous programme again, so a lot of my time was literally just studying, and also COVID. So that was the time when I did my programme. There were lots of lockdowns and so on, so it was quite a different experience for my masters.

And then when I started, obviously it's not to say that there were no Ismailis, obviously I would then meet with some Ismaili friends, some even Muslim friends, friends from Pakistan. So in Oxford, you have different groups of people that you meet or that you interact with. So even at least for me, so I have this group of friends from Pakistan who I meet with quite often, we do things together. There are people who are just Ismailis. Sometime we would have these gatherings where we would say a dua or a [inaudible 00:45:14] madhana or something like that. And then there are college friends and there are department friends and so on. So it's more a holistic kind of interaction with different groups of people.

Aasiya Kazi:

Obviously, you came here at a time, which was challenging globally, COVID, lockdowns, et cetera. But after things normalised, were there any difficulties you had in getting to know people from a diverse range of backgrounds?

Abdul Wahid:

Honestly, I think because of the living in different, I guess environments and in different setups, I would say it wasn't super, super hard for me to make friends or anything like that. When I came to Oxford, it was quite easy. And I guess one reason why is because you have so many opportunities to make friends or to meet people.

And also, when you are in university, when you are doing a DPhil, you are not really crazily looking for making friends every day. So I guess you are trying to also slow down social life at this point. So, I guess basically it has not been difficult. I haven't found it at a time when I'm like, "Oh, I want friends and I don't have friends."

Aasiya Kazi:

What about academically? How has your academic experience at Oxford contributed to your, let's say, personal and intellectual growth?

Abdul Wahid:

So yeah, I guess for me-

Aasiya Kazi:

Did it live up to your expectations?

Abdul Wahid:

Definitely. I would say definitely, especially my master's programme, going back. I think one main reason I guess why Oxford is so prestigious, if it is, is because of the people that you meet and the people who are in your courses. So, I guess the material you can find anywhere you go in the UK or even Pakistan. To be honest, there are many courses that I had better courses at Habib than I had here, the kind of readings or material and everything. But I guess definitely when I would sit with people, discuss things in my friend circle, in my course, you would see that everybody's bringing this really unique perspective to the table, which makes it different. And I think a lot of time, I was challenged academically by the thought process of other people, and that helped me grow definitely. And professors obviously, and their experiences.

So overall, I think my master's programme has been hugely impactful in how I see things. But honestly, I don't know if I am super satisfied with the PhD experience here at Oxford because of many reasons. We start with, I guess it's just a research degree. You don't have a lot of guidance, for that matter. You don't have a lot of training. So if I had not done my degree in masters here at Oxford, and if I had come from elsewhere, I think I would've definitely struggled with my research. Especially in my department, you don't really get any training on research methods or research, or generally. They just throw it into research, like, "Do it."

Aasiya Kazi:

They throw you in the field?

Abdul Wahid:

Yeah. Yeah. And then obviously, you are paying such a huge fee for what? That's another thing that bothers me often, is you pay 30,000 pounds, no matter which scholarship pays it, no matter who pays it. What are you paying for? It's literally for nothing. So you meet your advisor once a month, if you're lucky. And some advisors are really busy, you meet them once in two months or so, and then you're doing your own thing and you are just paying for the name, I guess.

As compared to many other places around the world, where your PhD is a holistic experience of your learning and you sharing... I guess coming back to the point of learning from people, because your PhD is such an individual project that you don't really find people who would be directly invested in your project. In your masters, you obviously discuss the same things, you have the same course, you find people to talk to them about. But in PhD, that's not the case because you are now doing your own project and there is less opportunity for you to learn from others. So yeah, the PhD has been okay in terms of learning, in terms of what the experience adding to your experience of learning. So it's mostly an individual project that you can do from anywhere. You don't have to be in Oxford for that.

Aasiya Kazi:

Yeah. And yet, you are here.

Abdul Wahid:

Yes.

Aasiya Kazi:

I'm always interested, because I came back. So, what is that like for you? Because at least for me, it's like when I was doing my masters here anywhere, this is my second masters, your everyday life is so different.

Abdul Wahid:

True.

Aasiya Kazi:

It's like you're going to class, you're going to coffee with your friend, and now it's the city and you or the university and you.

Abdul Wahid:

Yeah.

Aasiya Kazi:

How has that been? What has that been like for you?

Abdul Wahid:

So I guess for me, let's say about this year, it has been different in many ways. But again, I guess I'm generally a social person, a more social person, which means I've always had this kind of schedule where I would definitely meet someone every day, and then different initiatives that I am engaged with, teachings that I do, or I work with different organisations in Oxford, or things that I do back home and so on. So I guess there's always something to do beyond my PhD project, which is interesting.

Aasiya Kazi:

Do you want to tell us a little bit about if you're part of some clubs or activities?

Abdul Wahid:

No, certainly. In Oxford especially, so I started-

Aasiya Kazi:

Tired?

Abdul Wahid:

No, no, no, I'm good. I'm good.

Aasiya Kazi:

Let me know if you feel like this is all too much.

Abdul Wahid:

No, we have a few more minutes. We can do another 30 minutes.

Aasiya Kazi:

Okay, perfect. Just tell me if you feel like it's too much.

Abdul Wahid:

Yeah, yeah. No, this is a nice discussion. So yeah, I kind of started this, what we call the Oxford Collective for Pastoralist and Nomadic People. So it's kind of a group of people who are working on the issues that I work on and my advisor works on, and then they're friends, so we are now 15 or 20 people. So we meet quite often, we do events around Oxford and so on. So that has been a major, I guess, source of social project and also academic at the same time.

Aasiya Kazi:

Do you want to tell us a little bit about where the group members come from and what kind of social activities?

Abdul Wahid:

So basically, it's literally for anybody who works around nomadic or pastoralist people's issues. So it can be anybody. So we have people from across university, from School of Geography, from anthropology, from history, and from across different disciplines in the university. And they're from different regions, from Iran, France, UK, Mongolia, etcetera, etcetera.

So yeah, I started this. And then obviously, there are a few I knew, and my advisor knew some people, so tried to approach everyone who is interested. Some professors, some students. It came together, so we meet at least three times every term. And then we have different events, we would have film screening of pastoralism, or we would invite other people who work on pastoralism from London, from the UK in different parts of the UK, and then they would talk to us.

And then usually, we'll have lunch or dinner after whatever social or whatever academic activity is. So that is, I guess, a major kind of activity that I have been involved with this term. But otherwise, yeah, I've been a part of the GCR at Reuben, where I am, as the VP for academics and then as an environment officer at some point. And yeah, I guess that's kind of my engagement with something beyond academic.

Aasiya Kazi:

If you're talking about that, let's talk about the university side of things a little bit. In what ways has Oxford, the university and the college, supported and accommodated your cultural and religious practises?

Abdul Wahid:

Honestly, I never had an issue to start with, with anything that the college or the university has done. It has not directly at any point hindered in any way my religious practises or anything. My college has, let's say, multi-faith room where anybody can go and have their prayers or so on, and it

does celebrate Eid dinners. And so I guess there is this space where they acknowledge your religious beliefs.

And then the university also has the Islamic Society, and there are different venues where you can go to if you want. There's Islamic Centre where you can go to for prayers and stuff. But yeah, there's so much you can expect from an institution in that sense. And I guess it has the space, it has the venues where you can go, the societies where which you can join and be a part of.

Aasiya Kazi:

Such as?

Abdul Wahid:

The Islamic Society, like I was telling.

Aasiya Kazi:

Yeah, OUISoc.

Abdul Wahid:

OUISoc.

Aasiya Kazi:

PakSoc.

Abdul Wahid:

Yeah, yeah. So there is PakSoc. I used to be the vice president for PakSoc in my first year. But I haven't had a super engagement with OUISoc as much, but I guess people who choose to, there is the opportunity for you to go.

Aasiya Kazi:

So you feel like that you have been part of student organisations that sort of celebrate cultural diversity or promote, give you space for your religion, but also sort of gives you a chance to promote interfaith interactions and dialogue?

Abdul Wahid:

Yeah, yeah. Again, if you are interested in it, so does it.

Aasiya Kazi:

You think if this is something that you as a student want, then you think the university does provide it?

Abdul Wahid:

Definitely. I would say there is definitely that appetite, where if you initiate a project. I haven't seen at any point that a project has been turned down for me because it's religious or because it involves more than one religion or so on. So if it's something that you want to do, you definitely have this space to do it.

Aasiya Kazi:

What was it like being the VP of PakSoc?

Abdul Wahid:

It was-

Aasiya Kazi:

That was a broad question.

Abdul Wahid:

Yeah, it was unfortunately during COVID, a lot of things were closed. We did huge amount of activities online, so it was nice. We invited people from Pakistan to speak to us online, like [inaudible 00:57:39] and other people, some filmmakers and environmental activists and so on. So it was a lot of things for online. We did a few cricket matches, we did a board party and things like that. So, it was a difficult time to be-

Aasiya Kazi:

Leading.

Abdul Wahid:

... leading. Yeah.

Aasiya Kazi:

Or just be, I guess-

Abdul Wahid:

Yeah, just to live.

Aasiya Kazi:

Just to be human.

Abdul Wahid:

Yes.

Aasiya Kazi:

I think honestly, yes, it was really difficult. In terms of you've been part of university in so many ways, so what kind of suggestions would you have for improvement in terms of how the university could enhance the inclusivity of the environment, specifically for Muslim students? And again, by that I mean the diverse Muslims, again, are not a monolithic community. So the diverse needs of Muslim students.

Abdul Wahid:

I guess generally the university definitely has provided this space. There's a prayer hall near the museum and so on. So I guess generally, the university has provided a space for Muslims. And again, you see these different kind of messages coming from the university when it's Eid or when it's Ramazan, so it's not like you are not unnoticed. So you are definitely acknowledged for your identity. But I do feel there's a need for improvement within the Muslim community and their organisations, so especially OUISoc and Islamic Centre. So one reason I don't really go to many of their events is I feel it's quite exclusionary. So, a lot of the things that they would do is around the Sunni faith, and it's in a way doesn't have a lot of space for, let's say, Ismailis or even Shias to be a part of.

So I have been to some of the events in the Islamic Centre by OUISoc or by the Islamic Centre, where everybody's expected to go pray in the mosque after an event, or even before dinner, you have to pray and so on. So I guess it is quite heavily dominated by Sunni Muslims, the OUISoc. And in a space like Oxford where you want the openness, where you want the dialogues to happen, where you want the diversity, as you're saying, within the Muslim communities, needs to come out, doesn't happen. And I guess that is something that has to be discussed, that has to change about how we see OUISoc, the Islamic society. It's not a one sect society. It's not, let's say, Wahhabi society or Sunni society, for that sense.

Aasiya Kazi:

Absolutely.

Abdul Wahid:

So I guess there is a need to change that perspective so that people from diverse background within Muslim traditions feel welcomed, and they have a space where they can organise events that relate more to their belief system. So, these things don't happen. I haven't seen any such event happening, I haven't. So I guess there's a space for improvement, but within the Muslim organisations in Oxford.

Aasiya Kazi:

Absolutely. I think that is such an important point, that within these organisations that are very much affiliated with the university, that these conversations and changes need to be happening.

Abdul Wahid:

Yes.

Aasiya Kazi:

Obviously, this is the Muslim history project, so my questions are kind of particular-

Abdul Wahid:

As it has to.

Aasiya Kazi:

Yeah. So we've talked about religion, the social aspects of it. How is your identity as a Muslim? And again, when we say Muslim, we have to obviously acknowledge that Muslims are not a monolithic community, as an Ismaili Muslim, played a role in shaping your personal and academic journey at Oxford? Or what do you think? That's quite open-ended for you if you think [inaudible 01:02:14].

Abdul Wahid:

Yeah. To start with, I'm here because of a scholarship that is funded by the Ismaili Centre in London. So, I guess the opportunity has been given to me by my identity of identifying as an Ismaili Muslim. So, that is I guess the starting point, which keeps me definitely connected in one way or another to this identity of being a Muslim.

But I also, generally, I guess I like social gatherings around religion, for instance. And whenever there is an Eid celebration, like this year we did an Eid celebration at my house in [inaudible 01:02:55]. So because I'm living with four other, five other Muslims, so we have this space where we do most of the, in Ramazan, we would had a lot of events, like Iftari, where we would invite other people, and then we did a huge big Eid celebration there were 40 people come out join us.

So, I guess there's a deep relation between the religious perspective and culture of people. So yeah, for me, it's always interesting to be a part of that culture, which is also religious at the same time. But I guess my identity in that sense is always there. So, even with your name, anybody who is like, oh, you are Abdul Wahid, so definitely when they see it, and then you're from Pakistan, so there is the Muslim perspective there already.

So it is a part of it. I personally am not a super believer of reflecting myself as a Muslim in the first instance or as a part of my identity as a person, but it is there. So, it has given me the opportunities that I am here today. So yeah, I don't think there is a way you can avoid it. But at the same time, I wouldn't say when I meet people or when I make friendships, when I do socialisation, I don't think I would be exclusionary because of my identity, and I wouldn't like to be treated as such in any way. So yeah.

Aasiya Kazi:

Absolutely. We've talked about this in your overall experience, but in terms of zooming in on a particular, is there a particular moment or experience that sort of really shaped or impacted your time here at Oxford? Positive, negative, anything? I know I'm kind of putting you on the spot, but if you can think of it.

Abdul Wahid:

I guess I don't think there was one moment which has shaped anything about me, but it's always the whole experience, the overall experience, how basically you learn every day and you shape yourself every day. The process of learning and unlearning and relearning happens on a daily basis, and as it should. So, I guess it's the overall experience, but nothing I would say that is particular to one event that has had a significant impact on me as such. But yeah, it's gradually every day event.

Aasiya Kazi:

What about home? Do you go back often? What do you miss most about it?

Abdul Wahid:

I do. I think because my mother is alone at home, I have to visit her every year. And I really like Pakistan, to be honest, and Chitral especially. So, because of so much happening in here with all different things, academic, non-academic, but also really busy schedule and the hustle bustle, and I want that break.

And I go every year, spend at least two to three months at home. And then it's just a process of connecting with your roots, connecting with your people, connecting with your place, with nature and so on. So I do miss that when I'm here, which is why I have decided that no matter what, I spend two to three months back home so that you are still connected to your language, your people, and so on. So yeah, that happens every year.

Aasiya Kazi:

Anything else, Wahid, that I haven't specifically asked you that you'd like to talk about?

Abdul Wahid:

No, I guess because we are talking about this whole idea of Muslim identity in Oxford, I guess we cannot avoid talking about what's happening in Palestine these days and what the response has been recently. I guess that is maybe one of the instances when I felt a bit... And again, I never associate the issue of Palestine with Muslim experience as such, right? It's a humanitarian issue. And before anything, I would definitely consider it to be, if it was anyone else, if it was not Muslim and if I had gotten the same kind of response from, let's say, the vice chancellor email yesterday was quite disappointing in many ways. So yeah.

And I don't really know if I would say if it's because of my Muslim identity or because of what's happening to people who are Muslim. But I guess generally I would say I am so happy that there are people in Oxford who are speaking out on unjust things happening around the world. Considering everybody's so busy here, everybody does not have the time, but there are people who have set up the encampment and so on.

So, it has given me that relief in a way in which you are like, "Okay, within this institution there is this space where people can be speaking for justice and for things that go beyond identities and so on." But at the same time, I don't know if you saw the email that was sent by vice chancellor, which was not acknowledging enough of what is happening and a bit of a blame game of people feeling unsafe. I think that was a bit disappointing. And because of we are living in this time and period

when a genocide is happening in Palestine, I guess I thought an interview like this cannot finish without acknowledging that. Yeah.

Aasiya Kazi:

Absolutely. I think it really ties into what it's like to be a human at this moment in time, but also Muslim at this point in time. Right?

Abdul Wahid:

Yeah, yeah.

Aasiya Kazi:

And so you feel the activism around Palestine right now?

Abdul Wahid:

Mm-hmm.

Aasiya Kazi:

How does that make you feel and how does the university's response make you feel? That is what you've talked about a little bit. But is that something you want to address in more detail?

Abdul Wahid:

No, I think to start with, I might have a disagreement in terms of if it should be dealt with as a Muslim issue. So I would not start from there, and I've never done that, but unfortunately, like I said, it has... So if I as a Muslim, who comes from a Muslim family, start talking about Palestine, people would definitely look at it as a Muslim issue, which I don't want it to be. We spoke for Ukraine, which was of a similar nature, or not as huge as Palestine issue these days, especially that there is the whole support from European countries and so on for Ukraine, to just give you a comparative analysis in a way. But we were there for them as well. Now we are here for Palestine.

But to see this very different response from the university, where they are setting up scholarships for Ukraine and they're supporting them. And obviously, there are Russian students here, so it's never about the countries, it's about how you are approaching an issue that we identify as issue as student body and as people look up to in one way or another, that Oxford University is leading institute and blah, blah, blah.

So yeah, I mean I guess I totally understand there are so many things that are tied around funding and things like that for the university, but at some point, you have to take brave decisions and I would've expected, like Spain and different universities around the world that they're doing, Oxford did have to step up and listen to the demands of students, which I don't see happening.

Aasiya Kazi:

Do you think students who are involved in a particular kind of activism around that pro-Palestinian activism or pro-peace as we can call it, or anti-genocide, do you want to say something about what you think of their experiences of activism at this moment in time?

Abdul Wahid:

I think to start with, honestly at this point, engaging with such activism, especially on a daily basis, is a privilege in the UK especially at this point. Because we saw the education minister setting out emails and Tweets by saying students who get engaged with... Obviously, this is the thing, the discourse of fusing pro-Palestine or pro-peace movement to be supporting Hamas and so on, supporting a terrorist organisation or whatever.

So there is definitely risks, especially for international students. They are kind of literally saying that, "If you do this, you'll be kicked out of the country." And there is the fear always there because we are in a different country and we have such a limited visa. And if the country wants, they can definitely kick you out, and what can you do? So there is the fear. And students from the UK, I've seen, are doing it more comfortably because they're a citizen or whatever. Then as compared to US international students who definitely want to raise our voice, but at the same time we are like, "What can we do if they do, they kick us out and so on?"

So it's a bit of a struggle. I've personally felt, in the country at this point, again, going back to the point, me as a person, I don't want to say these things as a Muslim, just as a person. And I have felt difficulty on social media talking about it, always having this fear that how can it influence me as a person as well.

So yeah, it has been there, I guess, and it has been difficult for many people. And I guess some people have actually had to deal with the consequences speaking up for this cause. So yeah, I guess this is something which I have felt, which I see. If I were in my own country, maybe there was more independence, more freedom for me to speak against this, but because now I'm in a different land, there is less space and there's more risk and more fear around this.

Aasiya Kazi:

Thank you for sharing that, Wahid. As we wrap up, I know you have an event to get to. Anything else?

Abdul Wahid:

I think no. That was mostly it. So yeah, I guess we covered a lot of different things in this short interview.

Aasiya Kazi:

But I really appreciate your journey. Thank you so much.

Abdul Wahid:

No, thank you so much for inviting me.

Aasiya Kazi:

Can you send me a picture for the project?

Abdul Wahid:

Sure. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Aasiya Kazi:

Perfect. I will follow up on that.

Abdul Wahid:

Okay.

Aasiya Kazi:

Wait, I'm just going to switch this off. So all kinds of lint is getting on the phone. Okay, just one second. Done.