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A prism his own
 ZIYA US SALAM
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A new outlook Irfan Ahmad in New Delhi
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A new outlook Irfan Ahmad in New Delhi

He looks younger than his years. He scoffs at established traditions, and questions common perceptions too. At a time when the media is agog with news of numerous assaults on Indians in Australia, author-academic Irfan Ahmad, who teaches at Monash University in Australia, brings a different perspective to it. "It happens to people of other nationalities too. A lot of the incidents have taken place at technical colleges that are often owned by Australians of Indian origin. Indian media is trying to prove that the attacks are racist in nature. The Australian media is trying to say that it is opportunistic violence."

Not agreeing with the Australian media's description, Irfan, who has just authored "Islamism and Democracy in India" says, "by the same token if there are attacks on women at night, can you describe them as merely opportunistic violence?" The author who is shortly flying back to Melbourne, says, "Over the years different marginalised groups have suffered. People of all nationalities need to come together. After all, if there is an attack on a Lebanese in the city, Indians keep quiet. However, I must say, the common Aussies share our sense of horror and outrage at these incidents."

Not popular perception

Irfan's perception is indeed different from what is often depicted in the media. He brings the same mindset to work when it comes to writing. "In my book, 'Islamism and Democracy in India' I have tried to go beyond popular perception, tried to find the nuances and interrogated established prisms of thought. It is different from the approach of a political scientist. Rather than a bird's-eye view, I have tried to take the worm's-eye view."

In the 300-odd page book brought out by Permanent Black, Irfan talks of the early days of Jamaat-e-Islami Hind and Students Islamic Movement of India. He conducted detailed fieldwork, going to Aligarh Muslim University, many madrasas and meeting the ulemma. All along he tries to find how the Jamaat has changed in character, often even going back to its declared aims.

Based on his study, he paints a different picture of the organisation than what is commonly believed. "Jamaat-e-Islami was the first to give membership to women as women. Women were considered as individuals and not just as somebody's daughter or wife. The largest women's madrasa is maintained by Jamaat. In the book, I have tried to expose many commonly held perceptions." Incidentally, Irfan himself studied at a madrasa before going on to do a fellowship with Humboldt Foundation.

It is the same approach he takes when he talks of the Jamaat's founding father, Syed Abul Ala Maududi. "He is often projected as a dark reactionary force in our books as well as the media. In fact, he appears as an icon of tradition at many places but the truth is when he founded the Jamaat, he was as modern as, say, Jawaharlal Nehru. The two had different ways of being modern. In fact, in the early years of life Maududi exhibited shades of pluralist society. He was among the first to write a biography of Mahatma Gandhi. He also wrote the biography of Madan Mohan Malviya. His career began as a Congress sympathiser."

Once the Jamaat was founded in 1941, for quite some time, Maududi and his followers were opposed to electoral democracy, changing tracks many years later. "I have tried to argue that when secular democracy is responsive to aspirations of Muslim citizens, they embrace pluralism and democracy. But when democracy becomes majoritarian and exclusionary Muslims turn radical."

That is not to say Irfan does not criticise the Jamaat. "It is largely an urban movement. It is almost impossible to find its members in a village. Like any organisation, there are various shades of opinion. There are hardliners as well as moderates. But the organisation is changing now. It has a bank account. It is significant because this way it is part of the Indian banking system. It marks a complete turnaround for an organisation that before Partition invoked the Quran and the Hadith to denounce secularism and democracy and now even embraces them."

Well, again a matter of perception!