

# Imtiaz Ahmad: A Prime Mover of Muslim Studies in India

Social Change

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There are many scholars whose contribution to disciplines is through their research monographs. There are some others who build fields of knowledge that help foster others' research capacities. Imtiaz Ahmad belonged to the latter category as one of the prime movers of the sub-discipline of Muslim Studies in India. He did not, however, conceive the field as an autonomous one and instead saw it as embedded in larger concerns of democracy, secularism and development.

Imtiaz Ahmad argued in the discussion on the topic, 'Towards a Sociology of India' in the pages of *Contributions to Indian Sociology* that there had been a neglect of Muslims. The four volumes on Muslims in India, which he edited, became a benchmark for the study of religion and ritual, caste and social stratification, family and kinship, marriage and divorce.

A review by Francis Robinson of his work occasioned a significant debate in *Contributions to Indian Sociology* in the early 1980s. Imtiaz Ahmad's critique of an over-reliance on scriptural and textual perspectives received the support of Veena Das and Gail Minault who pointed out the importance, Islamisation notwithstanding, of local customs and folk theologies in the everyday life of the Muslims. Ahmad, Minault and Das emphasised the empirical and the contingent responding to the complexity of local culture and emphasising how theologies were grafted onto Muslim practice. Robinson, on the other hand, had argued that there has been in Islamic history a movement towards perfection and there is not, as Ahmad asserted, a state of equilibrium. Farzana Shaikh had likewise, pointed out the 'profound sense of the distinctiveness of being Muslim' among the communities of the subcontinent.

As a student, I was taken by the position of Imtiaz Ahmad and Veena Das. In retrospect, however, it seems to me that Francis Robinson's argument is important. It has been further developed by Talal Asad's work on the Anthropology of Islam, which he views as consisting of a set of foundational texts, the Qur'an and hadith and an established history of reasoned arguments based on these texts. The Islamic discursive tradition has its own rationality or styles of reasoning couched in its texts, history and institutions. Asad sees Islamist movements as part of the Islamic tradition even though they call for a rethinking of tradition. This tradition establishes an orthodoxy and orthopraxy in a given historical and material context.

Processes involving nationalism and transnationalism in the context of modernity have served to link the world of Indic Islam with the larger Muslim

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world. The clash of civilisations argument has become a self-fulfilling prophecy that has served to reify Islam into a single homogenous whole along with the foregrounding of Muslim terror in the wake of the attack on the twin towers. Further, the increased manifestation of the violence of hyper-nationalism has tended to foster both fear and a sense of community among Indian Muslims. Nonetheless, there has simultaneously been an immense enhancement of difference within and without the world of Indic Islam, as also in what are referred to as the Islamic and Islamicate worlds.

When I began my MPhil at the Delhi School of Economics, Imtiaz Ahmad became both a mentor and interlocutor. He was one of the examiners for my thesis and rightly pointed out that even though I had highlighted native agency in the making of violence, I had not, to that extent, highlighted the role of the British Empire.

Over the years, a closer relationship developed as we both became involved in many events and programmes. At a Workshop organised in Bombay in 2000 by Amrita Shodhan, Rowena Robinson (Indian Institute of Technology Bombay), Subur Munjee, Nasreen Fazalbhoy (Bombay University) and Rudi Heredia (St Xavier's College, Bombay) Imtiaz Ahmad spoke of the reasons for the lack of attention paid to Islam in the sociology of India.

At the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), we knew him as a valued friend. Indeed, that is perhaps one of the reasons that he incurred the displeasure of some orthodox leftists at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) and was virtually hounded out of the university on flimsy grounds that he was not taking his classes. Ashis Nandy mentioned at the Memorial meeting held for him at the India International Centre (IIC) that he realises in retrospect that the one cardinal mistake was that a support group had not been formed and he fought a lonely battle in the courts, albeit successful and ending with his reinstatement at the Centre for Political Studies (CPS), JNU. The Memorial meeting also brought out the special relationship he had with many students to the extent that at his burial when the person conducting the rites asked, *inka waris kaun hai?* (who is his heir?), many voices responded, *hum sab inke waris hain* (we are all his heirs).

The backwardness and injustice suffered by lower-caste Muslims became one of Imtiaz Ahmad's primary concerns. He was invited by the Mewat Development Agency to conduct a Workshop on the Educational and Cultural Backwardness of the Meos, an event in which I had also participated. I recall how thrilled we both were when a young woman from the community who had become a school teacher spoke fervently for women's education. Over the years, Imtiaz Ahmad would become increasingly concerned about 'backward' Muslims called *pasmanda* who were seen as belonging to the lower castes.

My last communication with Imtiaz Ahmad was an email from him that intimates his commitment to non-violence:

I have gone through the article. It is powerful and yet balanced. There are here and there a few allusions that may not be clear to an average reader, but then you have limitations of space. Please do go ahead and publish this but at a later point I would like you to focus on the issue of injustice and violence [and] write more elaborately on it. I think it is strange that at least in this country Muslims did not read and pay attention to Gandhi.

Is this an accident or a part of a malaise that afflicts more widely? Maybe we shall have time to discuss this and see what ways the point can be brought to the fore.

How rare is this capacity among the best of scholars to be both critical and courageous particularly given a context in which majoritarianism was thriving! It is interwoven into the fabric of democracy that he saw the multiverse of Muslim communities of the subcontinent and their Lived Islam.

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