**[Different idioms similar stories](https://www.dawn.com/news/1597162/different-idioms-similar-stories)**

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IRFAN Husain had made it a habit to forward me the occasional email in which his Indian fans would snitch about the poor calibre of my columns from New Delhi, particularly when compared to his. Why couldn’t I write as honestly as he did, they asked Irfan, who they admired for his unsparing criticism of everything that was wrong with Pakistan.

He tried to reason that I was an Indian journalist trying to describe the events in India equally critically to a newspaper on the other side of the border. And Irfan as a peripatetic Pakistani journalist was bound to slam the mess Pakistan’s military and civilian leaders had made of their country.

Irfan soon realised that reasoning with nationalists of any hue was like banging one’s head against the wall, more so if they happened to be Indian enthusiasts who loved hearing criticism of Pakistan but not of India. It is difficult to imagine a good journalist, he would say, who is also a staunch nationalist.

And that has been the best part of writing for a Pakistani paper from New Delhi.

Pakistani journalists have a formidable lineage with a global worldview, which started with Faiz Ahmed Faiz and Mazhar Ali Khan and continues undaunted. There’s no dearth of editors and scribes and even owners of newspapers jailed for speaking up for democracy, a kind of zeal less witnessed in India during the emergency and sadly for the most part today.

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Irfan Husain evolved a different skill and tactics to beat the system. He wrote under more than one pseudonym, the most familiar being Mazdak, a name he adopted while still working as civil servant. His choice of the pseudonym should tell us something about Irfan’s inspirations, Mazdak being a Persian rebel who nudged the ruler of the day to abandon his powerful nobles to set up an early communist order. The ruler was overthrown and Mazdak executed, according to one version of history.

The heroic story has been subjected to scholarly scrutiny and it is disputed by some that such a character did exist in fifth-century Persia. It does tell us something about Irfan, though, who perhaps as a bureaucrat of his times sought to usher ideologically imbued progressive changes on Pakistan’s hostile turf. Taking to writing was a handy tool in this endeavour.

In my two decades of writing for *Dawn*, I rarely missed reading Irfan’s insightful columns. They were acerbic, analytical, secular, liberal, humorous, entertaining, agitating, but invariably thought-provoking. That was not all. He also provoked me to look up his steady references and scholarly allusions from history. Irfan’s quarrel with the Muslim clergy in Pakistan as elsewhere was uncompromising, and this is indicated quite analytically in his book *Fatal Faultlines: Pakistan, Islam and the West*. He was sanguine that the damage could be limited from religious assault on democracy and even perhaps reversed had the US not persisted with making everything worse.

What well-meaning analyst would not agree totally with Irfan’s explanation for many of our troubles with Muslim extremism today?

It was eye-catching that Irfan used a metaphor from his Western cultural experience — being married to the erudite and warm-hearted Charlotte Breese being a key element — to describe a situation, which slightly varied from the one I would have used to narrate a similar story from my Indian grounding. There’s an evil character called Raktabeej, literally meaning seeds of blood, who is slain by goddess Durga. But Raktabeej had a boon. Wherever the drops of his blood fell, there would crop up another Raktabeej. Durga/Kali thus set about licking the blood clean before it fell to the ground, getting her famous red tongue in the bargain. Irfan’s story about American intervention uses the metaphor of dragon’s teeth that its military had sown in the troubled world.

“In the ancient Greek myth about Jason’s quest for the Golden Fleece, the hero was given a bag of dragon’s teeth and told to plant them in a field. As soon as he did so, an armed warrior sprang up at each spot where a tooth had been planted; this fierce army then turned on Jason. In its fight against global jihad, America has seemed a bit like Jason. Every time it cuts down an enemy, more spring up to attack it,” he said in the book.

Fair journalism requires a reasonable degree of objectivity and objectivity in turn requires a relative absence of parochial zeal to produce a credible narrative. Imagine if instead of having Irfan Husain or Saleem Asmi as colleagues, I had a Pakistani clone of India’s Arnab Goswami, with his foaming-at-the-mouth jingoism to work with. It would not happen, period. It has thus been a joy to work with Irfan and other *Dawn* colleagues who harboured goodwill for India. A depleting gaggle of Indian journalists has similar feelings for Pakistan, and they are there. Irfan gave me courage and an example to write without fear or favour from across a periodically tense border.

The approximate obverse of nationalist zeal in journalism is a steady flow of self-criticism. When Noam Chomsky slams Israel’s excesses against the Palestinians he can’t be accused of anti-Semitism. When Irfan Husain turned his attention from describing the rot in Pakistan to the violation of Kashmir’s freedoms by Indian forces, it was difficult to dismiss him as a zealous Pakistani. It is not only important to note what is being said, but who is saying it.

Firaq Gorakhpuri treated Harivansh Rai Bachchan’s popular poem Madhushala (tavern) with a sceptical frown. Firaq believed that Omar Khayyam’s celebration of the forbidden elixir made as much sense as Ghalib and Faiz paying fulsome tributes to the goblet for similar reasons. In Bachchan’s culture, drinking wine was far from taboo. Irfan Husain’s progressive pursuits were to me like Khayyam’s resistance against a stifling order, occasionally couched in poetic imagery.

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