**And now the Punjabi nationalism**

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The regional nationalism has been the most prominent feature of political evolution in Pakistan, though in some parts of the country particularly in Bengal, Sindh and KPK, the nationalism was quite assertive even before the inception of the country. A good part of Balochistan remained quasi-independent as a Khanate during the British Raj. The Bengali nationalism gained momentum as a backlash to the partition of Bengal in 1905. The Sindhi nationalism became more assertive after the annexation of Sindh with the Bombay Presidency. The Pakhtuns have always been a ferociously independent people as reflected by the Afghan-British wars.

The new country was territorially so constituted that only a federal structure of governance with sufficient political and administrative autonomy to the federating units as in all the modern Federations could have worked well in building a nation united in diversity and for shared political and economic aspirations. Barring the father of the nation, all the leaders who migrated from different parts of India to take over power in the country were not so familiar with the political aspirations, cultural and civilizational ethos of the national entities that constituted the new federation of Pakistan. The local leadership lost influence in the early days of the independent Pakistan, and was gradually elbowed out of the governing lot.

The central leadership got bogged down – particularly after the passing away of Mr. Jinnah and the assassination of Liaqat Ali Khan – in political tussles, intrigues and jockeying to the peril of nation building. The last straw on the camel’s back came in the form of the concept of strong center or the unnatural and inconceivable concept of coercive unity of peoples of heterogeneous cultures and languages, and the disastrous imposition of One-Unit Scheme. This gave an impetus to the latent sentiments of nationalism particularly in Bengal and the three provinces of West Pakistan – Sindh, KPK and Balochistan.

Since Punjab was having dominance in the security and bureaucratic establishment and was more populated than the other constituents of West Pakistan but was devoid of natural resources and Seaports, the Sindhi, Baloch and Pakhtun nationalists had all the reasons to hold it responsible for their political and economic woes. Even the Bengali nationalism was directed against it as the division of economic and financial resources was carried out on the basis of the territory – and not the population. Punjab undoubtedly took the bigger share of the economic and financial resources and federal jobs and powerful bureaucratic and military positions in Bengal and West Pakistan.

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This situation did not change even after the secession of Bengal. The new rulers switched to the division of economic and financial resources on the basis of the population. The quantum of provincial autonomy in the 1973 Constitution was nominal allowing Punjab greater dominance in the state affairs. So, in popular term, Punjab continued to be the big brother – satisfied with its well established position in the political and military-bureaucratic establishment and the lion’s share of the economic and financial resources. The other three provinces felt as merely cogs in the wheel of the state affairs.

Though Bhutto always tried to woo the Punjabi political elite, the majority of the Punjabi establishment resented his economic and administrative reforms. Even then, his mass popularity in Punjab remained unaffected. Benazir Bhutto inherited this popularity standing bravely to the repression of dictator Zia ul Haq. After Zia, for the first time in the history of the country, the Punjabi establishment felt threatened from the soaring popularity of Benazir Bhutto in Punjab in the run up to the general elections of 1988 and the likely retributive justice she was suspected to institute to avenge her father’s judicial murder.

At the behest of his promoters in the establishment, the young Chief Minister of Punjab, Mian Nawaz Sharif raised the slogan of Punjabism – ‘Jag Punjabi Jag, Lage na Teri pag noon dagh’ which echoed throughout his election campaign. His language against the Bhuttos was unusually foul, derogatory and abusive calling the senior Bhutto as traitor and the Bhutto ladies as stooges of foreign powers. The election was marginally won by the PPP. However, Benazir Bhutto publicly claimed that her party was deprived of a block of 25 National Assembly seats to prevent her from winning absolute majority. This was later confirmed by the confessional statement of General Asad Durrani for distribution of funds among the anti PPP politicians including Mian Nawaz Sharif at the behest of General Aslam Beg.

Though Mian Nawaz failed in his bid to capture the premiership of the country, he saved his throne in Lahore due mainly to the help of the establishment which connived with him in the Chhanga Manga operation. The Provincial Assembly members including the independents were bussed to the nearby resort, lavishly hosted there and brought back to Lahore on the day when the Leader of House was elected. However, he had sowed the seed of nationalism in Punjab. The outlook of Punjabi voter could not remain unaffected by this new nationalist approach in politics of Punjab which greatly eroded the roots of Sindh-based PPP.

Years after, the Punjabi nationalism once again raised its ugly head when a senior PML (N) leader identified the arrest of Shahbaz Sharif by the NAB as an attack on the honour of Punjab and Punjabis. The PPP has been facing arrests since 1977 but has never identified them with the honour of Sindh or Sindhis. The senior Bhutto suffered immeasurably at the hands of a tyrant. Throughout his ordeal, he behaved as a national leader and even died as a national leader. It is, therefore, unbecoming of the PML (N) leaders to identify their leaders with Punjab which represents the security and bureaucratic establishment and enjoys institutional dominance in the country.

The sentiments of nationalism have been largely pacified in the other three provinces after the quantum of provincial autonomy guaranteed by the 18thAmendment. Therefore, it looks ridiculous to stoke Punjabi nationalism when this dispute has been settled constitutionally.

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