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Comment

Demography and Pakistan

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Demography, along with geography, has always figured in the making of nations and in inter-state relationships. But perhaps never so critically as in the case of Pakistan. Indeed, in all the annals of its proto-history and existential career, demography and Pakistan have been interminably entwined. This may sound incredible, even inexplicable.

But for a moment consider the following. Which variable other than demography sparked the demand for Pakistan? Which variable has determined the roller coaster course of Pakistan's history which, during her first 24 years, became hostage to East-West Pakistan tension, mutual bickering and a litany of grievances, culminating in the country's traumatic dismemberment? Which other variable has set the nature of the political tone, tenor and discourse and triggered the political crises Pakistan has been almost continuously enmeshed in since its cataclysmic birth on August 14-15, 1947? Which other variable has fuelled the acrimonious debate on resources allocation, the civil and military bureaucracy composition, power-sharing formulae and decision-making weightage between regimes and political, administrative units, political parties and pressure groups? None else other than demography for the most part and as the core stimulant. Interminably linked with demography has, of course, been geography.

An explication of the above framework calls for a historical flashback. Of all the major countries conquered by Islam in the first, second and third waves, extending from the seventh to the 15th centuries, two countries on the periphery stood as exceptions – Spain (or Andalusia) in the west and India in the east. Muslim Spain, ascendant for some seven centuries, finally got wiped out when Boobdil handed over

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the keys of Granada to Ferdinand and Isabella in January 1492, a tragic event in the annals of Islam, culminating in Christian Spain's marathon Reconquista drive.

Muslims ruled over large parts of the subcontinent for seven to eight centuries. Yet, as against the Islamic heartland, this Islamic bastion on the scattered fringe remained non-Muslim demographically. Provincial Hinduism withstood imperial Islam, to quote Jadunath Sarkar, the famous Indian historian. Even the heartland of the Muslim Indian empire, the North Western Provinces of the 19th century and the United Provinces of the 20th century, housing the capital of the Dehli Sultanate (1206-1526) and the Mughal Empire (1526-1857), was home to barely 14 per cent of the population.

In 1842, after the battle of Ghazni, Lord Ellenborough, the Governor General, had put down the number of Muslims at 10 per cent of the population, perhaps without counting those in northwest India, which was still outside the British realm. Yet it was undoubtedly an understatement in the census since 1990 had revealed the Muslims comprised 22.6 per cent of the population of India and Burma (note Burma was included in the census in India till 1931), 22.4 per cent in 1891, 23.2 per cent in 1901, 23.5 per cent in 1911, and 24.1 per cent in 1921.

Hence, in the context of the low Muslim demography, Sir Syed's gravest concern at this juncture, to quote his own words, was how to get 'the two nations – the Mohammedans and Hindus – sit on the same throne and remain in equal power'. And he came to the ominous conclusion 'Most certainly not… to hope that... is to desire the impossible and the inconceivable'.

It was impossible under the unitary Westminster model, with its credo of majority rule which the Indian National Congress was insisting on since its founding in 1885, and with the British proclivity for the introduction of representative institutions – as indicated by the Gladstonian reforms of the 1880s, the Local Board Bill (1883), and the Bradlaugh Bill (1889), eventuating in the Indian Councils Act (1892). Profoundly realistic that Sir Syed was, his worst fears were summed up in a telling information: 'How can the Mohammedan guard his interests? It would be like a game of dice, in which one man had four dice and the other only one… there will be one member for us to every four for the Hindus…', Sir Syed argued in his Lucknow address on 28 December 1887.

In order to salvage the bleak Muslim situation to the extent it could be done. Sir Syed settled for separate electorates. Thus, from the late 1880s onwards, it became the core Muslim demand. It was put

informally by a representative Muslim deputation at Shimla on 1 October 1906, and was finally conceded by the British in the Act of 1909.

Until 1920, Sir Syed's claim of Muslim nationhood was in the religio-cultural context but not in terms of demography or dispersal of the Muslim population in the subcontinent. The Muslims, counting about 70 million, constituted the largest single bloc of Muslims in the world, yet they were no better than a 'minority' in the subcontinent.

In this context, the 1921 census figures came as a blessing. They showed that as a result of a greater population increase during the previous decades, they had acquired a slight majority in two of the largest provinces – 54 per cent in Bengal and 55.4 per cent in Punjab.

Punjab was adjacent to Sindh, the NWFP and Balochistan, and each of them had considerable or a preponderant majority. Thus the Muslim 'nation' had at last acquired some sort of a territorial base in two important regions.

What made the emergence of some Muslim majority provinces so significant was the Montford Reforms of 1919, which initiated the trend towards the devolution of power to the provinces. The reforms conceded greater powers to the council and for the first time the Indians were entrusted with responsibility in respect of the transferred subjects such as education, local government, agriculture, etc. Thus, the Muslim demographic dominance in Bengal and Punjab ensured them a share in the province power pie.

During the 1920s, this dominance determined the power-sharing mechanisms devised by Muslims as a basis for a Hindu-Muslim settlement, and get such a mechanism incorporated in the next instalment of reforms, promised by the British 10 years after the introduction of the Montford Reforms.

Hence, four of the five basic Muslim demands which figured in Delhi Muslim Proposal (1927), the all-Parties Muslim Conference resolution (1929) and Jinnah's Fourteen Points (1929) were: (i) reservation of seats for Muslims in Punjab and Bengal on a population basis; (ii) residuary powers for the provinces in a federal set-up; (iii) separation of Sindh from Bombay and setting it up as a separate province, and (iv) reforms in the NWFP and Balochistan, to bring them at par with other provinces in terms of their constitutional status.

The Act of 1935 conceded the demands relating to Sindh and the NWFP. This meant four (five if Balochistan was included) stable Muslim provinces to match the six Hindu provinces and a genuine federation at the centre to ensure the substance of power to Muslims in their majority provinces.

But the federal part of the 1935 Act titled towards a unitary government, a highly centralized structure, and Congress rule in the Hindu provinces during 1937-39 sought to give a foretaste of what to expect when it assumed power at the centre. Hence the Muslim call for the abandonment of the federal part, which the British finally did in late 1939.

And once the Muslim hopes of ensuring or enjoying the substance of power in their majority province proved to be a chimera, their demographic dominance in the northwest and the northeast was adroitly used as a launching pad for the Pakistan demand.

In 1941 the Muslims counted 79.4 million out of a total population of 295.8 million in British India – i.e., about 25.8 per cent. Had they been evenly dispersed throughout the subcontinent, without being fortuitously concentrated in the northwest and northeast, they could have been bereft of a sizeable territorial base, and the Pakistan demand, even if it had been raised, could have been made little territorial justification.

Thus, in the ultimate analysis, a particular mix of Muslim demography with its concomitant Muslim population proportion in certain specific regions led to the emergence of Pakistan.

Ironically, though, Pakistan, since its inception, has been hostage to its particular mix of demography. Space considerations preclude an extended discussion, but certain salient points may be noted.

East Bengal counted for one – seventh of Pakistan's area but four – seventh of her population. It was a 'rural slum' with an agriculturist economy, and little industrial infrastructure. Its representation in the services was poor – due, of course, to historical reasons – with West Pakistanis, some of them overbearing, dominating the higher echelons of administration. It had differences of race, language and temperament with West Pakistani. All this sufficed to spawn a list of grievances, tension and bickering. But consider for a moment whether all this could have acquired the proportion and the importance, and spawned the cataclysmic consequences it finally did without East Bengal's dominance on Pakistan's demographic landscape and its physical discontinuity with West Pakistan. Assam and Nagaland on the eastern fringes of India, though not discontinuous with the Indian mainland, have had similar problems and grievances against New Delhi, but they could not mount the sort of presence. East Bengal/East Pakistan did. In the ultimate analysis then, it was its demographic dominance that provided it with the much wanted clout to set in motion traumatic events and reverse the Westphalian model in the international system, and yet induce goodwill for itself in the country of nations.

The tragedy with Pakistan is that even in its post-Bangladesh format, in Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's 'new Pakistan', it is still hostage to demography. If united Pakistan had 56 per cent of Bengalis in faraway East Pakistan, the post 1971 Pakistan has some 58 per cent in one province, Punjab, and an additional four percent of the people of Punjab are scattered in the other three provinces.

Added to this demographic dominance is the fact that they are not only better educated, but are also characterized by the laissez faire attributes – initiative, industry and competition. No wonder, they command a large presence on the Pakistani bureaucratic, military, industrial, entrepreneurial, educational and economic landscape.

Of course, this gives rise to feelings of envy among the other nationalities, and given their inability to compete with Punjab, to accusations of Punjabi dominance. Clearly, the people of Punjab by themselves are not at fault. Rather, it is the particular effect of demography on Pakistan's nationalities' landscape that is the problem.

In any case, this demographic pattern needs to be reshaped in the interest of Pakistan. We might as well take a cue from India. They six full and two half provinces in India in 1947 have been reconstituted into some 27 full and small states, for various reasons and as a result of political contingencies. The same considerations call for the creation of several small and more easily manageable provinces out of the present four provinces. Remember, they are not intrinsically historical entities. They were carved out and set up as provincial units by the British for administrative reasons. The same reasons plus the creation and cultivation of harmonious feelings between the various nationalities call for the creation of new provincial units.