

The Spirit of Ekush: Myth and Reality

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Emergence of a new nation state Bangladesh based on Bengali nationalism in 1971 through massive liberation war has fulfilled the hardcore spirit of our language movement --.this sort of simplistic notion is not very uncommon among the common people as well as in the psyche of many of our intellectuals. This notion persists because in analysing the historical background of Ekush we have overemphasised the political and cultural aspects of our language movement. So, in 1999 when Ekush achieved recognition as International Mother Language Day by UNESCO we were overwhelmed with joy thinking that the spirit of our language movement has been recognised even internationally. However, to uncover this myth centring Ekush and to grab the actual spirit of Ekush which inspired the people of this deltaic region of the globe to take part in the language movement, we need to probe into the history of the creation of Pakistan in 1947 with a fresh outlook.

In British India, the Muslim League coined the Pakistan movement in 1940 through Lahore Resolution and eventually popularised it among the Muslim Majority regions of British India. Though the key Muslim League Leader M A Zinnah advocated Two Nation Theory (i.e. the Hindus and the Muslims are two separate nations), the Lahore resolution did not mar the very concept of ethnic and linguistic based nationality as it suggested that:

"No constitutional plan would be workable or acceptable to the Muslims unless geographical contiguous units are demarcated into regions which should be so constituted with such territorial readjustments as may be necessary. That the areas in which the Muslims are numerically in majority as in the North-Western and Eastern zones of India should be grouped to constitute independent states in which the constituent units shall be autonomous and sovereign."

The explicitly defined Lahore Resolution gave more emphasis on regional based nationality (which implicitly supports the linguistic based nationality as in every region, people have a distinct language) over the religious nationalism as suggested in the so called religious based Two Nation Theory. So, Lahore resolution did not confront with the modern theoretical framework of nation state and nationality as the two preconditions for this are a) a nation should have a territory b) Among the people of that region should have a common instrument of communication, a language which are fully reflected in the Lahore Resolution. Moreover, Lahore resolution had also suggested separate independent states in Muslim majority areas of India, perhaps with a loose confederation following the concept of Pakistan.

Why the majority of the people in the East Bengal participated in Pakistan movement, perhaps, is an interesting issue to be analysed. In this region, though the majority of the people are Muslims, historically they have been upholding and practising Bengali culture without any confrontation with the Islamic culture. The reason behind this lies in the way of preaching Islam which began in around the 14th century in this region. Most of the people who converted into Muslims in the East Bengal were from the lower strata of Hindu community inspired by the Peer/Aowalia who followed the Sufism contrary to the orthodox view of the Islam. This Sufism emphasised a spiritual union with God and did not require its newest adherents to abandon their traditional beliefs and practice totally. So, the influence of indigenous Bengali cultural practise is

predominantly evident in Muslim community in this region. For this, majority of the Bengali Muslim keep liberal outlook and traditionally believe in the principle of peaceful coexistence with other religious communities. Keeping this in mind, hence, we should discard the proposition that the Muslims of this country vigorously joined the Pakistan movement inspired by any sort of Islamic ideology.

In fact, if we analyse the socio-economic background of the majority people of the East Bengal of that time and their political affiliation objectively we will get the rationale of their involvement in Pakistan movement. In British period, the majority of the people in the East Bengal were marginalised peasant class and like other part of India this marginalised people were oppressed by the Zaminder (landlords-who collected revenues on behalf of the British Raj) and business classes. But by chance, majority members of these Zaminder and business classes were from Hindu community and they indiscriminately oppressed the peasant class whose major constituents obviously were from the Muslim community.

On the middle and lower classes of Muslim Community of the East Bengal, prior to 1937 Election, Zinnah's Muslim League had a little influence though it was founded in Dhaka. Muslim League, at that time, in this region, was in fact, treated as a social club of Muslim aristocrats headed by the Nowab Family of Dhaka. However, among the common people A. K Fazlul Huq's Krishak Praja Party had a special appeal as it promised to uphold the interest of the peasant and ordinary people of the society until the election of 1937. Even in the election 1937, the popularity of Krishak Praja Party could be marked. In that election though the Congress won a majority but failed to win an absolute majority. On the other hand Krishak Praja party outnumbered the seat obtained by Muslim League. However, after the election, some of the independent Muslim members along with some members elected from Krishak Praja Party joined Muslim League. This raised the number of members of the Muslim League to sixty and that of the Krishak Praja Party to fifty-eight.

However, as the popular leader of the Bengal A K Fazlul Hoque joined the Pakistan movement in 1940 (in fact Lahore Resolution was proposed by Fazlul Hoque), in this area Muslim League started to gain popularity among the common people. This got momentum when prior to the Election 1946 Khawaja Nazim-ud-Din, a conservative and communal Muslim leader was replaced from the central position of the Bengal Muslim League by Mr. Abul Hashim, a progressive and pragmatic Muslim leader of Bengal. Abul Hashim motivated the common Muslim people, who were largely the peasant community by giving emphasis on their economic needs rather than instilling any feeling of communal conflicts. In fact the religious ideology had no role in the 1946 electoral campaign and subsequent Pakistan movement in the East Bengal. In this Muslim majority part of India, the Pakistan movement was aligned with the economic demands of the Bengal peasants and Abul Hashim prevented the common people from degenerating into communal slogans. Muslim peasants' immediate conflict was with traders and money lenders of whom the majority were from the Hindu community. Abul Hashim considered this issue as the economic problem and did not let it turn into a communal conflict. Due to Abul Hashim's successful campaign, the Bengal Muslim League secured 114 seats in the provincial assembly as against a total 121 Muslim seats.

So, in essence it can be ascertained that to the common people of this region Pakistan movement was for the economic salvation rather than establishing Islamic ideology.

However, at the advent of the partition in 1947 the powerful Dhaka Nawab group led by Khawaja Nazim-ud-Din recaptured the steering position of the Bengal Muslim League and sidelined Abul Hashim.

At the advent of the partition, the vested rulers of the then Pakistan deviated from the Lahore Resolution and formed a single state instead of promised several sovereign states. This, in turn, alienated the Bengali intelligentsia and they became vocal with a view to preserving Bengali culture and tradition.

Immediately after the partition the founder of Pakistan M A Zinnah, without realizing the consequence, declared Urdu as the state language of Pakistan. In this context it may be noted that Urdu was not any major language of any province in Pakistan. But this was the common language of the Muslims feudal class and the majority of the Muslim League leaders are from this class. Perhaps Mr. Zinnah was biased by these leaders and became adamant to establish Urdu as the state language. Bengali educated class, intellectuals above all, students protested this initiative vehemently and popularised the language movement among the common people. In fact, in 1952 language movement, not only the educated class but also the illiterate (85% of the people were illiterate at that time) common people actively took part. The reason behind participation of the educated class in the language movement was straightforward as they considered the imposition of Urdu on the Bengali people would be a serious blow to Bengali culture as well as the Bengali nationhood as a whole. But the large scale participation of the illiterate people in the movement should be carefully examined to get the major spirit of Ekush.

It has been already discussed earlier, to the common people, the objective of Pakistan movement was to achieve economic salvation. However, the newly emerged country Pakistan utterly failed to fulfil the promises of the Muslim League which they pledged during the Pakistan movement.

After the partition, within short time the common people became dissatisfied with the food policy, market prices of agriculture commodities, the behaviour of the bureaucrats and the members of the enforcing agencies—especially the police. So, the basis of the large scale participation of the common people in the language movement was a sort of protest to get the economic freedom as they dreamt during the Pakistan movement.

From the above analyses, in a nutshell it can be stated that the spirit of the Ekush grew out of, economics, political and cultural issues. Though these issues are interrelated, for the common people the economic aspect is very crucial.

Now the question is to what extent we have achieved the spirit of the Ekush?

The language movement revived the spirit of Bengali nationalism and inspired by this we got a sort of political freedom by establishing an independent country. But unfortunately, after independence, we could not emancipate the hardcore philosophy of the Bengali nationalism. Especially, after the change of political scenario in 1975, the military turned political leader

General Zia reintroduced the much debated Two Nation Theory in a new package of Bangladeshi nationalism just to fulfil his own political ambition. Besides, he also distorted the secular image of the constitution which was the heart of the Bengali nationalism. Perhaps, the major wrong committed by General Zia was the legalisation of the communal politics opposing the creed of the Bengali nationalism.

As a consequence of Zia's ill-designed steps, the nation has been divided into two distinct groups, secular and communal, under the banners of the Bengali and Bangladeshi nationalities.

The major aspiration of Ekush, the economic salvation of the common people, is yet to be achieved. In fact due to massive corruption of the lumpen leadership at the power centre over the years the poor have become poorer and the economic gap between the poor and the rich classes of the society has widened further, which is a sharp contradiction to the spirit of the Ekush.

The present changed political setup of Bangladesh has instigated a ray of hope among the common people in realizing the spirit of Ekush. The people have already welcomed the drive against pervasive corruption. But the question is, whether the present elitist government can realise the aspiration of the common people. Especially, can they be able to succeed in working for economic salvation of the common people ignoring the pressure of the World Bank, IMF, multinational companies and similar imperialist institutions in this present US-centric uni-polar environment?

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