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The Problem of National Identity of Azeri Turks in Iran from a Linguistic Perspective and Its Solutions in a Sociological Perspective

Abstract

The number of Azerbaijanis who are living in Iran is significant, both in official and unofficial calculations. The state language in Iran is Persian. However, the chances of the Azeri people developing their language, culture, and history are very limited. This situation creates a foundation for the gradual loss of a people's national identity. A nation's first step toward self-improvement and global integration is its language. The most striking example of this is accepted worldwide as being in the Azeri language. However, if we introduce them in Persian, they will lose their originality and impact. From a sociological perspective, it is natural for a suppressed people to react to these adversities.

The most important factor is that people should not forget themselves and should be able to protect themselves from manipulation in political, social, and socio-bilingual environments. The research utilizes theories from Western sociologists. Such cases are not unique to Iran today; they are observed in many places. Language is an independent concept. Every free and social society must respect all languages and the cultures they bring.

This article analyses the problems faced by the Azeri people, the solutions of these problems, and future steps for the language.

Keywords: *bilingual society, language, Azeri people, social oppression, modern Iran, free society, social integration, globalization*

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İranda azəri türklərinin milli kimlik problemi dilçilik prizmasından və onun sosioloji prizmadan həlli yolları

Xülasə

İranda yaşayan azərbaycanlıların sayı həm rəsmi, həm də qeyri-rəsmi hesablamalarda əhəmiyyətlidir. İranda dövlət dili fars dilidir. Bununla belə, Azərbaycan xalqının öz dilini, mədəniyyətini və tarixini inkişaf etdirmək imkanları çox məhduddur. Bu vəziyyət bir xalqın milli kimliyinin tədricən itirilməsinə zəmin yaradır. Bir millətin özünü təkmilləşdirməyə və qlobal inteqrasiyaya doğru ilk addımı onun dilidir. Bunun ən bariz nümunəsi Azərbaycan dilində olması dünya miqyasında qəbul edilir. Lakin onları farsca təqdim etsək, orijinallığını və təsirini itirər. Sosioloji nöqteyi-nəzərdən, sıxışdırılmış xalqın bu bəlalara reaksiya verməsi təbiidir.

Ən mühüm amil odur ki, insanlar özlərini unutmasınlar, siyasi, sosial, sosial-ikidilli mühitlərdə özünü manipulyasiyalardan qoruya bilsinlər. Tədqiqat Qərb sosioloqlarının nəzəriyyələrindən istifadə edir. Belə hallar bu gün İrana xas deyil; bir çox yerlərdə müşahidə olunurlar. Dil müstəqil bir anlayışdır. Hər bir azad və sosial cəmiyyət bütün dillərə və onların gətirdiyi mədəniyyətlərə hörmət etməlidir.

Bu məqalədə Azərbaycan xalqının üzləşdiyi problemlər, bu problemlərin həlli yolları və dil üçün gələcək addımlar təhlil edilir.

Açar sözlər: *ikidilli cəmiyyət, dil, azəri xalqı, sosial zülm, müasir İran, azad cəmiyyət, sosial inteqrasiya, qloballaşma*

Introduction

Research methodology: The research is based on sociologists' perspectives on the relationships between nation, people, and language. The study reflects the linguistic and historical existence of the Azeri nation living in Iran. The analysis is conducted within the framework of Benedict Anderson's "Imagined Communities" theory.

Analysis:

More than 80 million people live in modern Iran, consisting of more than 40 ethnic groups. Based on population, Azeri is are among the top three. According to some sources, their number ranges from 30-35 million, while others estimate 16-24 million. In cities such as Urmia, Tabriz, Khoy, Zanjan, Ardabil, Maragha, Sarab, Julfa, etc., it is possible to hear only Azeri Turkish in the streets, markets, and city centers (Babak Shahed).

When the Azeri language tries to maintain its social existence, it faces political and cultural repression from the state. Automatically, this language is perceived as a "powerful weapon" and is suppressed, being portrayed as a significant threat to the state's cultural hegemony. The fact that Azeris speak both their native language and the state language, Persian, demonstrates their respect for languages. Studying in this language can be normal, but a six-year-old first-grade student who has never encountered their mother tongue in school begins to experience sparks of national identity. That child is left with a paradox—should they concentrate on their studies, struggle for national activism, or strive for a high-ranking position to bring their people's voice to the world? These are just a few of the questions and dreams circulating in the minds of Azeri children in society.

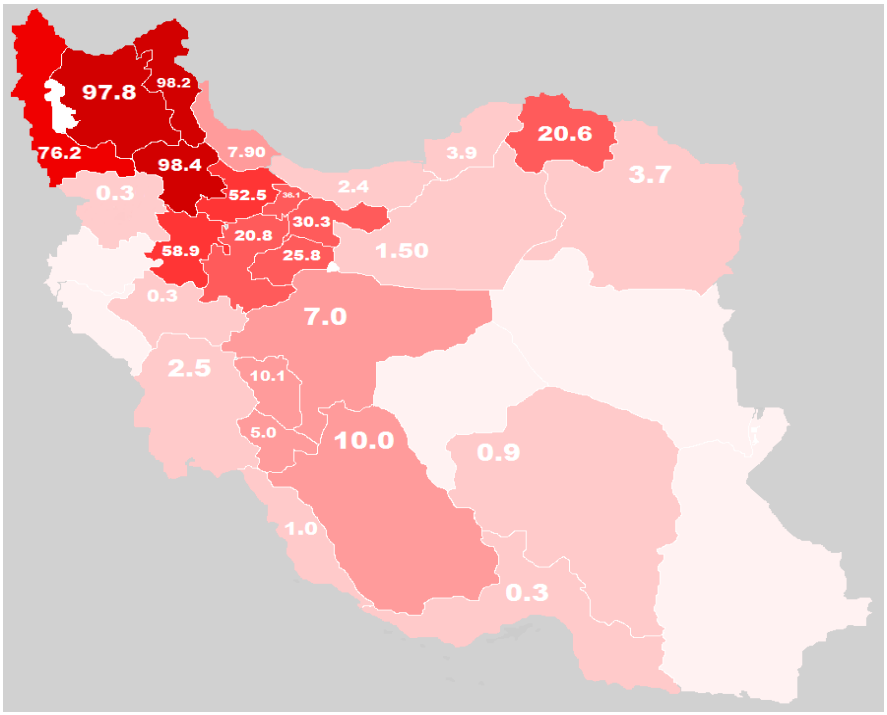

Figure No. 1: According to a nationwide survey conducted by the Iranian Ministry of Culture in 2010, the provinces where Iranian Azeri is (Turks) reside and their proportions within the population based on their native language.

In general, an "Imagined Community" should be established. Through this model, it is possible to observe how society develops and how mutual respect is maintained. Regardless of what has happened in the past, in today's modern civilization, these matters can now be discussed scientifically and viewed through the lens of integration. This describes Benedict Anderson's theory of the "Imagined Community." According to Anderson's theory, language and culture are mental structures that people use for their interests and future capital, and they reinforce one another. Through this structure, it is possible to form an ethical society. Regardless of interests, it opposes the dominance of one group over another. This allows society to allocate time to fundamental problems and enables globalization. Otherwise, the problem begins at the primary education level. A crisis occurs in the fields of language and culture. Anderson states that a nation primarily exists through memories and symbols. The folklore, music, musical instruments, and folk tales of the Azeri people are all memories and symbols. However, when these elements are under Persian linguistic hegemony, they create both sociological trauma and artificiality (Anderson, 2008, p. 104; Smith, 1998, p. 134).

Research

To achieve uniqueness, it would be more appropriate to focus primarily on originality and authentication. Cultural identity and the imagined community are preserved and sustained in this way. Interestingly, this process results in the emergence of a common language and society. This is also what Anderson intended to convey. Even if this language or the community speaking this language does not officially exist, this factor exists within the principle of the imagined community and is calculated to foster a unified moral structure across all spheres (Anderson, 1991, p. 98).

Fear and oppression gradually weaken and ultimately extinguish a people's sense of nationalism. However, the nationalism mentioned here is not Nazism; rather, it is a sentiment that has always remained underground, ensuring that a people maintain their identity. The destruction of this sentiment equates to the destruction of the people, and ultimately, the collapse of the society that speaks that language. The social position shifts. Even in such circumstances, an educated Persian individual may also be affected. A person tired of their own language is one step away from assimilation into Persian culture. The marginalization of a language in state mechanisms, its lack of presence in government institutions and universities, and the fact that Persian is the dominant language in all official sectors will naturally provoke a community that constitutes 35-40% of the country's population. Numbers matter, and historically, Persian and Turkish have always been the two principal ethnic groups in this geography. A comparison can be made with Switzerland, where four languages have official status, or Canada, where two languages are recognized. Therefore, the issue is not about the dominance of a single language but about approaching multilingualism and multi-ethnicity from a multicultural perspective. The foundation of multiculturalism is laid through the formation of languages within society (Smith, 1998, p. 68; Kymlicka, 1996, p. 97; Bourdieu, p. 127-130).

This problem can be addressed by reading different sociological perspectives. However, if we seek to maintain social stability through enlightenment, several approaches exist. One of these approaches is suggested by Anderson. His theory leans toward social liberalism, though not entirely. National identity is formed through the press, education, science, and media. These elements can sometimes cultivate extreme nationalism in societies. This was observed in Hitler's Germany. However, in simple terms, national identity also develops through these standard stages. Anderson views nations as "imaginary constructs" formed through social connections and culture (Smith, 1998, p. 186).

For example, a country may have a population of 4 million, and each individual considers themselves part of that state and nation, but none of them actually know each other personally. Here, social connections form the nation's identity and bind society together. Anderson states that nationalism emerged in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. He argues that the Industrial Revolution and mass media were the primary driving forces behind this development. Shared values among nations play a crucial role in this process. Their vision for the future, hopes, expectations, and imaginations all contribute to this framework (Smith, 1998, p. 144).

Especially in the context of governance, whether in terms of national languages or the concept of the state language, if tolerance and the preservation of a stable state foundation are considered, it is essential that the people's expectations are aligned with those of the government. The theory does not deny the history of nations; rather, it views it from a different perspective. The history of nations creates a common bond between different peoples and different cultures. As a result of this bond, the concept of a nation emerges. This can be seen as a segment that has taken its share from collective culture. However, each nation takes this in different ways and shapes its culture accordingly. Characteristics, literature, place names, family values, and similar aspects are understood differently and take their place in each nation with varying degrees of difference. This is an alternative theory for globalization. It is necessary not only to focus on development but also to appreciate one's identity and integrate it with modern values to see the nation as unique within the broader state structure (Shariati, 1979, p. 108-112; Anderson, 1991, p. 132; Gellner, 1983, p. 147).

What would happen if this ideology were applied in Iran through an enlightenment-oriented approach? What factors would oppose it? What factors would support it? Which languages would play a role in its realization?

Iran is an ancient state. The present geography of Iran has historically formed and dissolved empires and consists of many nations. If we take the development of the state in an official sense, meaning not as a confederation but as a fully established state with its taxation system and laws, we can trace back to the 10th century, where the synthesis of Persian and Azeri Turkish rulers in governance can be observed (Yarshater, 1983, p. 187).

What has shaped Iran as a nation are its rich culture and values. If the language of science and literature has historically been Persian and Arabic, this does not mean that other languages are doomed to extinction like Latin. The Azeri language has also been a state language, but Persian, with its distinct classical and romantic nature, has not altered the continuity of the state among Azerbaijanis (Green, 2019, p. 78; Yarshater, 1983, p. 264; Bourdieu, 1993, p. 203-204).

Even the way history is read plays a significant role here. In Iran, when nations study their history, they do so using the Persian alphabet. Books in the Azeri language using the Persian alphabet have also existed. However, history has primarily been recorded in Persian. The continuity of the traditional state language is an important factor in maintaining the connection with history (Yarshater, 1983, p. 178).

However, adding another language alongside the state language could be an alternative step. Yet, this step would not be easily accepted in modern Iran, as historically, having a single official language in states and the widespread recognition of this language across the East would increase the number of those opposing such a law. This is where Anderson’s theory of the Imagined Community comes into play, encouraging people in Iran to focus on globalization and take significant steps toward establishing the presence of the Azeri language in education, science, and media. Just as borders between states in Europe have been simplified, linguistic boundaries in Iran can also be expanded. Maintaining the state language while allowing room for other languages does not mean dividing the state; on the contrary, it means advancing the state by gaining supporters (Giddens, 1990, p. 71-79; Anderson, 2008, p. 103; Shariati, 1979, p. 144).

If both Azeris and Persians call themselves "I am Iranian," and historically, both Persian and Azeri Turkish rulers have identified this way, then conflicts can be eliminated. This demonstrates that there has always been a common ground in history. This shared bond is not about focusing on past conflicts but rather about looking toward the future with optimism. It is a reason to prevent opposition to this matter. In this regard, Iran is actually a fortunate country (Yarshater, 1983, p. 209).

People can, on the one hand, officially perceive themselves as part of Iranian civilization, while on the other hand, they can feel like members of their own nation and carriers of their respective cultures. For instance, the one-million-strong Talish population living in Azerbaijan has resided there since ancient times. Officially, they see themselves as Azerbaijani citizens and feel this way. However, from a national perspective, they preserve their ethnic identity and traditions. Many such comparisons can be made. In these comparisons, religion plays a significant role. Religion, by

participating in daily life, creates a separate cultural identity. For this reason, Iran can also be considered fortunate in this regard, as the Azeri and Persian peoples, being of the same religion, reinforce the "Iranian" identity while preserving the Azeri national identity within the 35 million Azeris. This is not a loss for Iranian society but a benefit (Forbes, 2019, p. 33-35)

Ultimately, in modern globalization, formality and subjectivity must function together. This approach opens many doors in our contemporary world. Formality is necessary for the validation, establishment, and, most importantly, recognition of something in the global arena. In order for Azeris is to create a stronger community and not see themselves as unnecessary to the state, they, like every other nation, have the right to organize and form a community. Organizational efforts and the establishment of a community are the foundation of official activity.

In the future, if the Iranian people can adapt to globalization, they may even accept the Azeri language as a state language. Over the past 1,000 years, and even today, Azeri Turks have held the most elite positions in governance and have been one of the two main nations playing a fundamental role in shaping the nation, the state, and statehood. (Gellner, 1983, p. 79; Anderson, 2008, p. 98; Green, 2019, p. 78-80)

Conclusion

As the first step, the principles of the imagined theory should be implemented, and as the second step, the Swiss model for the future should be proposed. As mentioned earlier, the introduction of an "Azeri language" curriculum in schools or specific grades, or a "mother tongue" curriculum to make it more impactful, along with media support, television programs in the Azeri language, and educational campaigns, are essential for preserving national identity. Next, the formation of organizations and the establishment of a strong community are crucial. When such a community emerges within any nation, a first-grade student representing that nation will not perceive their people as weak but will look to the future with confidence. This will create a foundation for protecting their state with dignity.

Following this, as a final step, significant development measures should be taken to establish the language as a state language. However, even if this ultimate step is not achieved in the future, the previously mentioned measures will still be sufficient for preserving the nation and introducing itself to the world. If people can confidently refer to themselves as "Iranian" and "Iranian Azeri," it will be a sociological contribution to this theory.

Making hasty sociological decisions may lead to bias and, in the end, result in negative consequences. Development can occur in stages. However, expecting immediate progress in sensitive issues is unrealistic.

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