

## **Role of Media in Empowering the Ethnic Minority of Iran: an Overview**

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### **Abstract**

Iran is home to approximately 77 million people who are ethnically, religiously, and linguistically diverse. The central authority is dominated by Persians who constitute 51% of Iran's population. Iranians speak diverse Indo-Iranian, Semitic, Armenian, and Turkic languages. The state religion is Shia, Islam. Iran's official language is Persian (the Persian term for which is Farsi), in which all government business and public instruction are conducted. However, millions of individuals from various ethnic, religious, and linguistic minority backgrounds also reside in Iran. These groups include Azeris,

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Kurds, Baluchis, Arabs, Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians, Baha'is, Sunni Muslims, and others.

Experts argue that Persians, with only a slim majority, possess a distinct sense of superiority over other Iranians and regard themselves as true heirs of Iran's history and tradition and the guardians and perpetrators of its legacies. Furthermore, the state run radio and television broadcasts are predominantly in Persian, and only a limited amount of programs is run in minority languages.

Ethnic groups in Iran always complain about being ignored by Persian majority. Their complaints cover economic issues such as insufficient jobs and underdevelopment that led to migration to urban centres and discrimination in getting government jobs. The ethnic minorities of Iran want their culture to be exposed in national radio and television channels, their language to be taught and their traditions to be respected.

In a nutshell, this paper will focus on the socio-cultural status of ethnic minorities in Iran and discuss how further media coverage can help in empowering them by raising and reflecting on their problems.

### **Key words**

Iran, Minorities, Persians, Culture, Empowerment, Media, Ethnic.

### **Introduction**

In the contemporary scenario, no one can deny the importance of media. It has played significant role in strengthening the

society. Media is considered as "mirror" of the modern society; in fact, it is the media, which shape our lives. Society is influenced by media in so many ways. It is the very purpose of the media that help people get information about many things and also to form opinions and make judgments regarding various issues! It is the media, which keep the people updated on what is happening around them and the world. The media play a major role in a society, in disseminating culture. It has a pivotal role in giving voice to cultural differences. The media are so varied that a community group or organization can closely target almost any sector and through them, almost any section of the public - by looking closely at where it is directing its media focus. For example, a small, locally-based community group would probably look at concentrating on its efforts in local newspapers, radio and television. A bigger event or community organization could look further to major daily newspapers and commercial radio and televisions.

### **Problems of Ethnic Minorities**

The United Nations (UN) offer a useful working definition of an "ethnic minority" as: A group of citizens of a State, constituting a numerical minority and in a non-dominant position in that State, endowed with ethnic, religious or linguistic characteristics which differ from those of the majority of the population, having a sense of solidarity with one another, motivated, if only implicitly, by a collective will to survive and whose aim it is to achieve equality with the majority in fact and in law (Deschenes, 1983, p. 31)

It is the right of everyone to influence the decisions that affect them. It is of particular importance to minorities. The essential issue of why minorities matter, apart from their distinct identities, is their lack of power. With lack of power comes a

feeling of exclusion, which can easily lead to violence being seen as the only option to attain their needs. Minorities have a right, like all people, to participate in the political and economic decisions that affect them, but given their lack of power, particular care and measures are needed to ensure that they can. While this is an issue for minority men and women, minority women tend to have even less influence on decisions affecting their lives in comparison to minority men.

### **Iranian Minorities: An Overview**

Iran is home to approximately 77 million people who are ethnically, religiously, and linguistically diverse. The central authority is dominated by Persians who constitute 51% of Iran's population. Iranians speak diverse Indo-Iranian, Semitic, Armenian, and Turkic languages. The state religion is Shia, Islam. Iran's official language is Persian (the Persian term for which is Farsi), in which all government business and public instruction are conducted. However, millions of individuals from various ethnic, religious, and linguistic minority backgrounds also reside in Iran. These groups include Azeris, Kurds, Baluchis, Arabs, Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians, Baha'is, Sunni Muslims, and others. Religion and language are the most important factors responsible for ethnic identity in Iran (Hassan, 2008).

The main religions in Iran are: Shi'a Islam - strongly dominated by the Twelve Jafari School (referred to as Ithna'ashari in Arabic), Sunni Islam, and other Islamic groups such as Isma'ili Islam and Ahl-i-Haq. The main minority groups are estimated as: Azeris about 16 million (24% of the overall population), Kurds about 5 million (7%), Baluch about 1.4 million (2%), Arabs about 1.4 million (2%), Turkmens about 1.4 million (2%), Dom about 1.3 million (1.9%), Bahá'ís about

300,000 (0.5%), Armenians about 200,000 (0.3%) Assyrians about 20,000 (0.03%), Jews about 25,000 (0.04%), Zoroastrians (Mazda-yasnie) about 10,000 (0.02%), SabeianMandaens about 5,000 - 10,000 (0.01%), and Ahl-I Haq (Yarsan) numbers hard to ascertain and variously categorised by outsiders as Shi'as, Sufis or an independent religion. Most Kurds, Turkmen, Baluch and some Arabs are Sunni, and can be discussed as ethnic communities since they do not form a cohesive coherent whole as Sunnis. Instead, the various communities tend to express their identity in ethnic terms. Iran has small pockets of Baha'i, Turkmen, Christian, and Jewish communities, but its primary ethnic minorities are: Azeris. Roughly one out of every four Iranians is Azeri, making it Iran's largest ethnic minority (Available at:<http://www.minorityrights.org/>. Accessed on:11/5/2014).

Experts argue that Persians, with only a slim majority, possess a distinct sense of superiority over other Iranians and regard themselves as true heroes of Iran's history and tradition and the guardians and perpetrators of its legacies. Although the Iranian constitution guarantees the rights of its religious and ethnic minorities, many of these groups say they face discrimination. They say schools do not teach their languages (as the constitution requires), they are denied government jobs, and their regions are neglected by the state, resulting in above-average unemployment. Ethnic groups in Iran always complain about being ignored by Persian majority. Their complaints cover economic issues such as insufficient jobs and underdevelopment that led to migration to urban centres and discrimination in getting government jobs (Hassan, 2008).

### **Empowerment of ethnic Minorities Through Media**

Increasingly, concerns are raised that mainstream media fails to reflect the lives and concerns of ethnic minorities. Such groups often experience their representation in the media in terms of 'bad' news. Lalley and Hawkins (2005) suggest that, if we can see our own views expressed beside those of others, we gain a greater sense of public investment in our communities —geographical, ethnic, linguistic and otherwise. Having representation in the media is important for minority groups, providing not only a platform for the community, but a bridge to that community for others. But equally important is accurate representation.

Ethnic media publications provide an alternative to an increasingly homogenized mainstream media. They are essential to make a necessary contribution to promoting and sustaining the culture of minorities. Media can help minorities to portray their culture, raise their problems, and express their views on different aspects of social life. In a pluralist society, ethnic media is necessary for different voices to be heard and opinions of different groups to be raised. Every State has an ethical duty to protect and patronize the culture and religion of its minorities. Therefore, media can be used as a strong means for minority empowerment. Communicating horizontally, rather than from the top to down, ethnic media help to build communities, reduce social isolation and keep culture and language alive. They are able to bring about social changes within communities (Lalley& Hawkins, 2005).

### **Minorities and Media in Iran**

According to Iranian Constitution, national radio and television are State-run, and there are no private radio and TV Channels. National TV channels hardly broadcast programs in

local languages of ethnic minorities. Serious discussions on minority problems are rarely produced or broadcasted. Only at election times and national festivals trivial items of ethnic cultures are shown in order to excite national sentiments and raise patriotic feelings among minorities. Although in 30 provinces of the country, there are local radio and TV channels which give out limited programs in local dialects and languages but serious problems of minorities are not raised.

The Iranian minorities note inadequate educational programs on government media for them, few publications in their languages, and lack of culturally and linguistically inclusive local programming by state radio and television (Hassan, 2008). Furthermore, the state run radio and television broadcasts are predominant in Persian and only a limited amount of programs are run in minority languages. The ethnic minorities of Iran want their culture to be exposed in national radio and television channels, their languages to be taught and their traditions to be respected.

Another common complaint among ethnic minorities is that they often poke fun at by the Iranian media. A few years ago violent demonstrations broke out in a number of northwest cities after a cartoon published in a state-run newspaper compared Azeris to cockroaches (Beehner, 2006). Religious minorities claim that sometimes their beliefs and customs are insulted in films and programs of national TV channels. Sometimes their dialects are made fun by their Persian compatriots in the national media for entertainment purposes.

### **Conclusion**

Repression of identity often leads to violent conflict, and the first step to prevent this is state must devise certain strategies and programs so that the respective minorities do not feel

marginalized. Preserving culture does guarantee a peaceful scenario and helps a particular community to flourish. Besides, the spirit of nationalism can be infused in a minority language too. It must be notified that a state cannot develop and be peaceful until its minority is not joined with the mainstream national development program.

The vernacular language is the best medium to empower a minority. Right to education in its own mother tongue is the ethical right of every single child in the world. Media can play a pivotal role in imparting news in vernacular language. This will be a significant step in making the minorities aware regarding what is going on in Iran. Also, it is easier for the government to let the minorities be aware about their policy implementation program in a much effective manner.

It seems necessary that there should be a direct state encouragement regarding broadcasts in local minority languages in radio and TV. In recent years, the Iranian government has established provincial television channels with the purpose of strengthening local cultures and protecting minority languages. Although this is one step forward towards empowering minorities, but it is not enough. As the Iranian constitution has restricted radio and TV broadcasting to State establishment, there should be a change in law to allow individuals, media companies and ethnic minorities to launch private broadcasting corporations. It is because the media can be considered free only when it's free from the clutches of government control.

In order to remove discrimination and avoid tension in ethnic regions, governments should prohibit and prosecute hate speech, especially in the media and education. Governments must implement their obligations to promote minorities' rights to practice their culture, religion and language, in public and in

private. Governments should take effective measures to mutual respect, understanding and cooperation among everyone living on their territory, including through educational curricula, culture and the media. It is only through such measures that minorities can be empowered and participate in development programs in the country.

Ethnic journalists also have a duty to ensure that their communities are accurately reported. Given that the mainstream media has often focused on the more negative aspects of ethnic communities, it would be naive to simply go along with this as a hard and fast rule.

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