



## The Fundamental Right of Mother Tongue and its Importance in the Education System: The case of Kurds in Iran

The right to exercise one's mother tongue for the Persian ethnic group in Iran is a common practice. The entire curriculum is in Persian; this language is the only instrument of learning and teaching within the educational system in Iran and in all the stages of learning.

In essence, special attention and importance is paid to language learning not only as an instrument of communication within the society, but also as an essential foundation for child's development. The growth and learning process of a child that commences at home should not be interrupted. The educational institutions should continue this process (learning and teaching in mother tongue) systematically.

Experts pay particular consideration to mother tongue in schooling and thus safeguarding the identity and personality of a child. Mother tongue has these responsibilities:

- A child, via her/his mother tongue, can express her/himself in a way that s/he understands the world.
- Mother tongue allows a child to understand the world and better explain it.
- Mother tongue carries with it all the social consciousness and allows the child to well participate in the society that s/he is part of.
- Mother tongue permits the child to learn the proper communication and behavioural skills within the society.
- Mother tongue is an instrument of communication between family and society.

However, in the educational system in Iran under the Islamic Republic the importance of mother tongue for development and comprehension is only for those children whose mother tongue is Persian. In that respect, it is not surprising if the parents of the other ethnic groups strive, for many years, to officialise education in their own language. The parents are not willing to accept the negative consequences of this system over their children which are the end result of disregard and disallowing of their mother tongue.

If we accept the link between thought and language, and most importantly mother tongue, we reach to the conclusion that we can not interchange languages at our will. A language such as mother tongue that starts and develops at home can not be easily replaced with another language (Persian).



Children face language complexities when they confront the Persian language – which is the only official language of educational system - in the early stages of learning, and in turn results in confusing “meanings and expressions”. Consequently, this leads to adverse outcomes in psychological development and analytical learning. These negative affects will have other consequences if the mother tongue of the child belongs to a national group that gets discriminated against politically and legally within the society and gets deprived of all the rights, for instance Kurds.

A language that with time develops in “words and meaning” in child’s mind, but it does not get continued in schools nor it enjoys any status within the system, can not be utilized to expand the knowledge that they have gained thus far and known the world with it. The children get deprived from this instrument of communication and comprehension, and they confront language difficulties in the early stages.

The well-known phrase that “start from where it is familiar and systematically continue and expand from that” is not something new in the developed world; however, this statement is worthless to the children of the people under oppression.

The results of research done by linguists among them, Rehbein 1984 and Skutnabb-uangas 1992 show that it is possible to transfer definitions and analysis that have been learned through the mother tongue to another language, and this becomes helpful in the knowledge of language and advances analytical capabilities. Rehbein states that understanding a story in the mother tongue makes it possible to tell the story in the second language.

In short, to create equal opportunities to train the children of the children of national minorities, it is necessary to create a bilingual system as social political goal and it needs to be institutionalized. This will result in the abandoning of one official nation and language and gives it place to a multi-lingual educational system.

Even though the number of independent states is 192, the languages of the people in these countries numbers around 5000 to 6000, and still some of these states follow the one official language policy. This encourages us to worry about the linguistic rights of the national minorities. If we accept the importance of mother tongue the way described, we then can conclude that how many nations and people are discriminated against and their languages are prevented from development.

In Iran, aside from the Persians, other nationalities including Kurds, Azeris, Arabs, Turkamans, Baluchies, Armenians and Assyrians live.: Though the Islamic Republic’s constitution states that every citizen of Iran, regardless of race, ethnicity has equal rights, the realities on the ground tells us something else. The government in Iran does



not recognize any nationality other than the Persians, and the children are taught in Persian, and they do not have the right to be educated in their mother tongue. Research has shown that the non-Persian pupils get extremely discouraged when reading Persian text books. This has led to the devastating effects on their learning process: learning obstacles highly escalate; they become reluctant to go to school, and they loose interest in studying and their chances of passing their graduation exams becomes highly unlikely.

A child whose right to study and speak in his/her mother tongue is taking away, gets stripped of his/her identity, personality and the only instrument of understanding in front of the educational institution. The language that the child has been accustomed to at home, the culture and the traditions that he/she has been brought up with, all of sudden get questioned, and he/she will come to an understanding that whatever he/she has learned at home is wrong and needs re-learning.

The policy makers of educational system in successive regimes in Iran have not taken the rights of the minorities into consideration thus far, and this policy applies to every aspect of life in Iran. For Iran to advance along with modern international norms, it must respect the special needs and rights of the nationalities, and accept the multi-ethnic reality of Iran, and take necessary measure in this regard. To modernize the educational system in Iran, all the aspects of the cultural and ecological circumstances must always be considered, and this process starts with the decentralization of the educational system in Iran.



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Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran

KDPI - USA

Ali Ghaderi

Chairman of committee

www.pdk-iran.org

aghaderi2002@yahoo.com

Tel: 703-919-1119

Fax: 703-339-1661