



VEDA'S

JOURNAL OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE (JOELL)

*An International Peer Reviewed (Refereed) Journal*

Impact Factor (SJIF) 4.092

<http://www.ioell.in>

Vol.6 Issue 2

2019

RESEARCH ARTICLE



## IRANIAN IDENTITY IN THE WEST

Munawwar Husain

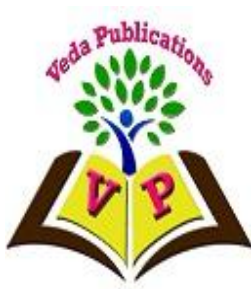
*(Ph.D Scholar, Department for Persian and Central Asian Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi)*

[doi: https://doi.org/10.33329/joell.62.151](https://doi.org/10.33329/joell.62.151)

### ABSTRACT

The national identity is one of the most important issues for young generation, in the world, especially for Iranians who have one of the most influential and civilizations of the world. The role of Iran in history is highly significant. The German philosopher George W.F.Hegel considered the ancient Persians to be 'the first historic people'. The city with Islamic Iranian identity has become a public and pervasive demand in today's era. There are many questions in this area that this paper is a step toward answering them; such as what is the meaning of identity? Has the sense of identity been changed over the time and how?

**Keywords:** *Iran, Identity, West.*



*Author(s) retain the copyright of this article*

Copyright © 2019 VEDA Publications

Author(s) agree that this article remains permanently open access under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0 International License



Identity is a factor of recognition of individuals, objects and groups. So the word identity requires an understanding of two opposite meaning: similarity and difference. These two meanings are in contrast with binary opposition. But in fact they are complementary of one concept, name of identity: intergroup similarity despite out-group differences. In the concept of identity, necessarily, There is an own and another (a self and a non-self). Each object has specific and unique characteristics that make it distinguishable from other objects. These definitions show two conflicting aspects of identity which can be expressed with "insider similarity and differentiation of others".

In the 19th century, Iran entered the age of nation-building and nationalism with the legacy of a longstanding historical awareness and cultural consciousness of its identity. The modern ideas of nation, nationalism, and national identity—as a set of sentiments about the nation and the modern nation-state, conveying the ideals of the autonomy, unity, and prosperity of the nation. These new ideas also brought about a transformation of people's identity from subjects (ra'āyā) to citizens (with a recently coined term, šahrvandān). Furthermore, with such changes in political consciousness and identity, the sense of patriotism became separated from religious feelings, and loyalty to the nation became a new political value.

The new ideas of nation and nationalism were reconstructed and disseminated mainly by those members of literati who had political, commercial, and cultural contacts with the West. The reform movement of Persia reform movement was primarily a response of the reforming Persian literati to the challenges of Western powers, was instrumental in promoting new ideas of nation and national homeland. Initiated by the Crown Prince 'Abbās Mirzā (q.v.) with his reforming vizier, Mirzā Abu'l-Qāsem Qā'em-maqām, during the early decades of the 19th century, the reform movement was substantively promoted under Amir Kabir (q.v.) in the period 1848-52. Amir Kabir, who had traveled to Russia and the Ottoman empire, became acquainted with modern institutions and used the new terms of "the zeal of nation and homeland," and "patriotism".

The ideas of nationalism, constitutionalism, and progress further elaborated by such Western-educated literati and statesmen as Ḥosayn Khan Sepahsālār (Mošīr-al-Dawla; 1828-81), who served as representative of Persia in Bombay, Tbilisi, and Istanbul, and also served as head of certain ministries, as well as in the grand vizierate (1871). Sepahsālār and his close associates, Malkam Khan Nāzem-al-Dawla (1833-1908), Yusof Khan Mostašār-al-Dawla (d. 1895), and Majd-al-Molk Sinaki (1809-81), among others, advocated the formation of modern political institutions, as well as the new idea of popular nationalism as the prerequisite for progress.

A conscious belief in "Iran's cultural distinctiveness" served as the foundation and common denominator of Iranian identity and the binding force among Iranians for centuries, with Persian literature, and more specifically, Persian poetry, as its core element. Furthermore, with a strong tradition of oral literature, particularly poetry, the idea of "Iran" and its elements in Persian cultural heritage have been widely disseminated through naqqāli and Šāh-nāma k̄wāni, to the masses in urban, rural, and tribal areas. There are many illiterate people who know verses from the Divāns of Hafez and Sa'di and the Šāh-nāma of Ferdowsi by heart and often refer to them in their daily social discourse. The Islamic Revolution brought cultural preoccupations to the forefront of deliberations among scholars of Iranian studies. Motahhari's view on the collaboration between Iran and Islam on the one hand, and Doustar's dīn-khū'i (religious temperament) on the other hand demonstrate diverse and insufficient endeavor to identify Iranian identity. It is argued here that discourse as a method can explain the characteristics of Iranians in first world countries. Identity is shaped based on the other. But who is the other of Iranian identity in the west? The point is that Iranian Identity crisis originates from different sources of the self and their other. They do not know exactly if their other is non-Iranian, non-Muslim, non Shii-te, or non-political Islam.

Identity is shaped based on the other. But who is the other of Iranian identity in the west? The point is that Iranian Identity crisis originates from



different sources of the self and their other. They do not know exactly if their other is non-Iranian, non-Muslim, non-Shii-te, or non-political Islam. To discuss Iranian identity, this article draws on the insights of discourse theory of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. The post-modernists render problematic the traditional model of history as the “study of the past as it was.” Meanwhile, Eric J. Hobsbawm and Benedict Anderson argue that nation is neither natural nor eternal; that national identity is an assortment of “invented traditions”; that nationalism is nothing more than a cultural artifact, that is invented by collective imagination; and that nationality is more rooted in subjective beliefs than objective realities. They argue that the basic assumptions historians make about the past are more often than not ideological constructions; that historians are bounded within their own cultural identities; that the nature of history is discontinuous; and that historical “knowledge” is a form of discourse. Moreover, they claim that subjective identity is itself a myth, a construct of language and society. In other words, national identity and consciousness neither is inbred biologically nor transcendent but rather manufactured. According to Bayat-Philipp: “The different expressions of Iranian national consciousness today, be they secular or religious, reveal a similar tendency to conceive the present as insubstantial and imperfect in comparison with the past.” (Mangol Bayat-Philipp, P.203)

#### IRANIAN IDENTITY

The word ‘Iran’ is derived from Ariana and means Arian’s land. The word “aria” was used in Avesta, ancient Persian, and Sanskrit languages. The original meaning of the word is āzādeh (free). The Samanid dynasty was the first fully native dynasty to rule Iran since the time of the Muslim conquest which further led to the revival of the Persian culture. Rudaki was the first most important and famous Persian poet after the Persians arrived in Iran and this poet was born during this era and was praised by Samanid kings. Their successor, the Ghaznawids, who were of non-Iranian Turkic origin, also became instrumental in the revival of Persian.

The culmination of the Persianization movement was the Shahnameh, the national epic of

Iran, written almost entirely in Persian by Ferdowsi. Language plays a pivotal role within the discourse of Iranian cultural heritage. Many of Iran’s cultural historians and literary critics start with the premise that the Iranian nation is defined primarily by the Persian language. For these scholars, language is the manifestation of a nation’s thoughts, experiences, and ambitions. Some suggest that the safeguarding of the Persian language is the most effective weapon that Iranians have to stop the encroachment of Western civilization. Others, such as Behruz have gone further, conceptualizing language as the reflection of the Iranian nation’s racial and mental structure.

Maskub, a contemporary cultural historian and translator, offers the most sophisticated view of the relationship between language and national identity. In Iranian Nationality and Persian Language, he contends that Iranians are different from other Muslims due to their history and language.

In contrary, although the Iranian language and customs would have survived by and large amongst first generation Iranians in the West, they would be weakened amongst the second generation. Children of Iranians abroad do not have enough motivation to speak Farsi or to follow Iranian customs, since they will lose their special symbolic meanings during time.

#### THE TRIPARTITE CONCEPT OF IDENTITY

Iranian/Islamic/Liberal, The Constitutional movement at the turn of the twentieth century was a turning point for Iranians to become familiar with modernity and liberalism. Iranian intellectuals were the carriers of new ideologies. Hajjarian categorized them into three main groups. Although his typology cannot explain all contemporary intellectual approaches, it correctly shows that the first was modernist, while second which was considered as the mainstream for political Islam was anti-modernist and traditionalist in general. Because Iranian identity was not harmonized to deal with the duality of Iran/Islam, it encountered in some ways a crisis in engaging with the triple concept of Iranian/Islamic/modern (liberal and socialist).

Although the Iranian language and customs may survive by and large amongst first generation Iranians in the West, they would be weakened



amongst the second generation. Children of Iranians abroad do not have enough motivation to speak Farsi or to follow Iranian customs, since they will lose their special symbolic meanings during time.

### CONCLUSION

Iranian identity in the West face not only opportunity, but threat. If the components are harmonized, Iranians might put all the positive aspects of different cultures together, because tradition, comprising religion, and modernity seem compatible. They need to rethink their tradition critically, recognize modernity with its positive and negative aspects, adapt it to their tradition and condition, and synthesize opposite issues. Otherwise, if they try to choose the components arbitrarily or hastily the result might be eclecticism and identity crisis. In this case, Iranians in Western countries may need to develop a coordinated approach to tradition and modern civilization. The difference between Iranians and westerners is that the latter experienced modernity along with its foundations unconsciously, while Iranians want to practice it intentionally without its foundations.

Iranians in the west should be aware of their Iranian identity, Islamic culture and modernity. Not all history before Islam neither was an era of darkness and thus should be discarded, nor was Islam a foreign, Arabic, imposed faith. "If Iranian intellectuals in general, and scholars of Iranian studies in particular, are to seek the correct answers to the question of national identity, they must not imprison themselves in the torturous labyrinth of arcane problematic, antediluvian ideas, ruminations of the past, mnemonic conjecturing, and esoteric altercations. They need to realize that aversion to new theoretical approaches, fetishization of the past, pompous bravado about ancestors, conspiratorial and chiliastic views of history, and cult of patriotism are futile strategies". Political Islam has divided Iranians overseas and at home into two groups: radicals who believe in Islamic government based on Shari'a, and masses who live with cultural Islam. Feeling nostalgia, like other Muslims, some Iranians might tend to Iranian traditions or extremist groups. While Iranian/Islamic components (of Iranian identity in the West) vs. the liberal one might be weakened in

future, Islamism and fundamentalism may possibly strengthened in some exceptional cases.

### REFERENCES

- Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983).
- Maedeh Arabi. How to Reflect Spirit of the Time in the Current Architecture of Iran. *International Journal of Science, Technology and Society. Special Issue: Research and Practice in Architecture and Urban Studies in Developing Countries*. Vol. 3, No. 2-1, 2015, pp. 64-69.
- Mangol Bayat-Philipp, "A Phoenix Too Frequent: The Concept of Historical Continuity in Modern Iranian Thought," *Asian and African Studies*, no. 12 (1978), p 203.
- Mehrzaad Boroujerdi, "Contesting Nationalist Constructions of Iranian Identity", Published in *Critique: Journal for Critical Studies of the Middle East*, no. 12 (Spring 1998); reprinted in *Persian in Kiyān*, no. 47 (June-July 1999), pp 44-52.