

The tussle over script

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Jason Keith Fernandes' recent book 'Citizenship in a Caste Polity: Religion, Language and Belonging in Goa' demonstrates how users of Roman Konkani script were made to feel less-than-authentic members of civil society in Goa

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When the Goa, Daman and Diu Official Language Act was passed in February 1987, it accorded official language recognition to Konkani written in the Devanagari or Nagari script. Those who used the Romi Konkani script, especially the working class Catholics have since been struggling with belonging and fighting for equal status for this script too.

And the recent book 'Citizenship in a Caste Polity: Religion, Language and Belonging in Goa' (Orient Blackswan, 2020), by Jason Keith Fernandes, a researcher at Centre for Research in Anthropology (CRiA), ISCTE, University Institute of Lisbon, Portugal, documents this struggle and also looks at how caste has played a role in this divide. The book was based on his doctorate thesis at the ISCTE in Lisbon. Fernandes will be sharing more about this book at 'What Next? The Identity Dialogues', a series of book discussions around

the themes of identity and belonging organised by The Dogears Bookshop and Thus. The session which will be held on November 21 will see him in conversation with writer-photographer and co-founder, Goa Arts and Literature Festival, Vivek Menezes.

Excerpts from an interview

Q. What pushed you towards writing about the Goan Catholics' struggle with belonging and their fight for equal recognition for Romi Konkani?

I think that my studying law has left me with a perpetual sense of discomfort with injustice. The injustice involved in the suppression of Konkani's Roman script, and the associated literature and arts forms was unbelievable and as such it was an obvious topic to focus research on. The issue is of course, deeper. The fight for the recognition of the Roman script is, as you point out, about belonging, and belonging to the state of Goa. I grew up hearing the lament of so many Catholics in Goa who feel that there is no space left for them in Goa. The state exists to support its people and when people feel that the state is not doing this, it is obvious that we need to help the state appreciate the nuances of the problem and what can be done to change the scenario. I hope that my research will go toward addressing the systemic injustices that mark the Indian state in Goa.

Q. Most academic works so far, you say, have neglected the experiences of this group. Why do you feel this is the case?

There has been some work on the Catholics in Goa, but way too much of this work focuses on dominant castes among the Catholics. There is less focus on the non-dominant groups. This occlusion is for a variety of reasons. First, to quote Raghu Trichur's observation in his book 'Refiguring Goa' (2013), a lot of the sociological and anthropological work on Goa has tended to try to support the nation-building project. As such, the attempt has been to demonstrate how Catholics in Goa are so very "Indian", ie like upper-caste Hindus. Thus the focus is largely on groups where one can demonstrate similarities with the brahmanical order. Hence the focus on dominant caste Catholics, many of whom, in any case, try to highlight their upper-caste history and highlight their largely imagined sufferings during the period when Goa was part of the Portuguese state. Catholics from other castes have no use for these recollections of a golden age under brahmanical hegemony. Things have generally gotten better for them with the suppression of the brahmanical order. This makes it difficult to rope them into nation-building projects that consciously or unconsciously seek to erect a brahmanical narrative.

Q. Although the Romi versus Devanagari debate has been ongoing for a long time, what were some new observations you had during the course of researching for your book?

I think what my book does is to frame the whole debate differently. First, I point out how the whole issue is also one of a caste battle. A question of caste supremacy of the Saraswats, and various caste groups – both Hindu and Catholic – that associate with them, versus largely non-brahmin Catholic groups who are urging the recognition of the Roman script. In this thread I demonstrate how Varde Valaulikar, who is hailed as Shenoi Goembab and the Father of Konkani, was not working so much for Konkani per se, but working in the context of creating a resource for the newly formed Saraswat caste. In other words, Varde Valaulikar was very much a caste activist.

Secondly, I offer a historical narrative which does not stuff Konkani and Goa into the historiographical narratives that were created for British India. The historiographical framing I use in my book is alive to the nuances of Portuguese Indian history, and legal history. This allows us to question the silly ideas that are so commonplace today, like that which suggests the presence of a uniform Konkani language before the arrival of the Portuguese. Such an idea is nonsensical, primarily because it ignores the presence of caste –

every caste still speaks the language differently. In fact it was the arrival of the missionaries with their relative egalitarianism which allowed for the language we know as Konkani to emerge – it allowed for greater education of people, allowed these people to access the grammars created for the language, and then allowed them to use the

same language.

Q. What were some challenges you faced while putting together this book? And how difficult was it for you to stay objective?

One of the great challenges an anthropologist faces is getting access to people, and then getting them to spend time with you. I was really lucky, however, in that people, on both sides of the divide, were generous with their time for me. This is even the people who knew that I was inclined to see the justice of the Roman script activists' demand. So I am particularly grateful to these latter individuals.

As regards objectivity, this is a good question. Objectivity is often misunderstood. One can be objective only in relation to the truth; which in this case is the justice question. I was clear about the justice question and my research bore out the justice question that the Roman script activists were, and are, raising. This now left me with the question of how do I deal with those who were opposing the Roman script. With the passage of time – this is one of the great benefits of taking years to produce a doctoral thesis – I was able to see how those opposing the Roman script were doing so not because they are evil or wicked – a common assumption when one is involved in a political contest – but because they were products, victims even, of a longer historical process. I sympathise with their concerns, whether it is of the Saraswat Konkani language activists, or the Catholics supporting the Nagari script, but these have to be evaluated in the context of the larger harm that results to historically marginalised groups as a result

of their positions.

Q. Now that the group in favour of Romi Konkani has begun fighting back, what are your thoughts on how things have changed over the last few years and do you feel that there will come a time when both scripts will be given their equal due?

One script is definitely getting more than its due at this time! The question is when will the Roman script get its due? When the Roman script does get its place in the Goan sun, I am sure it will resolve a number of the inequalities in Goan society, and allow for a great cultural dynamism. One often hears the suggestion that Konkani is endangered. Konkani is in danger only because the more popular version of Konkani is being deliberately throttled by the state! Release Konkani from this suffocation and watch the scene come alive.

With the establishment of the Tiatr Academy of Goa (TAG), and the Dalgado Konkani Academy (DKA), which receive some amount of state support, I think the activists are able to mobilise more effectively and this is great. However, there is also the danger in being satisfied with these concessions – which is what this state support to TAG and DKA effectively is – and forgetting the question of the right of the Roman script to recognition in the Official Language Act. Concessions are always temporary in nature, and can be withdrawn. True progress is made only when the issue of rights are redressed.

Q. The Church you say has been a significant location where the fight has happened. How?

People often assume that the Church – by which they understand the clergy – speak with one voice. This is not true as became so patently obvious to me in the course of my research. There are groups of priests for the Roman script, and those who are

in favour of Nagari, and there is an on-going low-intensity tussle. This is one way in which the Church is a significant location where the

issue is contested.

Q. What are some other themes that you would like to explore further in your writings in the near future?

I am really interested in the influence of Islam on Goa and Goans – both on what we understand as Hinduism and Catholicism as well. And by Islam I mean not merely the religion, but also the Persian and Arabic influences that filtered in both from across the sea, as well as from the Sultanates up in the Deccan.

I am also interested in the value of Catholic theology in addressing some of the problems with the obvious collapse of liberalism globally, in particular my question is, how do we, as social scientists, take (Catholic) theology seriously? It is my argument that the roots of the liberal order lie in Christianity, and it has been with the systematic cutting of a fruitful engagement with Christian theology that we see an increase in the disorder in the liberal world.

(The session will be held on November 21, 7 p.m. To join via Airmeeet, use this link: <https://bit.ly/convwthdrjf>)

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