

Goan Modernity Between Subalternity and Citizenship

NAWOO VARAK

Jason Keith Fernandes's book, *Citizenship in a Caste Polity: Religion, Language and Belonging in Goa*, is an important academic intervention that delineates the process of humiliation in the linguistic discourse of Goa. The conventional understanding of Nagari Konkani and Marathi as nationalist modernity and Romi Konkani as coloniality halts the process of civility in Goa. Modernity inherits a tendency to exclude more in favour of a few through the process of reduction, rejection, and exclusion (Guru 2009). Scribal elites shaped early modernity in India, contradicting regional histories of paradoxical continuities (O'Hanlon 2013). The book constitutes an introduction and five chapters that explain the layers of hegemony and subalternity associated with languages in Goa through in-depth anthropological empiricism.

Goa, the former Portuguese colony, still struggles on the periphery of a Lusophone past and Indian nationalism as reflected in the ongoing linguistic conflict among Marathi, Nagari Konkani, and Romi Konkani. The Goa, Daman and Diu Official Language Act (OLA), 1987 recognised Konkani in the Nagari script as the official language of Goa on 4 February 1987 by derecognising Konkani in the Roman script. It continued the use of English and also allowed the official use of Marathi in educational, social, and cultural fields. Before every legislative assembly election in Goa, the differences between Marathi and Romi Konkani are explicitly exploited to polarise the voters. By employing Partha Chatterjee's distinction between civil society and political society, Fernandes locates the upper-caste-class Catholics and upper-caste Hindus as a civil society that succeeded in securing legislative recognition for the Nagari script. Since 1985, the activism of Romi script supporters through the Konkani Porjecho Awaz

Citizenship in a Caste Polity: Religion, Language and Belonging in Goa by Jason Keith Fernandes, Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan and New India Foundation, 2020; pp vvi + 361, ₹1,410.

(Voice of the Konkani People) forced the Indian National Congress-led government to table the Goa, Daman and Diu Official Languages Bill on 29 January 1987 in the Goa, Daman and Diu legislative assembly. Paradoxically, Romi Konkani supporters were pushed into the realm of political society where quotidian life resembles struggles, shame, and humiliation.

Fernandes argues that the exclusion of Roman script completes the process of humiliation of lower-caste Catholics and equates their experience with the untouchability lived by the Dalits in India.

Humiliation and Subalternity

The book points out that civil society stereotyped the Roman script as a religious concern instead of a citizenship claim (p 216), thereby denouncing the claims of subalternity. The promulgation of "unity in diversity" in Indian federalism worked for the elites in Goa and derecognised the lower-caste Catholic minority (p 69). It correlates with the scant attention paid to the asymmetries in the language discourse while reorganising states on linguistic lines. That leads the author to seek a rupture into a habitus populated with the "active citizens" of Nagari scripts through a "room for manoeuvre" for the "activist citizens" of the Roman script (p 34). Fernandes points out that the struggles of Romi activists have been perceived by civil society to be overcome, relocated, and rehabilitated (p 53). Fernandes's proposals to map the humiliation of Romi activists on the scales of subalternity, and the act of claiming humiliation and consolidating it into subalternity suffer from ambiguity. Hence, the book fails to come up with the definite

markers of the subalternity among Romi activists, which are clearly evidenced in the lives of Dalits in India.

The book further argues that the elites in Goa considered Nagari Konkani as a feminine identity that required protection of Konkani Mogi, or the lovers of Konkani (pp 70–86). Similarly, the elites articulated an idea of self-rule through an upper-caste dialect that subordinates the idea of self-rule implicit in the indigenous tongues (p 88). It is evident when Orientalist Gerson da Cunha distinguishes between the aristocratic Catholics of Goa and Bombay Catholics as migrant Catholics from Goa. Cunha terms the former as Aryan and the latter as descended from the tribes (p 99). To mask derecognition stemmed from caste impurity, Fernandes argues that the elites style the Nagari–Romi conflict as a mere accidental script controversy. The book constructs Romi as a social identity of the indigenous Catholics rather than one of the foreign scripts of indigenous tongues. Fernandes further highlights that *Tiatr* is not a derivative art inspired by Italian Opera and Parsi theatre in Bombay but an indigenous art form, *khell*—an impromptu theatrical form that constitutes social critique (p 103). Generally, *Tiatr* is a Romi Konkani musical theatre that combines drama, music, and social satire accompanied with *Kantaram* (topical songs) on social and political issues. Though the author aims to nationalise what is allegedly glorified as colonial, he misses a distinction between the idea of *desi* and beyond. The *desi* considers the West as the negative reference point and fits itself into a Sanskritic fold by relegating the Dalits beyond its boundaries (Guru 2011). Therefore, it is not clear whether Romi Konkani deserves to be placed in the *desi* or the beyond category.

The affirmation of Goa Indica largely peddles the Hindu upper castes' narratives and erases the history of Muslims and other communities in the making of the Goan identity (p 144). Fernandes argues that the competition among the Brahmins in the Konkani region to appropriate the language inspired the Gaud Saraswat Brahmins to appropriate Konkani in Goa (pp 112–19). This was further aided by the moves of the Catholic

Church. To escape subalternity at international level (pp 254–56), the church was involved in the inculturation of gospel values in local culture and purification of the language (pp 155–56).

The book argues that the language controversy became an electoral issue since the 1989 Goa legislative assembly elections. Supporters of the Marathi language—including former chief minister Shashikala Kakodkar and former union minister Ramakant Khalap—and former chief minister Churchill Alemao, who supported the Romi Konkani cause, agreed to declare Nagari Konkani as the medium of instruction (मोI) in primary schools during the Progressive Democratic Front-led government in 1990. This move was responded to by Romi activists by demanding English as a medium of instruction in primary schools. For Fernandes, the demand for English is meant to escape subalternity and the inclusion of Romi in OLA is an act that completes the citizenship of the Romi speaker. He associates the *Konkani Munis* (Konkani person) with the subaltern classes in Goa while retaining the *Goembab* (gentleman from Goa) with the elites in Goa (p 143). Dayanand Bandodkar disassociated himself from the Congress to join the Maharashtrawadi Gomantak Party (MGP), where Hindu Bahujans voiced their support for social reforms through Marathi. The Hindu Bahujans, who may also be categorised as Hindu

Konkani Munis, retain a historical memory of humiliation and discrimination in caste relations, unlike the lower-caste Catholics, who uphold the Romi identity. Though Fernandes argues that, contrary to the Hindu lower castes, the aspirations of the Romi “Konkani Munis” were reduced to extreme subalternity (p 149), he fails to clarify whether this derecognition of Romi pushes the Romi language or its speakers into subalternity. If the epistemology of the Konkani Munis is traced from the Romi literature, then the Romi press and periodicals privilege a Sanskritic origin and preferred class over caste during colonial times, which was widely visible in the term *durbolata* (poverty) (Naik 2024: 79–80).

Action-in Clinamen

Since the derecognition of Romi in the OLA, the Dalgado Konknni Akademi (DKA) works for the rights and development of Romi and treats it as a secular issue, unlike the civil society (p 217). Still, the Charado Catholic caste, largely known for its Kshatriya roots, dominated the functioning of the DKA and was marked by the sparse presence of women. It also went closer to Konkani Bhasha Mandal (KBM), a parent organisation of Nagari Konkani supporters. It was founded by Catholic upper castes and was dominated by Hindu upper castes, especially Goud Saraswats (p 240). The claim that Portuguese learned Konkani from the

Brahmins and not from the Shudras, Kunbis, and other castes makes Konkani a community of the upper castes (p 277). Fernandes contends that the primacy of Nagari Konkani in OLA transforms public sphere into a domestic space (p 228) and aims to make it into a “citizen place.” For that matter, he justifies the closeness of DKA with the KBM as an attempt to build a “population group” (pp 240–41).

Fernandes shows that civil society works in Goa as a community of sentiments (p 259) that attempts to produce an ideal citizen by constantly inducing shame and guilt among the Romi activists (p 263). This results in a dissociative behaviour among many Tiatrists who hesitate to identify with subjugated identities. The exclusion of Romi from OLA shamed Romi writers and performers and resulted in the formation of DKA in 1988. The response through the Romi population group to their humiliation made former chief minister Manohar Parrikar of the Bharatiya Janata Party instigate the Romi public to demand official recognition for Romi (p 207) and led to the inauguration of the Tiatr Academy of Goa by Digambar Kamat, another former chief minister from the Congress party in 2009 (p 235). Therefore, Fernandes argues that claiming humiliation and responding to the shame makes acts of citizenship possible (p 258).

Conclusions

This book guides those who have experienced humiliation because of their caste, language, or script towards the full realisation of citizenship. The critique of orientalism, as this book styles itself as, needs an agency to thrive and survive. The main question is whether the DKA offers anti-oriental and non-Sanskritic agency to the Romi public. This book barely engages with any anti-Sanskritic Romi literature that would have further enriched anthropological empiricism. While highlighting the negotiations of Catholic Bامons (Brahmin) and Catholic Charado with and into the varna fold, Fernandes terms appropriation of Maratha identity by Hindu Bahun communities as a Sanskritic identity without probing its historical location in the life of lower-caste Hindus and Catholics (p 62). Societies outside Europe quickly adapted to new forms of political and social action of different agencies and ideologies in different ways and at different times, something that C A Bayly (2004: 12) calls the

“revolution of modernity.” Therefore, reducing the humiliation only to linguistic claims may not fully complete the acts of citizenship and remain reductive in nature. The owning of humiliation needs to induce an escape from social subordination and establish civility.

Many times, Marathi is associated with Hindu lower castes in Goa and its origin is traced to the demand for the merger of Goa into Maharashtra by the MGP in 1963. The role of Marathi in promoting the political goals of the Hindu right-wing organisations is not widely acknowledged. Therefore, the distinction between Marathi and Maratha deserves theoretical attention. Without exploring the analogies between the role of Marathi and Romi Konkani in the religious sphere, the book sidelines the possibilities of secularisation of politics in Goa. The constructing and sustaining forms of community through a historical inquiry result in shared achievement (Macintyre 2007). Though the communitarian aims to counter the claims of the upper castes that remained

unexplored, this book has emerged as a theoretical base to reimagine the Romi public sphere amid majoritarian politics in the state. This attempt to delink the Romi from the orientalist consciousness is in itself emancipatory.

The author is grateful to the insightful comments of the referee.

Nawoo Varak (nawoo.varak@khandolacollege.edu.in) teaches political science at Government College of Arts, Science and Commerce, Khandola, Marcela, Goa.

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