



It is only a mirage that the contours of the language debate in Goa are shifting. Though now assuming overtones of a religious divide in the medium of instruction controversy, at the heart of the agitation lie the fault lines of caste and class, which predate even the language agitation of the mid-'80s.

The mid-'80s agitation for Konkani as the sole official language of Goa, and the simultaneous demand from *Marathiwadis* for equal status with Konkani seemed like a tussle between Konkani-speaking and Marathi-speaking peoples. But the *Konkaniwadis* comprised those speaking English at home and those speaking Konkani at home, however not all those who spoke Konkani at home were *Konkaniwadis*. In fact many from the Hindu *bahujan* community swelled the ranks of the *Marathiwadis*, Marathi being a secondary means of communication, having had access to Marathi medium primary education post-1961. Hence Marathi was seen as capable of providing an access to a better life. Among the *Marathiwadis* were also some Brahminical people who wished to assert a kind of superiority as Marathi literateurs or religious, which they would lack in the face of Konkani writings that had people from all walks of life and social standing writing already then.

The agitation resulted in the Official Language Act, 1987 providing for Konkani *in Devanagari script* as the sole official language of Goa. Pertinently in 2003, the *Marathi Rajyabhasha Andolan* and the *Romi Konkani Andolan* together demanded amendment of the OLA to accord the same official status for Marathi and Romi Konkani. Clearly, there are different Konkanis and different Marathis, and the difference is one that should not be ignored at the altar of majoritarian and minoritising politics.

Incidentally, the OLA provided that the Government shall not discriminate against any educational or cultural institution, only on the ground of language, in granting aid. However, a Court decision in a case by a diocesan school teacher for parity in salary with Government school teachers, became the prop for the Government of Goa's then medium of instruction policy that the State can provide aid to the school on condition that they switch the medium to a regional language. The 1990 decision resulted in most English medium primary schools

shifting to Konkani medium to avail grants and pay their teachers equal salaries. Parents who wanted their children to have the competitive edge through English education could not afford the high fees of unaided English primary education, hinging on students' finances. Also the Catholic elite parents whose children frequented these schools did not want them to be in the company of who they perceived as the *hoi polloi*.

What followed was a tussle seemingly between Englishwadis and *Vernacularwadis*, but actually then one between Goud Saraswat Brahmins leading the camp supporting the Government proposition and middle and lower class Catholic parents who perceived English as a passport to a better life (even as most spoke Konkani at home) trying to find their voice to oppose the proposition. The Saraswat and rich class Catholic power prevailed.

The author recalls her own mother who gave tuitions to Catholic, Hindu and tribal school children in Taleigao telling her that the words used in the text books were completely different from the words that all of the children who were Konkani-speaking used for the same thing. There was clearly a dynamic at play of maintaining a certain power by using big words or using words that their communities used (mostly Hindu upper caste). The textbooks were in an Antruzi Konkani that was a foreign language to them, in fact much more foreign than English, which was ironically more accessible.

The Archdiocesan Board of Education in a representation to the Government in 2011, obviously adverting to the employability of those who are churned out from regional language medium schools, argued that language proficiency in English in a globalised society is a great asset and it will afford a level playing field for the haves and have nots.

The 'vernacularwadis' are no monolith. One strand of opinion clearly maintains that medium in the mother tongue in the early schooling years is the best way for a child to develop. However, for some, even as they hold this opinion, this is meant to read as grants for Konkani or Marathi medium schools *only* as they are also embroiled in identity and protectionist discussions that are intended to ensure that Goans are privileged in employment. Hence vernacular as in Kannada medium schools for the sizeable Kannada population in Goa, and now Hindi/Kurukh medium schools for the sizeable Oriya/Bihari tribal population relocated

here, would not be on their radar. With the RSS now in the forefront of the BBSM agitation through its chief and ideologue Subhash Velingkar, on the pretext of combatting some Church mobilisation behind FORCE, there is now the edge of a religious divide. Whose Medium is it Anyway?

Thus we see how the politics of medium of communication and access to the wider world and a better life plays out. It has often little to do with the value of language sustenance, or multilingualism, or any emancipatory potential of a particular medium of instruction, in the best interests of the child. It is more about positioning that is propelled by economics and caste and about power assertion in discussions about medium. It will brook no lasting solution unless the power dynamics are addressed, by duly recognizing minorities and marginalized and minoritised communities.

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