



By DALE LUIS MENEZES

The Shame of Speaking Konkani – II

The writing of a second installment to my article ‘The Shame of Speaking Konkani’ (published a fortnight ago), is partly for emphasizing the problem at hand and partly fortuitous. I say fortuitous because, in response to my article, Damodar K Kamat Ghanekar wrote a letter to the editor (4 September, 2015) and had a rather interesting anecdote to narrate in the same. The manner in which the abovementioned anecdote is narrated further allows us to see how shame and humiliation operates within Konkani language politics.

Recounting an incident which happened some 40 years ago, Ghanekar mentions how he came across Alfred Rose and his wife conversing in English in Panjim. When Ghanekar inquired whether it was really Alfred Rose, he indicates that Alfred Rose became painfully uncomfortable so much so that one could “well imagine the contortions of *embarrassment* [emphasis mine] on his face [Alfred Rose] which I [Ghanekar] still remember”.

There is something deeply unsettling about recounting a person’s embarrassment in a public place with such gleeful abundance. In Ghanekar’s telling, Alfred Rose not only appears to be a deeply shamed person but also a hypocrite. However, there is nothing hypocritical in what Alfred Rose did. In fact, as I have pointed out time and again it is quite normal for persons to use two or more languages to negotiate through their daily life. So why did Alfred Rose feel so embarrassed by the encounter with Ghanekar?

Unfortunately, I do not have an *exact* answer to this. This is because as students of history well know, we are confronted with only one side of the story. And, as we are aware, it is often the victor who recounts the story. Further, rather than being embarrassed about speaking in Konkani, Alfred Rose was allegedly embarrassed for speaking in English. It is highly unlikely that Alfred Rose’s English skills were the source of his embarrassment; surely his English was as good as his Konkani!

Presumably, Ghanekar approached Alfred Rose in Konkani, for if it was in English than we

would not have had any problem. My suggestion here is that Ghanekar was using an Antruzi variant of Konkani and this, I believe, is the key to the source of the embarrassment. The problem is that the Antruzi *boli*, located within an upper caste location and politics, is the source of much shaming and humiliation to anyone who fails to adequately reproduce the speech and ways of being of this dialect. The failure to live up to the Antruzi dialect does not simply cause embarrassment, but also causes much pain and anguish – resulting in the silence of many in Goa.

Such a situation has been noted by some other writers as well. For instance, an anecdote recounted by Jason Keith Fernandes in his doctoral thesis seems to be apt in understanding the embarrassment (or silence) that Alfred Rose experienced. Fernandes recounts, “In the course of our conversations [with a priest] around Konkani, this priest indicated a strong friendship he enjoyed with a Hindu gentleman. At one point however, the priest recounted that he was reproached by his friend: ‘Why is it that you never speak to me in Konkani’ the friend asked. To this question the priest responded that he felt ashamed, since his friend’s Konkani was so perfect, so pure, whereas his own was the ‘impure’ version that the Catholics speak”. At the risk of stretching the anecdote that Ghanekar provides *ad absurdum*, I would like to suggest that Alfred Rose was doubly trapped as the language politics that Alfred Rose subscribed to privileged only Konkani, and being called out for speaking in English by a person speaking Antruzi Konkani meant that there was no hope for redemption!

And what are we to make of the abundant glee with which Ghanekar recounts a 40-year-old anecdote of sarcastically indicating to Alfred Rose that he should do as he preaches? The clever way in which Ghanekar slipped a line from Alfred Rose’s song in the conversation – “*Tika [Konkani] shellant heddun menn diunk zai*” – is another way in which the shame of speaking Konkani is perpetuated. While Ghanekar’s encounter with Alfred Rose had resulted in “contortions of embarrassment” 40 years ago, the recounting of the same in the columns of a newspaper without any sensitivity or understanding has surely contorted many a Goan face with embarrassment today.

It is not surprising that in trying to prove the hypocrisy of Alfred Rose, Ghanekar reinforces a similar diktat that Alfred Rose does in his song *Anv Konkani Zannam* – to restore the pride in Konkani. Though Alfred Rose actively propagated some key tenets of the Nagri/Antruzi politics, he seems to have not escaped the shaming due to Konkani. After all, didn’t he say

that we should feel proud about Konkani?



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To reiterate, I strongly believe that Alfred Rose was not being hypocritical. On the contrary he was a product of his times as well as a victim of it. But to think that Alfred Rose was merely embarrassed for being ‘caught’ speaking in English is to not recognize the pain and suffering behind the “contortions of embarrassment”. By denying the real pain and suffering we perpetuate the shame and humiliation. As a linguist/lexicographer of Nagri Konkani, Ghanekar at least ought to have known this.

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