



By AMITA KANEKAR

Whose Culture, Whose Ethos?

There are times when one wishes Mr. Naguesh Karmali was right. A member of the Bharatiya Bhasha Suraksha Manch (BBSM), Karmali was recently reported to have accused the Catholic Church of being out to suppress Indian culture and ethos, with this suppression being “much larger than the way Portuguese suppressed it in the 16th and 17th century”. This was naturally seen by many as reflective of the increasing anti-minority vituperation being spewed by members of the BBSM, and also as completely bizarre.

Because, what exactly is this Indian culture and ethos? India as a country is just 70 years old, very far from existence when the Portuguese conquered the Bijapuri port of Ela. But we are expected to believe that Indian culture and ethos existed despite this, since nationalist rhetoric of Karmali’s persuasion requires that the Portuguese suppressed them. What was this Indian culture? The culture of Bijapur? Or of the Catholics in 16th century Bardez? Or of the Velips in Sanguem? Or of the Dalit communities on the Canara coast? Or of the Garos of Meghalaya? The BBSM would like us to believe that South Asia was some monolithic Hindu region, when in fact there were hundreds, if not thousands, of very varied cultures here at that time.

Karmali was speaking in the context of the demand by Goan parents for salary grants from the government for primary schools with English as a medium of instruction; the BBSM accuses the Church of backing this demand. The reasoning of the BBSM (if one can call it that) is that despite its use in South Asia for at least two centuries now English is a foreign language. They do not seem to be aware that, being similarly born outside South Asia, this argument makes Sanskrit foreign as well.

What is even more important to note, however, is that the BBSM has not opposed private education in the English medium; their vituperation is reserved for government grants to English medium. In other words, asking for government support for English-medium education is against Indian culture and ethos, while patronising expensive private schools which function in the English medium, as is done by many rich and upper caste people of all faiths – including family-members of stalwarts of the BBSM itself – is apparently not.



And in one sense, the BBSM is right. If rich and privileged caste children enjoy the right to posh education in English, giving them a skill vital to do well anywhere in today's world, while Bahujan children are forced to learn in Nagri Konkani, which, being unable to support even one single newspaper, is certainly not a help in getting good jobs outside the miniscule number in the Goa government – what is this if not a continuation of the hierarchy of South Asia's age-old caste system? Perhaps this is the aspect of culture and ethos that the BBSM would like to preserve – where knowledge and good earnings was the sole preserve of the brahmins and other dominant castes? For this would be certainly threatened if high quality English-medium education were to be subsidised by the government, and thus made available to all.

Let's not forget that fluency in English is increasingly becoming second nature to everybody, especially in a place like Goa, thanks to its ubiquity all over the popular media. So upper caste children going to private schools will breeze through their studies, since they are learning in a familiar language. While Bahujan children – especially Catholics and Muslims, since Hindus escape to Marathi – will struggle and suffer, and begin to hate their studies, as they try to cope with the unfamiliar, recently-invented, and Sanskrit-inflected Nagri Konkani, foreign even to most Konkani-speakers in Goa. But isn't this again part of the culture of caste – for upper castes to have an easy time, while the burden of 'safeguarding culture' falls on bahujan shoulders? And, as always, burdens which belong not to them but to the upper castes, especially the minuscule GSB community, for it is key figures from this community who are determined to force this baman bhasha down the throats of other Goans.

So yes, the Nagri Konkani project spearheaded currently by the BBSM is indeed deeply connected to South Asia's culture and ethos of caste. Just as the English language is a threat to that culture and ethos, as has been pointed out sharply by the noted Dalit thinker and writer, Chandrabhan Prasad.

So we hope that the Catholic Church decides to prove the BBSM's charge correct. The Church is in fact already responding positively to the egalitarian demands of FORCE, the parent organisation demanding English as a state-supported medium of instruction. But it would be great if it seriously took up cudgels against, not just the enforcement of the Nagri Konkani

medium, but many other unpleasant aspects of contemporary Indian culture and ethos that are making life difficult for Catholics as well as the rest of us. Instead of backing the Nagri Whose Culture, Whose Ethos? Konkani lobby, as it did in the past, in an unnecessary attempt to prove its 'Indianness'.

See also, 'The English Language and Denationalisation', *here*.

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