By KAUSTUBH NAIK

Unburdening the Language from Motherhood

The debate over Goa's language issue continues because the conflict is far from being resolved.The passing of the much controversial Official Language Act (OLA) in 1987 did anything but resolve it. In my previous columns, I have argued that the passing of the OLA was an act to impose Hindu Saraswat hegemony onto the Goan people, particularly the Hindu and the Catholic bahujan communities. In a book published in 2004, bahujan activist Ramnath Naik termed Nagari Konkani as 'Bamani', indicating the caste location from which the Nagari Konkani assertion emerged and is sustained till today. BJP MLA Vishnu Surya Wagh, in his op-ed article in a Marathi daily few weeks ago, also made a similar assertion, attracting sharp reactions from the Nagari Konkani camp.

Every time the legitimacy of Nagari Konkani as an all encompassing cultural marker for Goans is challenged by Romi Konkani and Marathi supporters in Goa, its proponents religiously argue against it. Instead, they assert that Konkani as the sole Goan language since it is widely spoken in Goa. They would put forth the idea of Goa as the 'mother'land and Konkani being the 'mother'tongue of all Goans. By Konkani, they of course mean Nagri Konkani. What distinctly marks the responses of the Nagari Konkani proponents is the manner in which they cover their defense with seeming emotional overtones, when in fact they are solidly reasoned out to assert their cultural supremacy. To nuance these conversations, one needs to undo a lot of generalized assumption about Goan history and language politics.

It is crucial to remember that there's nothing natural about the languages we speak, contrary to what is often believed. We pick up languages that are being spoken in our environment. If speaking 'a' specific language was as natural as having a biological mother, we would have been hard coded into speaking only the language that our mother would speak, irrespective of the social context that one would be born in. In a multilingual environment such as South Asia, one is bound to know more than one language with equal ease and proficiency. Further, this patriarchal fixation with defining languages as 'mother tongue' needs to be critically scrutinized. Characterizing language with the chaste figure of a mother,as something which needs to be protected is a pattern often observed in proto-nationalist movements.Such political movements not only restrict the role of woman as a passive symbol of political

discourses which are largely driven by men, but their underlying masculine nature often tends along the lines of fascism.

French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guttari, in their book *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1987), argue that "there is no mother tongue [but] only a power takeover by a dominant language within a political multiplicity". This is to imply that the project to naturalize languages(and script) as 'mother tongue' is essentially an attemptin fixing the language of the most dominant social group as the sole vehicle for cultural identity for those under subjugation. So, when Naik or Wagh refer to Nagari Konkani as *Bamani*, they are not merely hinting at the specific caste location of 'official' Konkani but also targeting the resultant fixing of the Hindu Saraswats in Goa as the ideal bearers of Goan identity, by the virtue of their dialect of Konkani being the official language binding onto the entire state.

It also needs to be emphasized that contrary to the claims of existence of one single Konkani since antiquity, history indicates otherwise. As Jason Keith Fernandes has argued there could have been several proto-Marathi and proto-Kannada dialects in use prior to the arrival of Portuguese. These dialects must have been largely confined to speech and associated with various caste communities. One must also remember that the access to knowledge was a privilege available only to the upper castes. Thus, even if there existed any tradition of writing in proto-Konkani prior to the arrival of Portuguese, it wasn't a democratic tradition to begin with. A transition of a dialect to language is marked by its dissemination and popularization through networks of circulation. In Goa too, as argued by Fernandes and recently by Wagh, it was the work done by Catholic missionaries in codifying and disseminating Konkani through the Church that enabled the emergence of Konkani as a language. It is imperative to note that this version of Konkani predominantly used the Roman script. Rochelle Pinto's *Between Empires* (2008), an inquiry of print and politics in nineteenth century Goa,also hints at the glaring absence of Nagari Konkani in the networks of print circulation while Romi Konkani, Marathi and Portuguese were thriving in Goa as well as in colonial Bombay. Thus, this false assumption that Nagari Konkani as a language was always present in Goa – even before the arrival of the Portuguese – has no basis in history.

Languages do not operate solely on impulses of emotions or identity, especially for communities which are displaced to the margins. Rather, people adopt languages that will provide them opportunities and social mobility. Multi-lingual practices are important to

facilitate social mobility in a caste and class setting that would diligently deny this mobility. Marathi, Romi Konkani and Portuguese have historically played that role for various Goan communities and therefore are very much the languages of the peoples of Goa.

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