



By DALE LUIS MENEZES

## Portuguese Passport and the Language Issue

Rui Carvalho Baceira, who has recently completed his 3-year stint as the Consul General of Portugal in Goa, made some very interesting comments about his stay before moving onwards to head Portugal's diplomatic mission in Palestine. Of his many observations, his statistics on the people applying for Portuguese nationality can offer some insights on the problems Goans are facing vis-à-vis education and employment. In an interview to a prominent national daily in Goa, Baceira said that most Goans seeking a Portuguese passport "are male, between 20 and 30 years old, and are not skilled. Few have a university background". He further added, "In Goa, Portuguese passport aspirants are roughly 60% Christian, 30% Hindu and 10% Muslim". While it is not exactly clear what Baceira meant by "unskilled", the reference, perhaps, could be to a lack of professionals, such as doctors or lawyers, seeking the Portuguese passport.

Baceira's comments are noteworthy precisely because they emerge out of first-hand information on how Goans are engaging with Portuguese nationality. The question is why is this happening – that is, why mostly unskilled Goans, without a university background, seek a Portuguese passport. Are any of the internal problems within the educational and employment setup of Goa pushing unskilled Goans out of Goa? The question is worth asking as many commentators in the past have made the suggestion, in the context of the controversies over Portuguese nationality, that it is rather the internal problems facing Goan economy and polity that is pushing people to migrate out of Goa.

The issue of a large number of Portuguese passport aspirants being unskilled reminded me of some commentators who had argued about Goa's linguistic politics being detrimental to Goans pursuing higher education and professional courses. Some ten years ago, Bahujan Samaj and Marathi activist Ramnath Naik, in his *History Hour* talk titled, "Social Damage done by Goa's Language Controversy and the Conspiracy behind it" at Xavier Centre (6 October, 2005), made the interesting suggestion that introducing Konkani in the Devnagari script overnight had consequences for the educational success of Goans. Naik asserted that shifting to a new language, without having the necessary infrastructure of scholarly books and trained teachers and scholars, had put members of the Bahujan Samaj at a disadvantage.



Naik's assertion, though at first glance seemingly bizarre, may hold true, as the demand for English as Medium of Instruction (Mol) would demonstrate. The manner in which the Mol issue has played out in Goa over the last few years has made one thing clear: most Goans, irrespective of religious affiliation want English medium education for their children, as a way out of the stifling and narrow linguistic system presently existing in Goa. The question, therefore, is whether the linguistic and educational policies of the Goa government (irrespective of which political party is in power) has led to the increase of unskilled Goans, who are unable to access university education?

That poor or low-income families were not being able to afford quality education for their children was also a major issue that votaries for English as Mol constantly highlighted. It does appear that if there are many Goans unable to access quality education it is largely because the educational system, from the primary to higher education levels, is not equipped to provide education to all Goans, irrespective of income and social status. Moreover, in the past several decades successive governmental policies have only made the situation worse, rather than broadening the choices that Goans had in terms of pursuing educational opportunities (preferably in Goa itself). The result may simply mean that more and more Goans are being unable to pursue educational and employment opportunities of their choice or liking.

In his talk, Naik also made the suggestion that the impact of language policies is similar for Catholic communities as it is for the Bahujan Samaj. Baceira's revelation that almost 60% of the applicants of Portuguese passport from Goa are Christian, allows us to return to Naik's suggestion and evaluate its merit. It is no secret that within the current linguistic regime in Goa - of privileging Devnagari Konkani - most of the Catholics are seen as outsiders; even demanding equal status for Romi Konkani led to Catholics being labeled as 'anti-national'. The demand for English as Mol was projected as antithetical to Indian culture; the detractors of English as Mol even went to the extent of communalizing the issue, calling it an explicitly Christian demand. In many ways the labeling followed a similar script of betraying the national culture as those obtaining a Portuguese passport were believed to have been doing.

Thus, along with a skewed language and education policy, this aggressive nationalism

propagated by these votaries of Indian languages and culture also contributes to pushing people out of Goa. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that almost 60% of those who apply for Portuguese passport in Goa are Christian, and most of them are unskilled, without a university degree.

In many ways it can be argued that most of us already knew the facts that Baceira revealed. It is common knowledge that in Goa it is the Christians that move out in large numbers, especially on a Portuguese passport. Rather than stressing a lack for one's own culture whenever controversies flare on issues such as Portuguese nationality and the language questions, it would do us a lot good to think about the internal systemic problems contributing to the migration of Goans. If these internal problems are not addressed immediately, one will only witness more Goans leaving the shores of their homeland.

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