Courtesy: Joao Roque and Malavika Neurekar

Jason Keith Fernandes: The Suppression of Romi Konkani and the Shaping of a Tongue

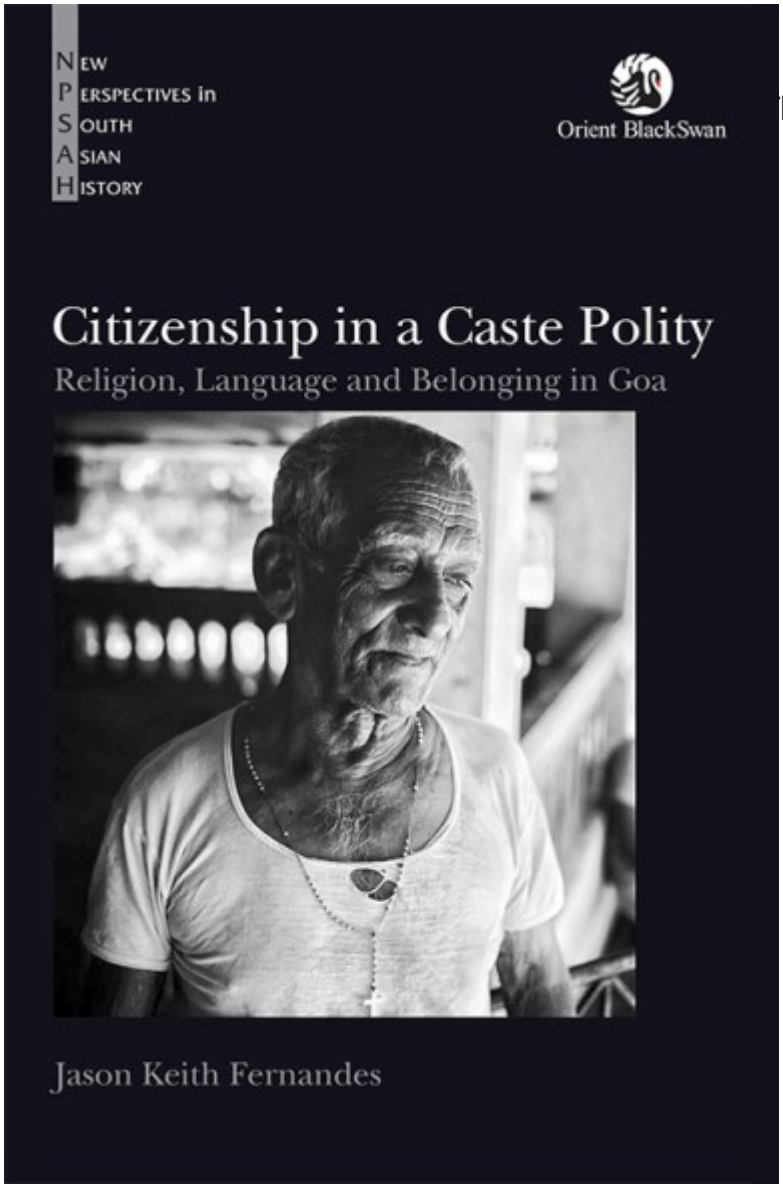
The history of the Konkani language has been fraught with conflicts of all shades, including the complex relationship with the colonial Portuguese state, a movement to establish its existence as separate from Marathi in the 1960s, and a widespread controversy around the medium of instruction in state schools in the early 1990s. But its most interesting episode is perhaps also the least talked about.

The Goa, Daman and Diu Official Language Act was passed in February 1987, three months before Goa attained statehood, which recognised Konkani as the official language of the Union Territory. The Act accorded official recognition to Konkani written in the Devnagiri or Nagari script, a move that came as a huge blow to working-class Catholics who spoke and wrote in Romi Konkani. It not only fractured their sense of identity and belonging, but also laid the foundations for processes that would be used to hamper access to government jobs and suffocate cultural art forms like the *tiatr.*

Writer and academic researcher Jason Keith Fernandes's recently-published book *Citizenship in a Caste Polity: Religion, Language and Belonging in Goa* (Orient Blackswan, 2020), explores the long-standing demand that Konkani written in the Roman script be accorded the same recognition as Konkani in the Nagari script. The citizenship of the Goan Catholic is one "based on repeated humiliation", he writes in this treatise on caste, language and identity.

Fernandes completed his Bachelor's degree at the National Law School of India in Bangalore, followed by a Masters at the International Institute for the Sociology of Law in Spain. He is a founding member of the Al-Zulaij Collective in Goa and employed by CRIA (Centre for Research in Anthropology) in Lisbon, where he is currently based. *Citizenship in a Caste Polity* is based on Fernandes's doctorate thesis at the ISCTE in Lisbon, compiled over a period of five years, which he spent shuttling between Lisbon and Goa, where he spent at least two months every year.

Malavika Neurekar in conversation with Jason K. Fernandes discusses the book.



Malavika Neurekar: Can you tell me a little bit about your personal motivations behind the research?

Jason K. Fernandes: The book is about people who want to belong and yet can't; that is to say the liminal subject. Now I know all about being the liminal subject. My mother is Mangalorean and my father was Goan, and so when I grew up in Goa, this liminality, of being not quite Goan, was an important part of my life. In those days it was very clear who belonged and who didn't.

But I realised that this crisis of belonging was, and is, not unique to me. It manifests differently among various people. Especially among Goan Catholics, everyone is trying to belong. For example, the Portuguese-speaking Goans were, and to an extent still are, seen as being exclusionary. However, my belief is that they were being so because they themselves may have been feeling lost after integration with India and were trying to make sense of the new world they were in. Konkani-speaking Catholics thought they would find integration into India through Konkani as an official language. Unfortunately, most of them are still struggling

to find that belonging. So, in that sense, I think I fitted very well into the area I wanted to study.

And as an anthropologist, you need to have a certain kind of sympathy for your subjects. You need to identify with them at some level while still being separate, or maintaining objectivity. I think I was able to have that in this case, so that was great.

MN: You say you used your own crisis of belonging to launch this inquiry. But in your book, you acknowledge the fact that you are an upper-caste and upper-class Catholic. You make a reference to how you do not speak Konkani fluently. Meanwhile, your subject happens to be the citizenship experience and linguistic marginalisation of working-class Goan Catholics. What propelled you towards this?

JKF: I didn't start out my doctoral work wanting to study Konkani. What I wanted to study was the fact that there were all these Portuguese flags and symbols on vehicles in Goa around that time [2005-06]. A number of Goans were reclaiming their Portuguese citizenship at the time and acquiring Portuguese passports. And it seemed to me that a lot of these symbols were being put up by persons who didn't have a traditional or familial relationship with the Portuguese language; i.e. people who may have spoken Portuguese at home. This would mean largely, though not exclusively, working-class and working-caste persons.

I thought this needed to be studied to see how Goan identity is developing and how people are making citizenship claims. As a trained lawyer, citizenship was always a theme I was interested in. But as I went into the field, I realised that there is no base study about citizenship among Catholics in general. There is no way to understand the Goan Catholic. Everyone who does [academic] work is more or less interested in creating a pro-Indian narrative for Goa. No one is discussing the Goan Catholic, even less the working-caste, working-class Catholics. If at all they talk about the Catholics, most of their assumptions emerge via association with dominant-caste and upper-class Catholics.

Now, I want to be very clear that I realised that while I was focussed on working-class and working-caste Catholics, at the end of the day the book is marked by my own caste location. I think I've been honest to the arguments that they [working-class Catholics] make. I've pointed towards the adversaries they identified, but I've reframed it. For instance, caste is so obvious in my discourse. And the persons I identified with – or rather, sympathised with – most actively would perhaps hesitate from framing it so starkly in caste terms…I identify with my subjects but I also recognise that at some level, this is one Brahmin taking on other Brahmins.

MN: How are the issues of Antruzi[dialect] and Nagari [script] dominance interlinked? Can they be viewed separately?

JKF: This is a problem of Hindu nationalism. As one of the blind reviewers of the book pointed out, “Antruzi” is used as a term to mask the fact that it is actually *Bamani* or Saraswati. It is the Saraswat caste dialect and they’re just trying to make it sound secular by calling it Antruzi. Right now, the problem is the imposition of *Bamani*.

However, even if you were to address the imposition of *Bamani*, the Nagari issue is also tied to Hindu supremacy, whether in Goa or in India in general. Let us recollect that the push towards Nagari emerged in the context of depriving Hindustani of its Perso-Arabic script [and] was led by the Kayastha-Baniya combine and was tied to the larger Hindu supremacist problem and still needs to be addressed.

Some years ago a Catholic intellectual-journalist told me for the Chardos, the other dominant Catholic caste [in Goa], caste is a Brahmin problem, that is to say only brahmins are casteist and the rest are innocent of casteism. I found this very true. While we need to critique Brahmins and the way in which they try to push their agenda and secure power, everyone else is under the assumption that they don’t do caste. But of course, they do. They have different ways of doing it. It may not be so commented upon, not so identified. So, we need to be attentive to the way in which caste supremacy plays out even when Brahmins are not directly involved. Which is to say, that even if Brahmin hegemony is challenged, we still need to see how other caste groups mobilize Hindu or *savarna* sensibilities that are now historically associated with Nagari.

MN: The primary argument of your book is that the refusal to recognise Roman-script Konkani has relegated working-class Catholics to a subaltern position in Goa’s political landscape. Beyond the academic framing of identity and citizenship, can you explain how this exclusion is experienced by Catholics in everyday, administrative terms?

JKF: You’ve opened up a can of worms and I could go on about this for a day now. But there are two examples I can give you, relating to the church. When I first started doing my research, there was this lady – who is quite a significant voice in Goa but will remain unnamed – who made the statement: “In my village, the young people prefer to do the scripture reading in Nagari rather than in Roman script.” I later found out that it is just one girl who prefers to do it in Nagari rather than in Roman script, but this was used to make the argument that the Catholic youth in general prefers Nagari over Roman. This speaks about how the church is a significant location where the fight happens. You try to push the church towards being more nationally compliant. The second is the case where this priest lands up in

church early to make sure that the person who is going to do the reading has the right accent. And right accent means you have to not sound so much like a Catholic, but try to approximate Saraswat [Brahmin] sounds.

In both these cases, there is an emotional thing going on where one is told that one's cultural way of being is not good enough, you need to be like someone else. Let me acknowledge that life is about constantly learning, and this is fine. But when it becomes about irredeemably shaming a person, saying there is almost nothing good in you or your culture is of low quality, which is told to many *tiatrists* for instance, it becomes problematic. Yes, there is a need for a common culture that we all participate in, a common model that we all emulate, but this can't be done saying that someone is irredeemably useless. And this model can't be based on the *vivência* or behaviours of a single caste.

In school, what happens is that a lot of Catholic children get a sense that their Konkani is not correct. In a meeting I attended, a *tiatrist* recounted that there are children who come home from school and tell their parents "Mummy, Daddy, your Konkani is not right." And this is deeply upsetting of the family's structure; of how you perceive your parents and grandparents; and the kind of received culture you have. This is hugely problematic.

Finally, at an administrative level, if you don't speak the right kind of Konkani, you may wind up not getting a job. For example, as I recount in the book, there is this one man who went to a university interview and based on how the interview was structured is convinced that because of the way in which he spoke Konkani, he was not preferred for the job. So, if I am a Brahmin speaking like a Brahmin, I will get the job. If not, out! And this is not the way in which we should be working. We need a standard culture, yes. But the question is how does this come about? In the case of Indian vernaculars where caste marks the language so much, if you're going to simply start excluding these non-ideal caste people from jobs, all you're going to do is impose one form on other people and shame them into submission. Ideally, it would be so great if, in a department of Konkani, you have persons with different caste backgrounds working together from their own kinds of Konkani.

MN: What are you working on next?

JKF: The focus of the research that led up to this book was an investigation of the cultural identity of a group; i.e. I was looking at people who identified as Catholic, but whose relationship with the religious itself was not the focus of my work. My subsequent work has begun taking Catholicism, and in particular Catholicism in Goa, more seriously. How did Catholicism in Goa work to be compatible with Indian nationalism? What were the ways in which the faith bended to achieve this nationalist accommodation? This bending was, of

course, easier because of the movements following the Second Vatican Council where the Catholic Church, following trends of thought that had already been around for at least a generation, sought to accommodate local traditions.

In the course of this work I also became interested in the larger question of how social scientists can take theology seriously. This has resulted in my initiating a course in theology, so as to learn Catholic theology from the inside as it were.

This focus on theology is a part of my attempt to respond to what seems to be the collapse of liberalism around us. Where do we find the inspiration for a new common sense? I believe that Catholic theology may have some of the answers. But this is still a work in progress.

If asked what my next book length work would be, I suspect it would be one that I tentatively hope to call “Why Goa is important to theory”, suggesting how using Goan histories and experiences as a location to think from can effectively challenge a number of the formulations that govern contemporary anglophone academic thought.