SCRIPT'ING DOMINANCE AND
CONTESTATIONS : LINGUISTIC HEGEMONY
IN POST LIBERATION GOA

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ABSTRACT

Linguistic hegemony is achieved when dominant groups create a consensus by convincing others to accept their language norms and usages as standard or paradigmatic. In post independent India, given the struggle for and subsequent formation of linguistic states, language became one of the dominant instruments of hegemony. The politicisation of language ensured that dominance and contestations were perennial components of language use. As in the rest of India, in Goa too, language became a crucial determinant of the status of the state.

Ever since Liberation, the politics of language use has dominated the political landscape of Goa. The passing of the Goa Official Language Act in 1987 (OLA) did not diminish the importance of language in determining the political future of Goa. While earlier language was used as a means of uniting the Konkani community, after the passing of the OLA, it became an instrument polarising the Konkani speakers on communal lines. In this paper, the focus is on how linguistic hegemony of the State and Civil society has led to the script controversy in Goa. The sociological fact that the language movement which had hitherto united the community of Konkani speakers now divided the community along the lines of religion and caste has also been highlighted.

Every time that the question of language surfaces, in one way or another, it means that a series of other problems are coming to the fore: the formation and enlargement of the governing class, the need to establish
more intimate and secure relationships between the governing groups and the national–popular mass, in other words to recognise the cultural hegemony (Gramsci, 1932).

The people of Goa, like the people of other linguistic states of India, are conscious of their language Konkani as the marker of their regional and cultural identity. This has been reiterated by the fact that ever since Goa’s Liberation on 19 December 1961, the political dynamics of Goa has directly or indirectly been impacted upon by language polemics. With the passing of the Goa Official Language Act in 1987, it was thought that the language movement had achieved its goal. But instead this Act opened up a host of unintended issues. It made manifest the script question latent in the language movement in Goa. This paper focuses on how the linguistic hegemony of the State and Civil society has led to the script controversy in Goa. The sociological fact that the language movement which had hitherto united the community of Konkani speakers now divided the community along the lines of religion and caste has also been highlighted. The linguistic hegemony concerning script has given new dimensions to the Konkani language movement in Goa.

Linguistic Hegemony

Though the idea of hegemony was in currency since long, its usage now to describe the intricacies of power relations in a variety of contexts is often associated with Gramsci. He used the term hegemony to mean intellectual and moral leadership through consent and persuasion (Gramsci, 1971). The concept of hegemony provides a philosophical framework within which we can explore the power relations between dominant and minority groups, particularly the means by which the dominant group, or the ‘leading’ group, secures its power and position.

Bourdieu (1977) used the concept “symbolic domination” to refer to the ability of certain social groups to maintain control over others by establishing their view of reality and their cultural practices as the most valued and, perhaps more importantly, as the norm. For Gramsci, the ruling class is an intellectual stratum that refines and presents its world view and thus provides an important part of the apparatus whereby the ideological component of ruling class hegemony is preserved and transmitted (Abercrombie 1980: 14). This intellectual stratum influences
all aspects of culture, especially language. In his study of the history of the Italian language, Gramsci assets that language should be understood as an element of culture and is the key manifestation of ‘nationality’ and ‘popularity’ of the intellectuals. Gramsci was aware that hegemony was used by linguists to refer to notion of prestige, by which speakers of other linguistic communities adopted the language of prestige as their own. For Gramsci language is both an element in the exercise of power and a metaphor for how power operates.

Linguistic hegemony is achieved when dominant groups create a consensus by convincing others to accept their language norms and usage as standard or paradigmatic. Hegemony is ensured when they can convince those who fail to meet those standards to view their failure as being the result of the inadequacy of their own language (Wiley, 2000: 113). Sometimes though, establishing linguistic hegemony is not the end of the process. Sustaining the hegemony remains a challenge. The politicisation of language ensures that dominance and contestations are perennial components of language use. This paper demonstrates how even script can not only provide the basis of linguistic coercion and consent, but can also threaten religious harmony.

The Speech-Script Continuum

The relationship between language and script has always been nebulous. Today, most literate people take script as a natural and absolute component of language, a given. However there is nothing natural and absolute about script and language relationship. The script is a system of signs which symbolise the sounds of a language. It is a representation of language. There is no fixed one to one relationship between a language and a script. Krishna (1991: 5) writes that the worst kind of misconception is to treat scripts as language. She says that the invention of writing developed a little over 50,000 years ago. If writing exists, it is because it had a prior, potential mode of being long before it took its visual shapes found in the languages with a written tradition.

The script is something that is external to a language, signs by which the sounds of a language are represented in writing. It is merely a mirror that can reflect any language. Hence scripts like the Roman script and Devanagari script are used in writing multiple languages. There are only
a handful of scripts used to represent the hundreds of written languages the world over.

The relationship between language and script seems uncomplicated, a simple linear transition from spoken to written form. At the level of the individual, the language script distinction poses no dichotomy. A child learns a language as part of his/ her primary socialisation. The individual progresses from spoken language to script as he enters the domain of secondary socialisation. But at the societal level, the transition soon involves more complex issues of legitimacy, hegemony and contestation. The script soon becomes a form of cultural capital. It is also seen as a source of symbolic power, with the speakers and users of the dominant variety enjoying benefits over others simply by virtue of the language they speak. Armed with a script, a language can now be used by a state as an instrument of social dominance and control.

As the importance of language in politics increased, language and consequently script now became a source of symbolic and cultural capital. In this paper I have attempted to show how, in their negotiations of script politics in Goa, script has been equated with institutions of ingredients like religion and caste.

Linguistic hegemony usually involves domination by speakers of a language ranked high in society. The speakers of other linguistic varieties are convinced and at times coerced into accepting the language of prestige as their own. If we look at the history of the Konkani language though, it was never considered to be a language of prestige. In fact, during the Portuguese rule, it was often dismissed as *lingua creadas* (language of the servants). In this section of my paper, I will briefly trace Konkani’s journey from the status of a ‘language of servants’ to the Official language of Goa.

**Historicizing the Script Question in Goa**

The Portuguese came to India looking for Christians and spices. The initial phase of Portuguese colonisation was marked by proselytisation. With this agenda, they set about wiping all traces of earlier forms of worship. They destroyed temples and burnt all religious literature. As written literature during that era was predominantly religious, the Portuguese policy of equating religion with culture led to the destruction
of almost all pre-conquest literature. Hence there is no clarity on pre-
Portuguese Konkani literature as there has not been evidence of any.

After the initial phase during which the conquerors destroyed all
literature, they realised the significance of language as an aid to their
missionary efforts and as a means of commercial intercourse. The
missionaries keen on proselytising in Konkani were now faced with the
task of creating literature in the language and had to indulge in guesswork
about the nature of the grammar and orthography of these languages.
Cunha Rivara (2006: 13) writes that it was found easier to introduce
Romanised words to express Konkani vocables, than for grammarians to
adopt the Devanagari alphabet, though the latter course would be proper
and more natural.

"Scripting" Hierarchy and Division

As with language, script too was used for divisive purposes. Equating
religion with culture, the Portuguese through the policies of the Inquisition
sought to distance the Catholics from the rest of the population. Language-
at first Portuguese and later Konkani-, was one marker distinguishing
both the communities. While both the communities spoke Konkani, the
Catholic elite familiarised themselves with Portuguese, and Hindus in
turn, were drawn towards Marathi, for a variety of reasons including
economy and religion.

In the nineteenth century the Catholic community in Goa was further
polarised on the basis of script. Since the end of the century, there had
been a steady flow of economically oriented migrants who were largely
Goan Catholics to cities in British India. These Goans had to find ways
to communicate with their communities back in Goa. The Catholics
attended Portuguese schools, but they did not know enough Portuguese
for the purpose of even writing letters. But as they were at least familiar
with the Portuguese script, they used those characters to write their
spoken language Konkani. They did not use the method created by the
missionaries to retain the Konkani sounds. This gave rise to an increase
of correspondence in Konkani in Roman script.

Very soon, the magnitude of the Goan diaspora gave rise to the
formation of groups and communities in the diaspora. Newspapers,
advertisements, books and novels catering to the non elite were produced
on a mass scale. While on one hand, it helped create community consciousness around Konkani in Roman script, it also resulted in heightening of divisions within the larger Goan community. The upper caste Goan Catholics looked with disdain upon Konkani in Roman script. There were serious attempts made by some upper caste Goan Catholics to retain the purity of Konkani by using Devanagiri script. It led to contradictory processes of assimilation and differentiation within the Catholic community in Goa.

This distinction between the high and low varieties of Konkani which were a result of casteist formulations got further enhanced in the twentieth century with the entry of Goan Hindu upper caste on the Konkani public sphere. This movement was initiated by Shri Vaman Varde Valavlikar, popularly known as Shenoi Goembab, who is credited with having heralded the Konkani Renaissance with his contributions to the various genres of Konkani literature. Shri Goembab, in an effort to reinstate Konkani identity in Bombay, began contributing voluminously to its literary development using Konkani in Devanagiri script. Following him, most of the early pioneers of the Konkani movement, most of who belonged to the upper caste Gaud Saraswat Brahmin community, also consciously began using Konkani in Devanagiri script. Aware of this dichotomy within the Konkani literary sphere, the First Konkani Conference held at Karwar in 1939 assembled itself under the slogan 'One language, One Script, One Literature' in order to build a homogenous Konkani society. Yet the divisions continued.

Given the pre eminent role that language played in determining the post colonial landscape in Goa, script based divisions within a language were relegated to the backburner. For at least three decades there was no politicisation and mobilisation on the basis of script.

**The Post Liberation Konkani Language Movement in Goa**

The Konkani literary sphere had to combat the already dominant Marathi literary sphere after Liberation of Goa. The story of Goa’s politics reflected both primordial and instrumental identities (Newman, 2001: 64). Immediately after Liberation in 1961, given the linguistic basis of state formation in India, Goa’s political history was shaped around language. The issue of whether Goa should remain a state in the Indian
federal structure or merge with Maharashtra was linked to whether Konkani was an independent language or a dialect of Marathi. On 16 January 1967, 54 percent of the people voted to remain a union territory. With this, Goa had just passed her first language-related political milestone.

Though the Opinion Poll had an impact on the Konkani cause, the purpose of the Opinion Poll was merely to decide the political status of Goa. As Goa was still a Union Territory, the language-dialect debate continued in the public sphere for a long time. Some Marathivadis still harbour hopes that Goa could still be merged with Maharashtra. This issue was finally administratively settled with declaration of Goa as one of the independent States of the Indian Union. After a virulent conflict, Konkani was finally made Official Language on 4 February 1987, and Goa was granted Statehood on 30 May of the same year. With the achievement of this milestone, for many, a number of hurdles had been overcome. But language is not static. They grow just as the imagined community that speaks it.

**Script Since Official Language Act: Threat, Perception and Political Mobilization**

In keeping with the linguistic basis for State formation, the declaration of the official language became a prerequisite to conferring statehood to Goa. The Official Language Act (OLA) was passed on 4 February 1987 and subsequently, Goa became a State on 30 May 1987. In the run up to the Official Language Act, the question of script did come up. The Konkani movement in Goa comprised largely of Catholics and upper caste Hindus. During the agitation, a local MLA, Shri Luizinho Faleiro, suggested that the movement should ask for Konkani in Roman script to be included for 25 years. The supporters of Konkani in Roman script were advised not to pursue this demand as this would make the case of Konkani even more difficult in the face of opposition from the Marathi lobby. So this demand was dropped.

For Gramsci, civil society is central as a location of hegemony and political power in modern democracies. By the third or fourth year of the twenty first century, the script entanglement began to get articulated in the civil society in Goa. The Church, the trade unions and a wide variety
of other institutions that exist outside direct state control are central elements of civil society. Once the dominant groups asset their hegemony they attempt to institutionalise it. Getting it formal recognition in various ways is one such method. By getting recognition from the highest body of letters, the Sahitya Akademi, the civil society in Goa, attempted to institutionalise the linguistic hegemony of Konkani in Devanagari script.

**Sahitya Akademi Recognition**

In 1981, the Advisory Board of the Sahitya Akademi, in keeping with its policy of ‘One Language One Script,’ announced that only Konkani written in Devanagari script would be eligible for awards. The Board unanimously decided on Devanagari as the script for Konkani. This decision of the Advisory Board was accepted by the Executive Council of the Sahitya Akademi.

As a consequence, only writers of Konkani in Devanagari script were eligible for awards. This created feelings of resentment among Konkani writers using other scripts, as by virtue of their script, they felt that they were shunted outside the purview of awards. Before the OLA, almost all the published books were in Roman script and there was a wide readership. The Devanagari protagonists view this as one of the main reasons for the recent protests by the lobby of the protagonists of Roman script and the demand for the change in status of the Official Language Act.

Since then there have been concerted efforts to mobilise the users of Konkani in Roman script. Hegemony often gives rise to counter hegemony by the leaders of the minority. This counter hegemony is articulated through diverse ways in which they try to institutionalise themselves. There are organisations like the Dalgado Konknni Akademi that have dedicated themselves with the development of the different genres of Konkani in Roman script. Various workshops and courses focussing on the different dimensions of language use in Roman script have seen a large number of participants. Thus the protagonists of Konkani in Roman script have focussed on the development and standardisation of Konkani in Roman script as a means to counter the hegemony the Devanagiri Konkani lobby.
The Script Conflict: Issues and Concerns

The script conflict has during its short duration of less than half a dozen years thrown open a number of issues and concerns. These issues debunk notions that script is merely the dress of a language, a means of providing permanency to speech. These concerns have occupied the public sphere polarising the Konkani community. In the following paragraphs, I have laid out the various issues that the script conflict has unfurled in Goa.

The case made by many supporters of Konkani in the Roman script revolves around the antiquity of Konkani in Roman script. Protagonists of Roman Konkani argue that the Roman script for Konkani has a history of over five hundred years and to do way or discourage the script would be to do away with a centuries old literary tradition. So the Roman camp feels that to deny them their script is akin to denying them their history and culture. Fr. Mozinho Athaide, founder-member of the group 'Catholics for Devanagari' dismisses this claim. He says that the history of Konkani in Roman script for a Goan does not date that far back. He said that until the nineteenth century, no Goan wrote Konkani in Roman script. The Konkani literature in Roman script was used solely as part of the missionary activities by foreigners who came to Goa.

Another issue concerns notions of purity and impurity which result from commonsensical understanding of language. Most Devnagirvadis argue that Devanagari is the most natural script for Konkani. Dr. Mathew Almeida, a linguist, opines that the claim that Devanagari is the natural script does not make much sense because any script is a set of symbols, arbitrarily chosen to represent speech sounds. He says that if Devanagari script was created expressly to represent Konkani sounds, then the term ‘natural script’ would make much sense. There is also another problem with defining a particular script as natural. It could imply that users of other varieties are unnatural. Goan Catholics have, in many ways, an onus to prove their loyalty to the India nation state. This reasoning is now extended to include script. Some other Devnagirvadis insist that Devanagari script should be used for Konkani as Devanagari is an Indian language and an Indian language, like Konkani should have an Indian script. Fr Almeida, poses the question, why not Kannada? It is an older Indian script compared to Devanagari and it was once in general use in
Goa. In fact, he opines that any linguist would choose Kannada as it best represents most Konkani sounds. In Fr. Almeida’s view clinging to arguments over the antiquity and suitability of script is simply a way of asserting Saraswat hegemony.

Fr. Pratap Naik an ideologue of Konkani in the Roman script also accepts the prevalence of hegemonic attempts made by the Saraswats in his paper ‘Konkkni Myths’ (2006: 6). He gives examples of various myths pertaining to Konkani culture and language. One common misconception is that compared to the Catholics, Hindus speak pure and good Konkani; Konkani spoken and written by the Saraswats is the standard Konkani. Responding to these myths, Siqueira (2006: 33) recalls that as a child he always felt that somehow his Konkani was not pure. And this is the attitude of a number of Goan Catholics, especially, the non-elite, who always strove to speak the standardised Saraswat Konkani. He writes that: Hegemony works precisely in this way, i.e. where the subordinate groups willingly consent to the values of the dominant groups.

One of the members of the dominant group, Shri Uday Bhembre has even come out with a roadmap that would help in bringing about uniformity with regard to scripts. Primarily arguing that a multiplicity of scripts would harm the development of Konkani, he goes on to give a blueprint on how and why it is to be maintained. The first argument made by him revolves around the fear of Marathi becoming the State language. This fear, in my opinion, has long crossed expiry date with the trend towards smaller state, and the niche that Goa has carved for itself in almost five decades of Liberation. Another argument made by Shri Bhembe is that since two generations have already studied Devanagari and the administration already runs in Devanagari script, it would be foolhardy to incorporate changes now. Since Liberation, school students in Goa have been learning Konkani in Devanagari script as their part of their curriculum. Hence these students, of whatever religion, are now comfortable with Devanagari script. In 25 to 30 years from now, all Goans will be familiar with Devanagari script. Hence he foresees that by 2035, Goans, whether Catholic or Hindu, will have converged on one script. This argument is not readily acceptable. Shri Premanand Lotlikar the President of Dalgado Konkani Academi, an organisation promoting the cause of Konkani in Roman script for instance gives the example of
French, a language that is taught in schools as a second language. He says that though a number of Goan students learn French in schools, after some years they are unable to communicate in French. The same situation arises with Catholics who learn Devanagari Konkani. After some years they cannot communicate in that script, because it is alien to them.

One major grouse of the writers of Konkani in Roman script is that after the OLA, awards and recognition have only benefited the writers of Konkani in Devanagari script. They are especially upset that the Sahitya Akademi recognises Devanagari script as the only script for Konkani. This, they feel, puts them outside the purview of the Sahitya Akademi. They allege that this move was done at the instigation of the Devanagari lobby and is communal and casteist.

One allegation made by people on both sides of the script divide is that the other side is attempting to communalise the issue. In the emotionally charged debate in the public sphere, both sides accuse the other of being communal. For the Roman camp, the OLA is seen as a tool to keep Goan Catholics divided. The predominantly Roman Catholic protagonists of Konkani in Roman script accuse the Devanagari camp of promoting cultural communalism. Shri Godfrey Gonsalves (2006: 30), writer of Konkani in Roman script writes:

"Over 29.86% of the nearly 13.5 lac Christians will eventually be denied their heritage and existence with the elimination of the Roman script. Today in matters of employment it is clear that knowledge of Konkani means written in Devanagari script, thus denying Christians the opportunity of employment."

If the Devanagari camp is accused of being communal, they in turn blame the supporters of Konkani in Roman script of inciting communalism. Devanagari protagonists brand the Roman camp of inciting communalism and trying to divide the Konkani community as well as public sphere on communal lines. Fr. Athaide articulates this view when he says:

"to claim that just because we are Christians, we are for Konkani in Roman script is false. Who has authorised them to speak on the behalf of Christians as a whole? Is this not a kind of religious communalism?"
In discussing script and communalism, it would be interesting to note the Church’s views on the conflict. Members of the clergy are on both sides of the script divide. While priests like Fr. Pratap Naik and Fr. Matthew Almeida along with the institution they represent, TSKK which is a Jesuit institution, have been at the forefront of the Roman Konkani movement, others like Fr. Jaime Couto and Fr. Mozinho Athaide have formed a group ‘Catholics for Devanagari’ and are proactive supporters of Konkani in Devanagari script. This split among the clergy reflects a caste-based distinction with upper caste priests supporting Devanagari and the non-elite promoting the cause of Konkani in Roman Script.

Conclusions

Derrida (1996) writes that “Language tends toward becoming One, toward reducing the heterogeneous nature of reality”, toward what he calls a “homo-hegemony.” Linguistic hegemony arises when the community accepts language homogeneity as the norm. Language is a means of communication among and within communities. Ever since migration, industrialisation, colonisation and other socio-political realities, there has been an intermingling and redrawing of language communities and languages boundaries. Thus multilingualism rather than monolingualism should have been the norm of most of the nation states today. This linguistic myopia wherein language homogeneity is seen as natural is in reality a political decision rather than a socio-linguistic fact that has been followed in many established nation states in Europe and America.

When India got her independence, like many new nation states, she showed a preference for linguistic homogeneity. But attempts by the nation state to downplay the linguistic plurality backfired and the newly formed nation state faced her first major threat in the form of language movements. All attempts at linguistic homogenisation in India, stems from this inherent preference of monolingualism in the face of multilingualism. And this attitude towards language percolates right down to level of script as well.

Linguistic hegemony with regard to script for Konkani again arises because of the inherent belief that a multiplicity of scripts is detrimental to the development of a language. There is a collective fear that if Konkani community is divided along the lines of script, it will not be able
to stand up to the domination of other powerful languages like Marathi and English. This fear of resisting plurality of script has paradoxically threatened the unity of the Konkani community. While the community was successful in overthrowing the hegemony of Marathi domination, differences over script threaten to undo the achievements of the language movement in Goa.

While addressing a gathering of Konkani activists, Khubchandani, a sociolinguist, cautioned that in a pluricultural situation, pluralism and encouragement of diversity is the least acrimonious way forward. He advises that in a plurilingual situation like Goa, language should work at multi polar levels. He opines that in a plural society which has multiple layers, you cannot work on a mono level. He is optimistic of the language movement of Goa, which with its various successes can be a role model for other multilingual smaller states.

References


