Konkani: The Script Controversy

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Written in multiple scripts – Roman, Nagari, Kannada, Persian-Arabic and Malayalam – the Kokani language today finds itself at the centre of a debate where arguments are being proposed to establish the primacy of one script over the others. The script controversy in Konkani is deeply enmeshed with issues of belonging, dignity, access to resources and the idea of nation that one wishes to cherish.

Konkani is a unique language. It is probably the only language in India which is written in five scripts – Roman, Nagari, Kannada, Persian-Arabic and Malayalam – with credible oral and written literature in each of them. The phenomenon of several languages embracing a common script is better known in India. The Nagari script, for instance, is employed for Sanskrit, Hindi, and Marathi, and now increasingly for adivasi languages across India. The script issue which was lying low in the assertions of the fledgling Konkani public sphere has erupted in its full fury in recent years, as different Konkani script communities are mounting their respective claims for pre-eminence. Many advantages are suggested to back these claims: Those who argue for the Roman script point out the advantage that it holds in store for the children of increasingly diasporic Konkani communities who would inevitably be exposed to education in English invariably in the Roman script. It would be easy, so the argument goes, to persuade them to learn Konkani, since these children do not have to learn a new script afresh to access the language. The advocates of the Nagari script point out the easy access it can facilitate to many Indian languages with their rich resources, including Sanskrit. Those who pitch for Nagari overtly suggest that national integration would be served better through the option they recommend. Those who deny Nagari such a privilege think that the relation between languages and script on one hand and the nation on the other is much more complex. Apart from these weighty considerations, for many a writer in Konkani, script is an issue of priority, since most of the awards and recognitions today, particularly those conferred by Central Sahitya Academy, invariably require that the concerned writings are made available in the Nagari script. Some of them feel that such a demand is not merely unfair, but it challenges their very sense of belonging expressed through a script native to them. In other words, the script controversy in Konkani is deeply enmeshed with issues of belonging, dignity, access to resources and the idea of nation that one wishes to cherish.
Some of us came together in a seminar on “Scripts and Languages of Modern India with Special Reference to Konkani” organised by Jagotik Konkani Songhotton–World Konkani Organisation– (JKS), at Kalaangann, Mangalore, on March 10 and 11, 2012, to discuss some of these questions. The participants present were linguist Anvita Abbi, litterateur Alok Rai, political scientist Asha Sarangi, linguist and writer Prathapananda Naik and several Konkani literary figures and activists, including Tomazinho Cardozo, the president of JKS and Eric Ozario, its general secretary. The paper of the Konkani specialist, and an ardent advocate of the Nagari script, Madhavi Sardesai was read out in absentia. The arguments and conclusions presented in this note are shaped by the deliberations of this seminar.

Relation Between Language and Script

Konkani is spoken by about two and a half million people hailing from the west coast of India and spread across the states of Maharashtra, Goa, Karnataka and Kerala. About 40% of them are from Goa, where Konkani is the state language. A majority of them, to the extent they employ Konkani as the language of communication, use the Nagari script, although a significant minority uses the Roman script. About 45% of the Konkani speakers are from Karnataka. Except for the Navayat Muslims who use the Persian-Arabic script, they write Konkani in the Kannada script. In Kerala the Konkani speakers write in the Malayalam script and in Maharashtra in the Nagari script. Interestingly this has been done for ages and is an important marker of their identity. The scripts they have employed have provided them access to the dominant languages of the regions they reside in, and as a result there has been much linguistic convergence registering phonological, grammatical and syntactic changes in the Konkani spoken by them. There are significant differences in the popular usage of terms.

The relation between language and script in Konkani becomes confounded once ethnicity informs this relation. Konkani is spoken by several upper caste communities such as Saraswats and Gaud Saraswats; by the fishing community of Kharvis; the agrarian pastoral community of Kudumbis; the Muslim Community of the Navayats; the Siddis, whose ethnic origins lie in Africa and the Catholics of Goa, Mangalore and of the surrounding coastal and the Malnad region. Some of these communities such as the Saraswats, Gaud Saraswats and Catholics are highly diasporic, both within the country and outside. In Goa while the Catholics and their institutions generally write Konkani in the Roman script, the Hindus employ the Nagari script. In recent years the association of Nagari with a hallowed tradition, and particularly with Sanskrit, has made sections of the Konkani speaking upper castes in the coastal areas of Karnataka veer towards the Nagari script. The issue has become highly divisive with the starting of Konkani schools in recent years. Outside Goa, and particularly in Karnataka, these schools, which were the outcome of hard-fought battles with the dominant languages of the region, are embroiled today in the script controversy. The teaching-learning regimen in the Konkani schools threatens to break down due to this discord.
The script controversy is deeply mired in political contentions. The Saraswats, Gaud Saraswats and a section of the Catholics in the region have come to believe that their genealogical roots lie along the banks of the Saraswati river in the north. The Sangh Parivar has a major presence in the entire Konkani speaking belt today, particularly in Goa and coastal Karnataka. In this context, there is a growing feeling among certain sections that the Nagari script would tend to reinforce a specific kind of dominance—that of Sanskrit, Devanagari, Aryavarth (northern India) and the upper caste Sangh Parivar. But at the same time such an axis offers connectivity and encourages bonding, and quite a few would grudgingly opt for it in the absence of other options. The social connectivity that the Nagari script promises could be hugely enabling, particularly, to members of the minority linguistic communities suppressed by the assertive majority linguistic communities of their respective regions. At the same time some others feel that such an axis is likely to marginalise lower castes and minorities writing in scripts other than Nagari. Further given the fact that Marathi is written in the Nagari script, a turn to Nagari is seen by some Konkani protagonists as challenging their hard-won autonomy from the predatory moves of the former. There is also a nagging apprehension that using one’s language for the reinforcement of a homogenised all-India identity could in turn endanger the cultural diversity.

For many Konkani lovers emotionally attached to the language, the script controversy endangers the impressive strides the language movement has made in the last fifty years, i.e., a separate political identity for Goa which was achieved in 1967; the recognition of Konkani by the Central Sahitya Akademi in 1975; the recognition of Konkani as the official language of administration for Goa in 1987; and the inclusion of Konkani in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution, which lists the major national languages, in 1992.

### Script, Language and the Sense of Belonging

There is no easy way of replacing one script with another since for those who use it, it is their only source of access to an entire culture and literature beyond the familial and the spoken. Even the familial and the spoken are marked today by the field of a script that provides access to the concerned language, which in turn is bonded to languages in its horizon. Such a bonding to languages differs from one Konkani script community to another. In this context asserting the primacy of any one script will not only deprive a person of his or her moorings but will also lend credence to the notion that people and communities can be transposed from one culture to another like pawns on a chessboard. In this sense, foisting one script on speakers of a language which is written in multiple scripts is no different from foisting one language on a land of many languages. Further, there is little empirical evidence to suggest that a shared script necessarily amplifies access to the concerned language and its resources.

At times the argument for the primacy of a script in the Konkani public sphere is proposed by invoking the principles of efficiency, effectiveness and usefulness. It is argued that given
multiple scripts, capacities and scholarship required to build up the resource-pool of a language get frittered away making it an unattractive option not merely to the outsiders but also to its very adherents. Without a body of critical resources and competences, a language has little opportunity of being employed in literary, scientific and other learned pursuits. While efficiency, effectiveness and usefulness are valuable considerations to be cherished, these cannot be implemented at the expense of the very people who value these goals. Opting for a single script will deny to all Konkani script communities, except one, the access to the Konkani public domain. In the words of Anvita Abbi, the latter will be turned illiterate at one stroke. Besides, what is the use of access and aggregation of resources if they have to be eventually converted into museums? On the contrary, is not efficiency served better by the resources garnered by Konkani script communities, bonding with the dominant language in their respective regions, and placing them at the service of Konkani? In fact, if imaginatively conceptualised, Konkani could be a grid language reaching out to numerous languages through a web of its script communities, rather than looking for a resource-pool by tying its knot with a leading script today.

If you take into account Konkani speakers as a whole, a majority of them use the Kannada script more than any other script. But such majoritarianism, or the noblesse grace of Nagari script, or the prospects and attractiveness of the Roman script, can hardly be employed to issue a diktat to people whose conception of their selfhood and authenticity are deeply marked by the language written in a particular script. Collapsing a language and script together has sometimes done enormous harm not merely to the richness of a language but the larger relations that a language encompasses as reflected in the Urdu-Hindi controversy.

Scripts and languages mark civilisations, and much of what we consider today as culture is closely bound with linguistic communities. In other words, culture, community and language are closely entwined and often overlap. People are embedded in cultures and communities which mainly express themselves through a language. And therefore the non-recognition, relative marginalisation and the loss of a language can have deleterious effects on them. In other words, a rooted and a confident self is closely associated with a linguistic community. At the same time, limiting a person exclusively to a single linguistic community can be hugely confining, no matter how popular such a language is and how rich in its contents. A language other than one’s mother tongue can provide access to another culture and to its way of life. Often enrichment of one’s language happens through access to the resources of other languages. Many of the Indian languages would have remained poorer without access to the resources of other languages. Konkani advocates are yet to imaginatively tap and network with the resources that their multiple scripts connect them to. It can also be safely conceded today that a person groomed and sensitive to deep script diversities in India could bond with the cherished diversity of the land.

Languages as social formations are also deeply embedded in power and dominance. Often social groups and strata visit language formations with their own concerns and interests,
and in the process edge out and marginalise other social groups and strata. Once a language opts for a script, then such a move further constrains the options available to a language begetting or reinforcing a specific mode of dominance. Language formations are also formations of meanings and values. A unilateral or unequal appropriation of the meaning and values of such formations by specific strata or social groups of a linguistic community may spell marginalisation and deprivation for other groups and strata of the same community. This was well understood by Jotiba Phule when he refused to entertain the invitation of justice Ranade, his friend, to participate in the Conference of Marathi Authors dominated by the upper castes. Languages also provide the tools and instrumentalities of enquiry and investigation. If these tools are usurped by any single group or strata then these might not serve the purpose of others unless the motives of such a group are wholly altruistic.[iv]

Resolution of this Controversy

How do you resolve this conundrum? Some solutions such as a simultaneous translation of writings into other scripts could be attended to by technology. One of the suggestions that came up during the seminar was a multi-script digital dictionary which would enable Konkani to build bridges between its various scripts. At the same time it is important that the language as a whole be nurtured as a major resource by its speakers. They have struggled for it to be recognised as an independent language, and rightly so, and such efforts should not go in vain just on account of the script controversy. We have also argued above that it cannot be at the cost of plurality of scripts that Konkani is blessed with.

One of the ways of approaching this issue is the kind of pedagogy that is going to be dispensed with in the Konkani instructional institutions. At present the script controversy has created a divided house, and English medium education is provided in the name of Konkani schools. It is quite possible that a three-script formula could be devised in these schools. Konkani schools in Goa in addition to the Roman and Nagari scripts could enable their wards to learn one more script which could either be the Kannada, Persian-Arabic, or Malayalam script. Probably Kannada would be a preferred option in this case not merely due to the presence of a large number of Konkani writers of the script but also the contiguity of this region to Goa. Schools in Kannada script region have little option except to follow a three-script formula as is the case with those in the Malayalam script region. Such a three-script formula would still be weighed in favour of the Roman and Nagari scripts. Considering the fact that the Kannada, Malayalam and Persian-Arabic scripts can provide access to rich literary legacies and learning, some determined effort must be made by Konkani institutions that have sprung up in the region to provide instruction in these scripts on an optional basis. Public bodies such as the Linguistic Commission of India could play a pro-active role in this regard.

The existing practice of considering works only written in Nagari for awards and recognition by public agencies cannot be endorsed. Writings in all scripts should be
considered for the purpose. How an informed and competent judgment can be made in this regard, is an institutional issue. One of the suggestions that came up in the Seminar was to extend an award to the literature/writings in every script of the language; although this might not be a feasible option in all instances. While all such attempts may not exclusively privilege the script and literature in Nagari, it should not be neglected either. In fact in any evaluatory exercise of this kind, the literature and writings in each one of the scripts will have to be assessed leading to a more appropriate critical reception and cross-fertilisation.[v]

No one can prevent anyone from writing and publishing in the script they are familiar with. Much of the writing is dictated today by the market. While the market can be sometimes helpful, it does not necessarily beget the best of literature and is unlikely to do so in the future. Given its multiple scripts, Konkani is ideally situated to send a different message: Tapping multiple language resources can provide a great impetus to good literature, including scientific.

Having said that, it is important to point out that the majority of the Konkanis are linguistic minorities in the regions of their birth and not merely of adoption. Therefore, the Konkanis need to rally in defence of their rights as linguistic minorities, and they might succeed, in ideal conditions, to elicit the support of a democratic majority.

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[iii] In this context reference can be made to the debate with regard to Hindi, written in Nagari script, as the National language of India, a proposal that met with strong opposition, leading to the longest debate on any issue in the Constituent Assembly of India. Austin calls the debate ‘intractable’. See, Granville Austin, The Indian Constitution, Cornerstone of a Nation, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1966, p. 265

[iii] Such an assertion does not deny the significance of such languages as Latin and Sanskrit. Those who are proposing the argument of efficiency, do so in the competitive arena of language resources.

[iv] It would be foolhardy to trust in the altruism of social groups, that too in the longer run, although there could be individuals who make the good of others their own good.
I am reminded of the way we assess scripts in a competitive examination where a group of evaluators work together to evaluate the scripts. Whenever a top ranking script is noticed by an evaluator, he tends to point it out to others, making everyone to assess it closely for the purpose of relative ranking.