

## CULTURAL HOMOGENIZATION TO CULTURAL PLURALISM - A NOTE ON GOAN IDENTITY

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### ABSTRACT

Identity is a problematic analytical concept which has acquired diverse meanings, ranging from emphasizing sameness and persistence through changes to something that implies multiplicity and fluidity. Identities are not static but dynamic, always undergoing changes with alteration in circumstances. This paper makes use of secondary data in an attempt to explain the dynamic nature of the concept of identity and, specifically, Goan identity. While the concept of 'Goan' or what constitutes Goan identity is baffling, to say the least, it is also experiencing a seismic shift. The historical encounter with the colonial other has left a significant imprint on the Goan personality and the post-liberation developments in the form of in-migration, out-migration and the Goan diaspora have ushered in further changes in the perception and evolution of the Goan identity. It is imperative that the traditional understanding of the Goan identity keep abreast with the transformation in the Goan self-awareness from the time of India's Independence and Goa's liberation. Along with the evolving Goan consciousness, have surfaced various issues and concerns. One major concern which attracts one's attention is the desire of many diehard Goans, votaries of nation-state, to bring about cultural homogenization. In this context, it is argued that it is worthwhile to abandon the search for homogeneity, which may be antithetical to the spirit of democracy and aspire for the creation of a national state which endorses cultural pluralism.

**Keywords:** identity; Goan identity; nation-state; cultural homogenization; cultural pluralism

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## INTRODUCTION

The introduction to the book 'The Transforming of Goa', by Norman Dantas (1999) begins thus - 'It is difficult to find a Goan who will not thump his (or her) chest and declaim proudly: "Hany Goenkar". But it is a far knottier task to find two of the tribe who will agree on who or what is 'Goan'. There is hardly any agreement amongst Goans with regard to the essential characteristics of Goan or Goanness. Various attempts have been made, however, to understand the essence of 'Goanness' and to define Goan identity. Often the various endeavours have ended with an understanding of the Goanness which is nothing more than 'a romantic notion fixed in the hoary past with little or no relationship to contemporary reality' (Dantas 1999). The dynamic nature of Goan identity has been overlooked, despite the prevalence of polarized opinions within the political, cultural and scholarly discourse.

## IDENTITIES NOT STATIC BUT DYNAMIC

The concept of identity has been used, misused and overused by various agencies. However, the concept itself is indispensable and cannot be discarded as it has been and still is the hope of a better order in the future. The term 'identity crisis' was introduced in the domain of psychology and in social sciences in the 1950s, it became popular in the 1960s in politics referring to national or collective identity, extending its scope and diffusing it across disciplinary boundaries. Identity gradually came to be interpreted on one hand as something static and unchanging, a reality which remains the same, while on the other hand identity was discussed and portrayed as changing, fluid and negotiable.

By the 1980s sociologists, philosophers and historians were already engaged in controversies with regard to the significance of the term identity (see Kubiňáková 2010: 30). Brubaker and Cooper (2000) stated that the diverse meanings of the word identity,

distinguished by them as strong and soft, are even contradictory to each other. The strong understanding referring to the essentialist position denoting sameness over time and the soft alluding to the constructivist notion emphasizing multiplicity, fluidity and instability. According to the strong conception of identity, it 'is something that all groups have or ought to have', 'something people (and groups) can have without being aware of it'... in a way replicating the 'Marxian epistemology of class' and implying robust group boundedness, homogeneity and 'a sharp distinctiveness from non-members'. The soft conception indicates that identity is 'multiple, unstable, in flux, contingent, fragmented, constructed, negotiated' and so on (Brubaker and Cooper 2000).

In the modern states one single identity was emphasised but today in the postmodern states the idea of multiple identities is becoming prevalent (Das 2009, 24). Oommen (2009, 3) does not find the existence of multiple and differing identities as vexatious as the identities which are placed in a hierarchy and considered as superior or inferior. He suggests horizontal locationing rather than vertical arrangement of identities, as in reality there does not exist any 'hierarchy of identities but only contextuality of identities' (ibid).

Humans are identity seeking creatures and there is nothing wrong in seeking identities but problems arise when 'some identities are undervalued, stigmatised and even viewed as dangerous while others are privileged, celebrated and viewed as safe' (Oommen 2009, 4). Evaluating identities in this manner raises several issues: attempts by nation-states to homogenise identities, creation of new identities as a consequence of inequality between collectivities, identities becoming sources of inclusion and also exclusion and a thinking within the dominant majority that 'nurturing identities of minorities ...is a security risk for the 'nation' ... leading to the alienation of the oppressed minorities from the state and nation' (ibid).



Identities are also considered to be primordial or constructed, but according to Oommen (2009, 2-3), 'it is more realistic to arrange identities on a rigidity-flexibility continuum' than to analyse them as primordial or constructed. For him, gender and race identities are rigid whereas identities based on religion, caste, or language are flexible (as one can change one's religion, adopt the process of sanskritization and move higher in the caste hierarchy or give up one's mother tongue and acquire a new language) and those based on class and citizenship are substantially fluid. He further states that in the process of social transformation 'some identities are rejected and/or become obsolete, some are reinvented, and still others are newly-created (ibid. 3-4).

### GOAN IDENTITY

Language is a powerful force in the politics of a nation as it can be a symbol of identity, a claim to a certain territory as well as an important means whereby social, economic, political mobility may be achieved (Arel 2002, 114-15). Though a cultural nation cannot be reduced to a single marker of identity, language is more often than not a significant component of identity (ibid. 92) that provides both social as well as emotional identity to individuals within speech communities.

Cultural identities are not dead realities but ones which undergo change. As stated earlier, identities are classified as primordial and constructed. The primordial identification emerging from one's foremost cultural identity is found in the unconscious domains of the one's personality (Newman 2001, 155), and draw people toward the preservation of language. An example of primordialism is the prevalence of the 'deculturalisation' process in Goa which Bhembre (2002) laments. According to him a significant segment of the Goan population will be uprooting itself from the Indian soil, abandon the unique characteristics of the cultural

identity of Goa and will live as if it was an Indo-Anglican community, and the other group will be the ones who will contribute to the preservation of the Goan identity'.

The constructed or instrumental identification is the one that is chosen by people since in its selection, there is a greater probability of social, economic and political success (Newman 2001, 156). This identification pushes people towards language assimilation (Arel 2002, 115), which involves appropriating another language wherein people envisage opportunities for mobility. To understand the implications of instrumental identifications, it is sufficient to read about popular movements in favour of one or the other language. Martins (1990, 2), for example, wrote sometime back that children who speak English and are brought up by educated parents who speak English, and use English to communicate with them from childhood, will be studying better only in English medium primary schools and not in the schools conducted in the medium of the mother tongue, especially in circumstances when they have an inadequate knowledge of the mother tongue (ibid). This is how people make choices between the two types of identities, which often divide people into two opposing camps.

Those commenting on Goan identity state that essentialism or primordialism and instrumental identity are not found in Goa in their pure form (Newman 2001, 56; Kale 1999, 140). On the one hand, essentialism seems to urge many towards strongly supporting the cause of Konkani and Marathi, considered by them to be the major component in the definition of the Goan identity. On the other hand, the same people, on account of an instrumental identity, prefer a different language as a medium of instruction for their children's education.

However, in Goa and elsewhere, 'assimilating to another language, whenever language acts as one of the main markers for the group, is perceived as pathological and iniquitous by nationalist



leaders.’ (Arel 2002, 99). And therefore, ‘the “backward-looking” conception of a language-based identity, where the true identity is the one that allegedly prevailed before assimilation, collides with the “forward-looking” conception which can go as far as projecting one’s language preference in the future.’ (ibid. 115)

### CULTURAL HOMOGENIZATION OR CULTURAL MONISM

Nation-states attempts to unify and homogenise identities while people invent new identities. With modernisation the value of equality is also cherished and instead of traditional identities melting into a culturally homogeneous entity the desire to be equal leads to creation of newer identities. Often the majority perceives that nurturing identities of minorities as a source of insecurity for the nation as such and utilise the state machinery to obstruct justice to the dominated minorities.

According to Oommen (2009, 1), the post-colonial states of South Asia made efforts to transform themselves into nation-states with cultural homogeneity as in West Europe. However, they failed firstly because these states comprised of several ‘nations’ which vigorously resisted all efforts towards cultural homogenization, and secondly because of large scale influx of migrants from differing cultural backgrounds.

Liberation and the initial encounter with non-Goans developed among Goans ideas about their own identity. The Opinion Poll conducted by the Government of India was in favour of Goa’s separate geo-political identity. With the influx of outsiders into Goa and these others competing with the locals for employment, there emerged a demand to make Konkani the prime criterion for employment. ‘Sons of the soil’, ‘Goa for Goans’, sentiments led to the demand that Konkani be made the official language of the state. A prolonged agitation rocked Goa and resulted in the Goa Legislative Assembly passing the Official Language Bill, and thus Konkani

acquired the Official Language status on 4 February 1987. Newman wrote, ‘Konkani Mai (Mother Konkani) ascended her rightful throne at last’ (Newman 2001, 71). The fact that Goans speak Konkani or, at least, consider it as their mother tongue was recognized and accepted by the state. However, a significant number of Goans have questioned the clarification provided of the meaning of ‘Konkani language’ in the Official Language Act, that is, the need for the language to be in the Devanagari script. This scenario is an outcome of the homogenizing efforts of the dominant community. In the article entitled ‘Konkani Mai (Mother Konkani) Ascends the Throne’, Newman (2001) wrote of the struggle for Goan identity and how, with the passage of the Official Language Bill, the common man had felt that justice was done to Konkani, which the Portuguese had suppressed for centuries and the Goan governments had neglected for more than 25 years. The Official Language Act of 4th February, 1987, however, satisfied neither the Romi Konkani nor the Marathi protagonists.

Often it is considered by some so-called protagonists of Goan identity that those who speak English or opt for English education, especially primary education, are unpatriotic. Writing about people of Hong Kong, Hok-shing (2007) says that they do not like if they are viewed as Westerners or non-Chinese even though, for a number of reasons, they use English in their day-to-day life. For the last fifty years or so Goans, too, have been using English but that has not made them any less Goan; they still have a strong sense of their being Goan Indians.

Against the differences that still threaten to divide the major linguistic communities of Goa, Newman has argued that Goans have been fashioning a common Goan syncretic identity through the many centuries. To Newman, the traditions of the Catholics and Hindus differ a lot as far as form and style is concerned but over the centuries there is an evidence of a growing convergence between the



practices of the two communities. Despite the many religious differences, the emergence of a syncretic Goan style has contributed towards a common Goan identity. Though, especially evident among the lower castes, Hindus and Catholics of the higher castes also participate in some major religious festivals and worship and honour the same goddesses, for example, Shanta Durga and Our Lady of Miracles (Newman 2001, 31).

Pundalik Naik who played a major role in the Konkani agitation as a leader of Konkani Porjecho Avaz, also, spoke about Goan identity, at a Writer's Programme in America, 'as based on a co-existence of Hinduism and Catholicism' (Couto 2004, 97). The statement was substantiated by Pundalik Naik saying, 'This is how our society has evolved' ... 'We have lived together for centuries and despite the excesses of the early years, the Goan has known to discriminate between people and the state, between the devout Christian worshipper and the colonial church establishment linked with state power. The masses worked together, prayed with the same intensity and, before Liberation, often went hungry for the same reasons. Their traditional occupations as fishermen and labourers bonded the communities in ways that taught them to respect each other's Gods' (ibid.).

According to Couto, conversion transformed into an exercise in social engineering which tried to bring forced changes in various areas viz., food, dress, language, music, etc., (Couto 2004, 189). However, the Church authorities did not succeed in their endeavour as it is the land and local language, Konkani, from which emerge the Goan identity. The Goan, then, is an outcome of the religio-cultural amalgamation of the two, altogether different Indic and Iberian worlds (Ibid. 94 in Kubiňáková 2010, 27)

De Souza commenting on Goan identity had this to say: 'The identity of any community is basically made up of its cultural uniqueness, including the environmental characteristics of the land

of one's ancestors. The mother-tongue and the historical experiences of one's ancestral community are important constituents of that cultural heritage' (DeSouza 2000, 492).

Analysing the thoughts of the different writers on Goan identity one can argue that Goa's identity is syncretic. Syncretism, attempted reconciliation or integration of different practices of different religions, may be regarded positively as contributing to enhanced tolerance among religions or negatively as leading to adulteration of faiths. Syncretic beliefs are found among both the major religious communities in Goa. Highlighting the significance of such syncretic beliefs, Couto aptly writes that the 'union of worship despite separate faiths is a factor that accounts for communal peace and harmony in Goa; and it was to this unique tradition that Shennoi Goenbab appealed to in the making of Goa's identity' (2004, 207).

The concept of hybridity adds to our understanding of Goan identity, though some social scientists consider syncretism and hybridity as synonymous. Hybridity facilitates in unsettling the introverted concepts of romantic nationalism and cultural essentialism (Nederveen in Kubiňáková 2010, 45). The concept has been utilised to refer to 'the creation of new transcultural forms' in postcolonial regions (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 1998, 118). Because of the contact with the coloniser, a process of hybridity has occurred and the outcome has been the transformation of Goa and Goans into an extended family. The encounter between the Indic and the Iberian world has led to the internalization of shared traditions, icons, mythologies and rituals and have been given expression in the architecture, the artistic field of music, literature, religious customs and traditions and in the Goan homes (Couto 2004, 410).

### CULTURAL PLURALISM THE ONLY OPTION

Cultural pluralism is a value orientation that promotes coexistence, accommodation and forbearance as well as preservation of a number



of cultural communities within the state's territory (Oommen 2009, 7, Das 2009, 22). As today's societies are multi-religious, multicultural and multilingual polities it is necessary that collective rights are recognised. Societies, today, are experiencing deterritorialization of religion and language. State and nation are being delinked. Terminal loyalty to the state is being abandoned. The loyalty of a Konkani-speaker or Marathi-speaker is not confined to his or her 'nation-state'. The loyalty of a Goan or Maharashtrian is not limited to his state but to his cultural community wherever it is scattered. Also, the nations and minorities insist on equality and identity simultaneously (Oommen 2009, 7-8).

Today there is a need 1) to distinguish four dimensions of societies: stratification, heterogeneity, hierarchy and plurality; 2) maintain a distinction between pluralism and plural society; and 3) abandon the doctrine of homogeneity as it goes against the spirit of both democracy and pluralism. It is to be noted that people who pursue identity politics belong to two different camps: hegemonic or those who reinforce their dominant identity and others emancipatory that is those who are in search of a new identity.

What happens in most societies is that the identity of the dominant cultural mainstream becomes the 'national' identity and the other identities are dissolved or assimilated into the major one. Persisting with the minority identities is considered 'unpatriotic'. Other societies do recognise multiplicity of identities but the state avoids nurturing the minority identities for political reasons.

Homogenising means establishing the hegemony of the dominant collectivity and the destruction of the minority collectivity, thereby eclipsing the minority identity. Secondly, annihilating and assimilating minority collectivity 'endanger the principle of maintaining diversity and nurturing identity' (Oommen 2009, 12).

The basic problem with Goans is that we are pursuing the

West European ideal of nation-state. While the state or the dominant group want to homogenise, nations search for their roots in a bid to differentiate. The solution lies in moving from the notion of nation-state aiming at cultural homogenization or cultural monism articulated in the slogan one nation, one people, one-culture to that of a national state that seeks the goal of cultural pluralism. Cultural pluralism and multiculturalism are values cherishing cultural diversity and predicting a society, wherein different communities build a common identity while at the same time retain their cultural attributes. It describes the coexistence of many cultures in a territory without one particular culture dominating the others in the locality. Cultural pluralism would also include a national policy which favours the coexistence of a variety of cultural, religious or linguistic groups. While diversity is plain plurality, pluralism connotes engagement to create a common society. Pluralism is achievement and creation of common society where distinctiveness of one's traditions and particularities are not relinquished but the deepest differences are acknowledged and held not in isolation but in relationship to one another speaking a language of dialogue and encounter or give and take. Pluralism also implies a vision to preserve and promote the separate identities of the different groups within the region based on the principle of equality and equal rights and opportunities. The Goan society ought to be like a honeycomb wherein akin to the bees the different religious and linguistic communities carry on protracted interaction amongst themselves sharing the Goan space, ethos and cultural traits. Cultural pluralism is both a political as well as an intellectual challenge making it imperative that Goa and Goans abandon their aspirations of creating a nation-state pursuing cultural monism and instead pursue the idea of a national state endorsing cultural pluralism.

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