

TRAILING THE TONGUE

Written by Wendell Rodricks

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The mango groves stretch for miles along the coast. In the hot, humid month of May, Maharashtra sizzles on the Deccan plateau. But here, near the sea, in Ratnagiri, a cool breeze blows the luscious perfume of the world's best mango, the Alphonso, through the palms and well tended orchards. Then suddenly, wafting on the wind, I hear it. The lilting melodious sound of my ancestral language. Yes, it is Konkani indeed. There are few local words that I do not understand. I speak to the man in my native tongue. He is a Konkani Brahmin, he tells me. And his dialect of Konkani is called Chintapawani. We bond in an ancient brotherhood of the Konkani coast. It happens to me everywhere on this coastal strip. Further South, the people of Malvan speak Malvani, Goans speak Gomatani, Tipu Sultan's influence has resulted in Konkani with Urdu words in places as far flung as Mysore, Coorg, Srirangapatna and even in Calicut, I was astonished to hear Konkani in a jewellery shop. There were some Malayalam and Tulu words thrown in. The owner recognised me and spoke in Konkani at length. How his "family left Goa twice...in the 13th century fleeing the forces of Alauddin Khilji and later escaping the horrors of the Portuguese Inquisition in 1560. There have been Konkani people here always. Before the Malabar coast, this was the Konkani coast". Surely, he was misinformed? I had never heard of this. "But let me take you home for lunch and share more about our common lineage". Over lunch that comprised steamed red rice, a fish curry and local pickle, I realised that it was not just language but food that was also common. So I set about discovering the Konkani coast... with my tongue. Through language and food. Dr. Krishnanand Kamat, has a website that recounts the history of the Konkani. "The seven kingdoms of the Konkani, as per Hindu mythology, mentioned in the Hindu history of Kashmir, included the entire west coast of India". The Pandavas of the Mahabharata, Lord Krishna, the Goddess Durga and later the Mauryas, the Marathas, the Muslims from the plateau and the Portuguese arrived on the coast. Due to the pious nature of the people this strip of land by the sea has many temples with people faithful to 'their' temple Gods. Annual pilgrimages all over the Konkani are common and the events surrounding them colourful and festive. The capital of the Konkani is supposedly Chandrapur. Is this the present village of Chandor in Goa?

The Konkani coast may have vanished today, but the Konkani language lives on. You can hear it in Karwar, Ankola and Kumta-Honavar. Away from the Mangalore coast, in the valley of Siddapur, I attended a wedding where villagers from far and wide spoke fluent Konkani. The Nawayatis of Bhatkal speak melodiously with Persian words. This did not surprise me. In Goa, the famous Chapora fort area was occupied by Persians. The ancient name was Shahpura, the town of the Shah of Persia. I settle down to a breakfast in Karnataka with a Konkani family.

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Steaming 'undi' rice balls flavoured with ginger, curry leaf, chilli and coconut appear. They have a delicious sweetness as well. Is it local molasses? This addition of a sweet ingredient in savoury or spicy dishes is popular from Gujarat to Kerala. There are other commonalities. The simple broths made with lentils, the humble dishes using local bananas, rice and vegetables.

Here, in what was once Canara, a region of the Konkani, sour Ambat and fiery Prawn Gassi find common ground with the hot and sour Ambotik shark curry and the spicy Portuguese influenced pork vindaloo of Goa. Rice is a staple. It is powdered, ground to a paste, steamed, fried or cooked as is. The neer dosas, the idlis, the sannas, all rice preparations, grace most Konkani tables in their various avatars. Fruits like bananas, jackfruits, cashew nut, mango and sour kokum flavour dishes in numerous ways. Mangoes are eaten raw in water pickles, ripe as dessert and sun dried when raw as a souring ingredient. With a limited range of spices such as turmeric, asafoetida, cumin, mustard, fenugreek, chilli and pepper a wondrous array of Konkani cuisine has evolved over the years.

Local ingredients are abundant due to the landscape that permit agriculture during the torrential rains that lash the coast in the monsoon and the fertile earth that makes it easy to grow crops. On my trail of the tongue for language and food, I discovered a rare natural phenomenon. Along the entire Konkani coast, near the ocean and on islands in the Arabian Sea, there are natural spring wells with fresh water. While in Arambol, Goa, a fresh water lake almost touches the ocean, the Fort Aguada derives its name from this natural wonder. The hill was called 'mae de agua' (mother of waters). There were, and still are, so many springs on Aguada hill that mariners would anchor at the base of the hill, while barrels of fresh water rolled down into the ships embarking on long journeys across the globe. In Sindhudurg, Maharashtra, the stunning fort covers an entire island. Thirteen families live on the 23 acre island surrounded by a raging ocean. But within are three fresh water springs. It is the presence of these springs all along the Konkani coast that makes for easy cultivation of vegetables such as pumpkins, drumstick, ladies finger, tendlis, cucumber, tomatoes, eggplants and ridged gourds which have different names in different coastal areas.

There is in Goa, an unusual astringent spice called teflam or toefam that flavours the curries of oily fish like sardines and mackerel. Non-Goans ask about teflam. They must have this spice that grows wild on the hills. But they possibly have another name for it. And this is something remarkable about Konkani as a language. Because of the various influences, words appear in the language across the coast that seem alien to Konkani neighbouring areas. Goan Konkani is peppered with Portuguese. For the most part, the items of daily life that the Portuguese introduced to Goans, stayed in the original language. Spoon and table became localised to culer and mez (from colher and mesa). Similarly, traders who touched the coast introduced Arabic and Persian words such as dukan (shop), karz (debt), fakt (only), dushman (enemy) and barik (thin). The most remarkable transformation of the Konkani language is that Konkani

people introduced local words to be understood by non-Konkani speaking people and for commerce. Hence, a Konkani person from far away Alappuzha or Kasargod in Kerala can understand what a Konkani person in Ratnagiri, Maharashtra, is saying but will not understand business terms.

Konkani is often denounced as dialect of Marathi. Nothing can be further from the truth. Konkani, because of the sea trade, has more connections with Gujarati. There are many common words not found in Marathi. But the lo, li, le case terminations in Konkani find resonance with the no, ni, ne of Gujarati. In both languages, the present indicative have no gender. There is a strange connection away from the coast, to the east of India that connects the Konkani language... Bengali. There are theories that suggest that Konkani is a language with Bengali as the mother language. Just as Hindi is from Sanskrit. This connection has found credence due to the migrations of the Gaude Saraswat Brahmins. In Goa, on a journey to see the magnificent Betal statue in Loliem, I met a teacher, Raul Bose, who played a part in the famous Opinion poll in 1967 when Goans were fighting against being joined with Maharashtra. Mr. Bose told me that there were migrations from Bengal since ancient times. European travellers to Goa in the 17th century mention "beautiful Bengali" women in their travelogues. On the highway from Goa to Mangalore, about 23 kilometres before the city approaches, we stop regularly at a restaurant called Pallavi. The local fish, dusted in spices and drizzled with rice floor is deep fried in coconut oil. It is crunchy, spicy and delicious. The prawn gassi curry is to die for and the lacy rice, neer dosas light as air. They also make a Konkani dish: Vadde. It is a small deep fried fritter that can be made with potato, grated vegetables or seafood. Here it is made with local clams. When I speak to the owner and ask to pay my bill, he chatters away in Konkani but presents the bill in Kannada script. Another fact about Konkani sinks in. As it is a prakrit (spoken) language without a script of its own, the melody of Konkani is written in Devnagari, Roman, Kannada, Malayalam, Persian and Arabic script. How many living languages in Asia can claim to be written in six completely different scripts?

It would take the tiny state of Goa and its Konkani-proud people to make Konkani one of the official languages in India in 1986. A language that once trailed the length of the Konkan coast has found its space in many places dotting the Western coastline of the country. But in Goa it has found its official home!

This is Wendell Rodricks' essay in TRAVELLING IN, TRAVELLING OUT, edited by Namita Ghokale

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