

Konkani Language and Scripts – A Historical Linguistic Overview

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ABSTRACT

The Konkani language, spoken along the western coast of India, embodies a unique linguistic and cultural heritage marked by its multiplicity of scripts and regional variations. Despite being constitutionally recognized, the language continues to face deep divisions over script usage—principally between the Devanagari, Roman and Kannada proponents. This paper offers a comprehensive historical-linguistic overview of Konkani's evolution, tracing its origins from the Maharashtri Prākṛit and its development through successive socio-political and cultural interactions. It highlights how the language's script diversity mirrors the pluralism of its speakers, while also revealing the identity politics underlying script-based movements, particularly after the Official Language Act of Goa (1987). Through a critical analysis of archival records, missionary texts and linguistic evidence, the study challenges the antiquity-based argument for a single "natural" script and emphasizes that any language can adapt multiple scripts to represent its phonemic inventory. Examining examples from Kannada inscriptions, Roman missionary orthography and modern Devanagari representations, the paper highlights the script plurality that has historically enriched Konkani rather than weakened it. Drawing from comparative models like Serbian digraphia, it proposes a digraphic or even trigraphic framework for Konkani, aligning with global linguistic inclusivity and technological adaptability. The study concludes that Konkani's vitality depends not on enforcing script uniformity but on embracing its inherent multiplicity. Recognizing script diversity as a strength rather than a threat could transform Konkani into a model for multilingual coexistence in the globalized era.

Keywords: Konkani Language, Linguistic History, Digraphia, Devanagari Script, Roman Script, Kannada Script, Language Identity, Script Politics, Multilingualism, Globalization, Indo-Aryan Linguistics.

Introduction

The Konkani-speaking community along India's western coast shares not only a common language but also a long history of disputes surrounding it. In recent times, fresh tensions have emerged as groups advocating for the Roman-script Konkani and those supporting Marathi in Goa have pressed for amendments to the Official Language Act of Goa (1987), while in Karnataka, demands have risen for official recognition of Konkani written in the Kannada script for educational purposes. Each faction has sought to justify its claims through various media outlets—newspapers, television debates, social media posts and online discussions. Unfortunately, these exchanges often descend into emotional rhetoric, with Roman-script supporters being told to "go to Portugal" and Marathi advocates to "go to Maharashtra," leaving little room for informed linguistic or historical dialogue. The lack of a serious academic engagement with the issue remains a significant gap in this ongoing discourse (Pinto *Herald* 6). In the

Konkani world, scripts and dialects having caste and religious overtones, as pointed out by Narayan Desai in his thesis *The Politics of Script – The Case of Konkani 1961–1992* (2002) and Rochelle Pinto's *Translation, Script and Orality* (2007) have much to reveal (Desai; Pinto). Jason Fernandes' *Citizenship in a Caste Polity* further elucidates the politics of scripts with regard to the Goan identity (Fernandes). It is interesting to note that none of the academicians in Goa or elsewhere in India have expressed their scholarly view on this matter. Has the Konkani case been understood and can there be a possible solution? A humble attempt is made here to study the Konkani case from a historical viewpoint and then offer possible solutions from a linguistic viewpoint.

Konkani Origins

Konkani, like other Middle Indo-Aryan languages, is part of the broader Indo-European language family having its origin in the various Prākṛits that were spoken in the northern part of the Indian sub-continent. The claim that Prākṛits were the spoken form and Sanskrit was the literary form, which means both existed simultaneously, with the former being patronized by the ruling dynasties after the restriction of the Sanskrit language to religion and liturgy, is a general view held by modern scholars. Various hypotheses like the origin of Sanskrit outside India with the discovery of the first Sanskrit inscriptions at Damascus in modern Syria and another related view that Sanskrit is the origin of all world languages is equally propagated with their own viewpoints (Deshpande, *Sanskrit and Prakrit*). In India, the para-Munda substratum of the Austro-Asiatic branch being the first layer of Indian languages, followed by the Dravidian layer and finally the Indo-Aryan layer with the addition of the Tibeto-Burmese family of languages has been linguistically and archaeologically proved (Witzel). The mutual exchange between these languages as well as phonological ruptures leading to dialects and variants is also well argued and proved in linguistic circles.

Konkani's origin in Maharāshtri Prākṛit, the form of Prākṛit that was spoken in the modern-day Maharashtra or later Apabhramsa is proposed by prominent linguist scholars like S. M. Katre, Jose Pereira, the lexicographer Sripad Desai and P. B. Janardhan (Katre 170–183; Pereira, *Konkani: A Language* 111–122). Interestingly, this aspect of the circa 8th-century origin of the Konkani language is rarely debated about. What leads to the controversy is the script. Proponents of the official script, viz. the Devanagari-alone camp, argue their viewpoint from the antiquity argument. For them, the oldest is the natural, and the natural must be the legal and official. Consequently, the Konkani language and the official script issue is a closed chapter for them (Pinto *Herald* 6).

Languages and Scripts

From a linguistic perspective any language can be written in any script. Either a script is created or a script from another language is adopted to equally represent the sounds of a particular language. Hence to terms something as a "natural script" would mean that it should have the capacity to represent the specific sounds which the adoptee language has (Fromkin et al 539-549). Hence, Devanagari for Sanskrit or the modern Kannada script for Kannada is their natural script for each of those languages. Interestingly, a global language like English and Hindi, a language known to majority Indians, lacks a natural script. Even a classical language like Tamil does not have all the characters in its script to represent all Tamil sounds. Hence modifications or diacritical marks and even conventions are used to write those languages. The official languages of Delhi are Hindi, Urdu, and Punjabi written in Devanagari, Nastaliq (Perso-Arabic) and Gurmukhi respectively, along with English. Linguistically, it is one language written in three scripts. In German universities, like Heidelberg University, Sanskrit is taught using IAST (International Alphabet of Sanskrit Transliteration). Hence, what one needs to learn here is the script and the association of the script with the sounds of the target language.

In the Indian context, with Buddha and Mahavira using Pāli and Ardhamagadhi respectively for the propagation of their religious systems, along with Sanskrit, a new feature of Sanskrit–Prākṛit admixture was seen in the development of modern Indo-Aryan languages and to some extent even in the Dravidian languages. To cite an example of Kannada, Jains in Karnataka promoted Kannada literature under the Rashtrakutas, Chalukyas and Kadambaras before the Yadavas of Devagiri. With the Vakataka dynasty, the influence of Sanskrit–Prākṛit admixture faded in favour of a highly Sanskritized form of Kannada (Narasimacharya 108-136). Loanwords from different languages are a feature of every language.

Konkani's First Script

Konkani people being subjects of the Kannada kings had naturally learnt the Kannada script and used it to write Konkani, at least among the literates. The same was used for the Marathi language as well, along with the Devanagari and Modi scripts (Ghantkar v-xiv). The Kannada inscriptions at Sangali dating around the 11th century show the use of Kannada script for Marathi, while the Aksi inscription at Raigad in Maharashtra in the 10th century shows the use of Devanagari script for Marathi. It is equally important to note that, as pointed out by the famous epigraphist Eugen Hultsch, the Shravanabelagola stone inscription of the 12th century is a Marathi inscription in the former state of Mysore (present-day Karnataka). Its presence in the Kannada-speaking region shows the prestigious position that Marathi held even outside its homeland. Moreover, the words *karaviyalē* (causative verb form of “to do”) and *suttalē* (the surrounding wall) have an entry in Shankar Gopal Tulupule's *A Dictionary of Old Marathi*, where he makes an entry in his lexical work as well as his other monumental literary work – *Yadavakālin Marathi* as Old Marathi lines (Tulupule 761). Accordingly, the Shravanabelagola Nagari or Nanda-nagari inscription which is claimed to be Konkani has been dismissed by various scholars (Pereira, *Konkani Mandakini* 10). Hence to say it is the first Konkani inscription would be technically incorrect.

Further, considering the historical fact that Chavundaraya, who was a Jain king of the Western Ganga dynasty, and Shravanabelagola, which was then and even now a Jain pilgrimage centre, during whose reign both the statue and the inscription (c. 10th century) made their presence, it is most unlikely that there would have been a substantial Konkani population at that time in that part of Karnataka. The claim that foreign missionaries gave Konkani its first written literature needs further verification. Some form of Konkani literature in the Kannada/Kandavi script might have existed. The pre-sixteenth-century *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* would have been in that script (Naik, *Mahabharata Adiparva* vi).

Konkani and Kannada Script

Archival records in Goa reveal that Konkani subjects under the Kannada rulers not only adopted the Kannada script but also had their own version of Kannada to write Konkani, which is the *Gōykanadi lipi* or the Goan-Canarese script. The foreign missionaries knew Konkani and Marathi to be distinct languages along with their scripts. Their letters to their superiors in Rome reveal that they were also keen to get their compositions published in the local scripts – *lettera terra* (Eliasson 169-170). With the Yadavas of Devagiri, who were of Kannada origin but later patronized Marathi as the official language of their administration, both the Marathi language and it being written in the Kannada script made their presence in the Konkani. Along with this Kannada loans made an entry into the Konkani language (Miranda, “Kannada Influence on Old Konkani Lexicon” 81–95). One language being written in two scripts at the same time is not something new in the Indian sub-continent. There are numerous examples, both in the past as well as in the present.

The morphological analysis of *Flos Sanctorum*, where shows the retention of schwa, the only missionary manuscript found in Goa in the Old Kannada script, reveals a lot more. Bi-syllabic and tri-syllabic words from *Flos Sanctorum* when compared with the handwritten glossary produced by Fr. Diogo Ribeiro of the Jesuit society reveal the retention of schwa, which is not found in modern-day Marathi, northern Konkani dialects and the Kanara Christian dialect (Rodrigues, “Uniformity of the Vocabulary and Phonology” 18–24). Hence, words like *tākli*, *āstā*, *distā* were written as *tākālī*, *āsātā*, *disātā*, a feature still prevalent among the present Salcete dialect of Goa and to some extent in the GSB dialects of Kanara and Kerala. The *comunidade* assembly minutes are entirely in the Old Kannada script, and the signatures of the *Gaonkars* are either in Roman script (of Catholics after conversion) or Kannada script during the Portuguese regime. The first Goan to be knighted in Lisbon in 1538 has his signature in the Kannada script (Ghantkar x). Till date no Konkani manuscripts, either in Devanagari or any other script, which would have escaped the alleged burning of indigenous literature by the Portuguese, are found in the New Conquest areas (Pinto *Herald* 6).

The Kannada script here is used as an umbrella term for the variant forms of the Kannada script – known as Modi (not to be confused with Marathi-Modi), *Gōykanadi*, *Hale-kannada* and *Kandavi*. It is due to this reason that the wrong nomenclature of Konkani being called “*lingua canarim*,” and to the extent of the Konkani grammar book being called *Arte da Lingoa Canarim* by Fr. Thomas Stephens, dominated the missionary world in Goa, who interestingly called Marathi as “Marhastri” (Stephens *Kristapurann*). The same script continued to be used by Goans from the Old Conquest areas who migrated to coastal Karnataka for trade, better job opportunities, entry into the armies of neighbouring kings, availability of agricultural land, famines, wars, epidemics, etc. The claim that migrations from Goa

to Kanara were due to the Inquisition and religious persecution has been questioned by archival information, which reveals that most cases under the tribunal came from the northern province of the Estado da Índia – the present Mumbai–Vasai region (Machado 294-300; Mendonça, “The Alvará that Deposed the Local Language” 41–61).

Konkani and Devanagari Script

The earliest confirmed record of the use of Devanagari script for Konkani is the testimonial given by the three Konkani pandits Appa Bhat, Ranga Bhat and Vinayaka Pandit from Cochin in the *Hortus Malabaricus* composed between 1669 to 1676 ACE. The allegiance of these *vaidyas* with the Dutch colonial power, like their Goan counterparts with the Portuguese, and as enlisted in Goa’s celebrated archivist Dr. Panduranga Pissurlekar’s *Agentes da diplomacia Portuguesa na Índia* also reveal the famed position and alliance which these members of the elite community, along with their Catholic elite counterparts have had with the foreign colonial power (Bhave 13-21). Hence to have their certification and their preferred script on this testimonial is not a surprise. Interestingly, the first complete Konkani book printed in the Devanagari script was the New Testament Konkani Bible by the Protestant Missionary William Carrey in 1818. This is in the North Kanara GSB dialect of Konkani (Pinto *Herald* 6). Could Fr. Maffei, an Italian Catholic Jesuit working in Mangalore be referring to this work and drawing his conclusions on Konkani being written in Devanagari/Balbodh script? In the modern period Shenoi Goembab, who against the background of the *eki*-movement of uniting all Saraswat sub-castes could be credited to promote Konkani in the Devanagari script. His lashing against Goans who considered Marathi as their mother tongue is equally justifiable. Prior to him, Monsignor Dalgado’s effort, to represent Konkani in the Devanagari script along with the Jonesian system of Romanization may also be considered (Pinto 13-40, Almeida 158-176). However, neither present day Roman nor Devanagari users follow his method.

Konkani and Roman Script

Konkani in the Roman script came to be used due to Christian missionaries who wanted to learn the language to propagate their Roman-Latin version of Christianity, commonly known as Catholicism. Since the first century, and especially since the 4th century, there are traces of Apostolic Christianity in the Indian sub-continent, which used Aramaic-Syriac as their liturgical language. The missionary orthography was highly scientific. Jesuit texts such as Thomas Stephens’ *Doutrina Christam* (1622) and Miguel de Almeida’s *Vonvallyancho Mollo* (1658) exemplify this system (Priolkar; Almeida). Thanks to them, scholars can now study Old Konkani literature. In the modern period, Shenoi Goembab, Dr. Eduardo de Bruno, and Monsignor Dalgado made efforts to represent Konkani sounds accurately using symbols or diacritical marks. The first nine books of Shenoi Goembab in the Roman script also serve as a good model of Romanization, different from what is used by the Church today in Goa (Almeida, 158-176). Being an international script, Roman orthography has the potential to unite Konkani speakers all over the globe, at least at the literary level.

At the first Konkani convention held in Karwar in 1939, keeping the diverse scripts of Konkani the Devanagari script was proposed as the official script for education and later for administration. The same is reflected in the choice for the script for Konkani under the Sahitya Academy in 1975 and the OLA-87. It is worth noting here that no one has challenged the suitability of the Devanagari script for Konkani, despite its orthographic imperfections. What the non-Nagari users accuse the Devanagari lobby is that they have diverted all the government benefits and awards for themselves. In the same vein, Devanagari proponents have worked towards getting the administrative and educational corpus translated into Konkani, with Konkani being taught in Goa, Karnataka and Kerala in this script and the state administration in Goa slowly moving towards Konkani. The Devanagari script choice by the elite Catholic clergy of Goa, despite their inability to read or write in that script is also an important point to be considered in the Konkani script row (Pinto *Herald* 6).

Colonization or Globalization?

Human civilization having its origin in Africa with almost forty thousand years of history and the whole human family having genetic links with one another dismisses any argument that one race is a foreign race and the other is a local one (Tony Joseph). To argue that all that is said or done are colonial vestiges would not be right, since today in a globalized world the whole human civilization has become a global village. The railways, the judiciary, the parliamentary form of government, the banking system, and so many other things came to India from the West. In the same breath, oriental spirituality, spices, food, attire and the like have made their presence in the West.

Right from dressing to the use of gadgets, food to migration for jobs overseas reveal that all have mutually benefited from globalization, without discarding its side effects. The appellation of the Roman script as the vestiges of the colonizers is therefore, redundant today in such a globalized world. One could also argue that both Konkani and the Roman script are genetically of the Indo-European stock. Hence rather than colonization, it is globalization today, resonating with the Indian ethos of *vasudhaiva kutumbakam*, which calls all to “think globally, act locally” (Pinto *Herald* 6).

An Academic Proposal

Keeping the diverse history of Konkani, a digraphic (even trigraphic) model for the promotion of Konkani can be considered. The Hindi-Urdu model of preserving the Hindustani language with its caste and religious repercussions finally led to a rift among both communities and even separate nations (Rahman 302-399). However, both languages continue to flourish due to their substantial population. Multi-script is seen in many languages of India, but they finally agreed on one script since most of the people are in the home state. Konkani, with a population of around 20 lakhs spread in four different states, with just half its population in its home state, will have to consider another model. It should also be noted here that not even one lakh of the Konkani population are into literary Konkani and depend on other languages in their daily lives. For the past 88 years (1939–2024), this one-script model has not been beneficial for Konkani; on the contrary, it has created antagonism between various groups (Almeida 159-163).

At the global level, such a diglossic (one language, multiple varieties) and digraphic (one language, multiple scripts) situation existed when the Serbians carved a nation for themselves. Orthodox Christians who predominantly used the Cyrillic script and Serbian Catholics who predominantly used the Latin script found themselves in a dilemma. The Serbian government accorded an official status to both. This helped to bridge the gap between both communities. Both scripts are taught in school. Government administration employs both scripts. Today, this digraphic approach has become part of Serbian identity (Isailović & Krstić 185-195).

Considering the historicity of Konkani, the present-day Roman, Devanagari, and Kannada users can learn a lot from this model. This would mean a scientific way of writing all the three scripts, so that shifting from one script to another can be technically done using software like *Konkanverter* or even an app. In a country like India, which has diverse languages, dialects, scripts and so many other varieties, the Konkani language and the Konkani people can set a precedent not just for India, but for the whole world. The Karwar convention of 1939 was a national vision for Konkani. Another convention with a global vision where all stakeholders of Konkani are equal partners is still awaited (Pinto *Herald* 6).

Conclusion

The history of Konkani reveals a paradox: a language with deep historical roots and literary traditions, yet continually fractured by script politics. From its Prākṛit origins through its rendition in Kannada, Devanagari and Roman scripts, Konkani has never been bound to a single writing system. Attempts to enforce one-script policies, particularly privileging Devanagari, have not resolved these tensions but have instead deepened divisions. A broader perspective, one that embraces the coexistence of multiple scripts, offers a more sustainable solution. Ultimately, the script debates surrounding Konkani are less about linguistic necessity than about identity, power and recognition. Acknowledging this reality enables scholars, policymakers and communities to move beyond polemics towards inclusive strategies of preservation. Konkani’s survival depends not on narrowing its forms but on embracing its plurality. If the community can reimagine diversity as strength, then Konkani will live long.

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