

BOOK REVIEW

Citizenship in a Caste Polity: Religion, Identity and Belonging in Goa Jason Keith Fernandes (*Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2020*)

Jason Keith Fernandes' meticulously researched and well-written monograph *Citizenship in a Caste Polity* is a study of the "citizenship experience of the Goan Catholics" (15). Building on a fine-grained and historically informed understanding of this experience, the book seeks to make three major interventions in current debates on the politics of citizenship in modern India. First, it documents the foundational role of caste in India's citizenship experience; second, it persuasively establishes the importance of viewing contemporary India from spaces outside of what was British India; third, it offers an original theoretical perspective on citizenship by working with and expanding Partha Chatterjee's writings on this theme. The fact that Fernandes largely succeeds in making these interventions means this book is recommended reading for scholars across disciplines working on the politics of citizenship in South Asia.

The empirical focus of the book is the fate of the Konkani language in the state of Goa. More specifically, Fernandes takes his point of departure from the political conflicts that ensued after Konkani was declared the official state language in 1987. The fact that Konkani was recognised only in the Devanagari script and not in the Roman script in which it is also written was the source of the conflict which flared up in the first decade of the new millennium. By unpacking this conflict, Fernandes brings to light the intimate connections between script, language, caste, class and citizenship in contemporary India. His inquiry takes him back in time to trace the historical processes through which Konkani emerged as a marker of Goan identity and the cultural basis of citizenship. The book convincingly shows how this historical process culminates in the intertwining of the Antruzi dialect of this language, the Nagari script and the figure of the Hindu Saraswat Brahmin, who thereby emerges as the embodiment of the ideal Goan citizen. The Saraswat Brahmins today dominate Goa's social, economic and cultural world (92), and have also successfully established themselves as a locally dominant caste of "business Brahmins" elsewhere along the Konkan coast (Tambis-Lyche 2011).

The introduction presents the aim and agenda of the book and outlines its structure. Chapter 1 lays out Fernandes' framework for studying citizenship in India. It is a *tour de force* review of a large and diverse literature on citizenship that is skilfully synthesised. The starting point is that citizenship is not a status but a practice. Any useful anthropological study of citizenship must therefore move beyond the juridico-political domain and mere "formal declarations of citizenship" (31), instead proceeding from an inquiry into the actual practices, or "acts of citizenship," in and through which people and groups seek to create a room for manoeuvre within the social field. Chatterjee's concept of political society is then mobilised to guide the analysis of such practices. In making this move, Fernandes joins a growing body of anthropological work on popular politics in India that has found it analytically productive to work *with* (rather than *within* or *against*) Chatterjee's conceptual bifurcation of the political that *Citizenship in a Caste Polity* similarly critiques (see Nielsen 2018; Nilsen 2018). In "repairing" the concept of political society, Fernandes insists that the political cannot be bifurcated in any neat manner; that the boundaries between "political" and "civil" society are much more fluid; and that political society is itself internally stratified or scaled (55).

Chapter 2 traces the historical transformations in the status of the Konkani language. Over the course of a century, Konkani went from being the language of the subaltern Goan Catholic underclass, to being “intimately linked to the fashioning of the self-image of the largely upper-caste Goan elite” (101) – both Catholic and Hindu. This confluence of the politics of fashioning the self around language among both Catholic and Hindu Brahmins propelled a Sanskritised Antruzi Konkani in the Nagari script to the status of “the singular marker of Goan identity” (87), a “locus around which a Goan political identity was framed” (67) – at the expense not only of subaltern Goan Catholic communities, but also of subaltern Goan Hindu communities who claimed Maratha. Chapter 3 traces this process further into the post-colonial era to show how “the Goan Hindu in general, but the Hindu Saraswat Brahmin in particular” (143) came to embody the ideal Konkani person. Although they were not Hindus, Catholic Brahmins could, by virtue of the caste status they shared with Hindu Brahmins, aspire at least partially to embody this ideal, however deficiently. This path was, however, effectively closed to subaltern Catholic communities who were neither Hindu nor Brahmin, and who ended up at the bottom of the hierarchy. Both historical chapters are rich in detail and, in combination, offer an extremely valuable *longue durée* account of the intimate connection between caste, language, script and citizenship.

Chapter 4 focuses on the language conflict of the 1980s and the different activist strategies deployed by those promoting and opposing official recognition of the Roman script. Again, the battle lines are drawn clearly along historically conditioned lines of caste: “The Brahmin and Brahmanised castes on one side, that of Nagari; and the anti-Brahmin groups, on the other, that of the Roman script” (244). This is also the chapter where the conceptual pair of civil and political society is put to work the most, with insightful results. Chapter 5 draws emotions into the debate on citizenship. More specifically, Fernandes describes how the emotions of shame and guilt are constitutive of the citizenship experience of Goan Catholics who constantly fall short of completely embodying “the ideal image of the citizen-subject” (263) to which they must aspire. The conclusion draws out the wider theoretical implications of the book’s approach to citizenship. Fernandes argues, among other things, that we should move away from the binary dichotomy between elites and subalterns, and instead see subalternity as “a relative condition” with subalterns positioned in “chains or webs of subalternity” (309). This is easy to agree with as it echoes the original Gramscian view of subalternity as always relational.


The book’s theoretical ambitions and historical depth combine to make this a captivating read. Nonetheless, a few minor criticisms are in order. While Fernandes’ engagement with Chatterjee’s writings – particularly in Chapters 1 and 4 – is both compelling and analytically productive, the recourse to spatial metaphors – which inevitably seems to accompany discussions about civil and political society – makes one wonder whether these terms can ever truly capture the fluidity and complexity that characterise what we may call “the political.” As much as he insists on repairing Chatterjee’s foundational dichotomy, Fernandes too (at least in places) speaks of political society as “a ghetto” (46), and of civil society as “a closed enclave” (71), or a space to be “entered” (241). This remains a language of compartmentalisation, boundaries and relatively demarcated political spaces, and not a language of transgression and scales. Empirically, an anthropologist would have liked to see the author make more use of his primary ethnographic data. The book is rich in its historical account and makes good use of newspaper archives to analyse the language politics of the 1980s. But much of the contemporary ethnography involving real people doing real things with other people in real time is presented in somewhat more anecdotal form, or zooms in closely on the experience of individuals. What is largely missing from the book are substantial ethnographic accounts of the ways in which the politics of language plays out in

everyday social life and shapes everyday social relationships between people. More attention to these everyday, socially embedded dimensions could have established an interesting bridge between organised language/script activism and the ways in which the politics of language constitutes the stuff of everyday life. A short coda on the fate of the language/script conflict would also have been welcome. Language as a field of popular contestation seems to have recently been eclipsed by struggles over nature, in so far as most popular movements in Goa today are focused on land grabbing and environmental destruction (see Da Silva, Nielsen, and Bedi 2020; Oskarsson et al. 2021). These struggles tend to foreground Goa's lands, forests, rivers and natural beauty as key markers of Goan identity. Does this mean that language and script are no longer instrumental in defining hegemonic identities and conflict lines? Or, can these new conflicts over land and nature be read as a rearticulation, in a changed context, of some of the historically constituted connections between caste, class and power that earlier played out in the domain of language?

Anthropologists work in small places, but on large issues. *Citizenship in a Caste Polity* demonstrates with bravura how fruitful it can be to engage what is arguably the most burning issue in contemporary India, namely the question of citizenship, from the country's smallest state. By looking at contemporary India from Goa's peculiar historical location between the epistemological frames of Portuguese India and British India, Fernandes is able to build a wider critique of citizenship in India. What we have in India, he concludes, is not so much a realisation of a democratic regime of citizenship, but merely the rhetorical articulation of it. What exists is rather a legally sanctioned modern caste polity, accompanied by the attendant practices of shaming and claims of humiliation (314–315). The fact that the “caste polity” mentioned in the title thus refers as much to India as it does to Goa should ensure the book the wide readership it deserves.

References

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