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# Reconstructing Konkani Migration: Literary Memory, Historical Evidence and the Politics of the Past

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# Abstract

This paper critically examines the recurrent migration narrative of Konkani communities from Goa to the Kanara coast through a comparative reading of seven Konkani or Konkani people-related novels: Uday Bhembre's *Vhoddlem Ghor*; V. J. P. Saldanha's *Saiba Bhogos* and *Devache Kurpen*; Mahabaleshwar Sail's *Yugasamvar*; Kasturi Mohan Pai's *For the Love of Mandovi* and *Mahaprasthan*; and the Kannada novel *Swapnasaraswata*. Though differing in language and literary context, these works largely reproduce a popular oral narrative structured around colonization, conversion, destruction and consequent migration. The paper argues that this literary memory is historically selective, foregrounding Goud Saraswat Brahmins (GSBs) and the Catholic elite—*Bamons* and*Chardos*—while marginalizing other Konkani-speaking communities that also migrated from Goa.

The study employs the Historical-Critical Method, juxtaposing textual readings of the novels with archival evidence and historiographical scholarship. It places these narratives alongside Anant Kakba Priolkar's *The Goa Inquisition: The Terrible Tribunal for the East* (1961), written against the political background of the movement for Goa's merger with Maharashtra, and later modern scholarship by Alan Machado Prabhu, Dale Luis Menezes, Panduranga Pissurlencar, Angela Barreto and others, which reveals the complexity of Konkani migration to coastal Karnataka.

Archival evidence further challenges the novels' linear narrative of displacement by examining the role of local elites and their collaboration with Portuguese structures. The paper questions whether migration can be explained simply through persecution and flight and argues that the term "historical novel" becomes problematic when literary memory is treated as historical fact, rather than as a selective reconstruction of the past.


# 1. Introduction

The migration of Konkani-speaking communities from Goa to the Kanara coast remains one of the most persistent as well as disputed narratives in Konkani collective memory. It is commonly represented as a consequence of Portuguese colonization, religious conversion, persecution, destruction and subsequent migration (Kudva, 50–51, Priolkar 113, 121). This narrative has survived through oral traditions, family histories, religious memory, historical writing and literature. The present paper critically examines this migration narrative through a comparative reading of seven novels in Konkani, Kannada and English. These include V. J. P. Saldanha's two celebrated novels *Devache Kurpen* (1993) and *Saiba Bhogos* (1997) in the Kannada script; Mahabaleshwar Sail's Konkani novel *Yugasamvar* (2004) in the Devanagari script; Kasturi Mohan Pai's English novel *For the Love of Mandovi* (2011) and his recent Konkani novel *Mahaprasthan* (2022) in the Devanagari script; Gopal Krishna Pai's acclaimed Kannada novel *Swapnasaraswata* (2009) and Uday Bhembre's Konkani novel *Vhoddlem Ghor* (2021) in the Devanagari script. Although these works differ in language, genre and literary context, they broadly reproduce a narrative connecting colonization, conversion, destruction, displacement and survival.

These literary representations are important sources of historical memory, but they cannot automatically be treated as documentary history. When compared with archival evidence and historiographical scholarship, they reveal a more complex relationship between religion, politics, commerce, social position, colonial authority and migration (Patil 177–204, Conlon, *Caste by Association* 354–357). The paper, therefore, examines not only what these novels remember, but also what they omit, emphasize or reinterpret.

## 2. Methodology: The Historical-Critical Method

This study employs the Historical-Critical Method to examine the relationship between literary representation and historical evidence. The method critically examines texts in relation to their historical origins, contemporary sources, literary forms and processes of transmission and interpretation (Law 1–24). Applied to this study, the method operates at three interconnected levels. First, the novels are examined as literary texts, with attention to narrative patterns, recurring themes, representations of migration and the construction of historical memory. Second, historical claims implicit in these narratives are compared with documentary and archival evidence concerning Portuguese rule, religious policies, commerce, political relationships and migration, corresponding particularly to the comparative concerns of source criticism (Law 113–39). Third, the evidence is considered alongside interpretations offered by historians and other scholars.

The method does not seek simply to prove or disprove the novels but distinguishes historical processes from their subsequent literary representations in the novels. Historical-critical analysis examines how texts are shaped through processes of composition, transmission and interpretation (Law 181–215), while also considering how historical traditions are formed and represented through literary texts (Law 140–80). Given the breadth of the corpus, comprising seven historical novels, detailed summaries of individual works are not provided. Instead, the analysis identifies recurring historical themes concerning migration, conversion, displacement, and communal memory, with particular attention to the historical claims and interpretations embedded within this body of historical fiction.

## 3. Literary Memory and the Migration Narrative

# 3.1 Migration as Collective Memory

Migration narratives are not merely accounts of geographical movement. They explain origins, preserve collective identity and provide communities with an understanding of why their ancestors left one place and settled in another. In the Konkani people's context, Goa occupies a central position in the historical memory of Goud Saraswat Brahmins (GSBs), Konkani Catholics and other Konkani-speaking communities of Kanara, as well as Maharashtra and Keralam (Machado, *Sarasvati's Children* 99–233). The novels in this study present migration as a major break or change in history. Portuguese colonialism frequently appears as the major disruptive force, while conversion, persecution and destruction become immediate explanations for displacement.

Migration, consequently, becomes more than a physical movement from one place to another. It becomes a narrative of cultural, religious and social survival. The homeland is remembered not merely as a geographical place but also through emotional and symbolic attachments (Sail 6–7). In this context, Goa becomes the remembered place of origin, while Kanara emerges as the space in which displaced communities reconstruct their institutions, religious practices, social networks, and most importantly, their sense of identity. This process of reconstruction is reflected in Dr. Kasturi Mohan Pai's English novel *For the Love of Mandovi*, which portrays the experiences and memories associated with migration (K. Pai 2–3). Such literary representations demonstrate how migration can become a foundational element of collective memory.

## 3.2 Literature as an Archive of Memory

Literature preserves experiences that may not always survive in formal archives. Family memories, oral traditions, religious experiences, perceptions of injustice and memories of homeland can all be incorporated into literary narratives. The significance of the novels lies not only in whether every event described can be historically verified, but also in what they reveal about the ways Konkani communities remember their past (K. Pai 282–286).

Literature can function as an archive of memory, even when it cannot be treated as an archive of historical fact. As GopalKrishna Pai explains in his interview at the end of *Swapnasaraswata*, a historical novel can preserve the emotional and cultural dimensions of migration while selectively presenting communities, events and historical explanations. Literary narratives may preserve how communities remember and interpret the past, even when their representations do not correspond fully to documentary evidence. Consequently, literary memory should be read critically alongside documentary sources, rather than being either accepted as historical fact or dismissed entirely (G. Pai 471–91).

# 4. Selective Memory and Community Representation

## 4.1 The Problem of Representativeness

A significant problem in the dominant migration narrative is its emphasis on particular communities. The literary memory examined here frequently foregrounds Goud Saraswat Brahmins and sections of the Catholic elite particularly *Bamons* and *Chardos*, as in Saldanha's novels, while giving comparatively less attention to other Konkani-speaking communities (D'Souza 52, 64). This raises an important question: whose migration is being remembered when the history of "Konkani migration" is narrated?

Konkani-speaking society historically comprised diverse communities with distinct religious traditions, social positions, occupations and political relationships. However, apart from the communities discussed above, several subaltern communities of the Konkan coast, including the *Kunbis*, *Velips*, *Dhangars*, *Ghuravs*, *Renders*, *Gavdis*, *Bhandaris*, *Kharvis*, *Gabits*, *Vanis*, and other occupational and caste groups, remain largely absent in these novels. Likewise, Brahmin communities distinct from the Saraswats, including the *Chitpavans (Konkanasthas)*, *Karhades*, *Daivajnas (Daivadnyas)* and

*Kudaldeshkar/Aadya Gauds* (Machado 251–53; Parobo 113–66) receive little or no representation in the novels examined. This absence is significant because it highlights the selective nature of literary representation and suggests that the experiences preserved in these novels do not encompass the full diversity of Konkani-speaking society. While literary memory can preserve important aspects of a community's past, it cannot automatically be equated with the complete historical experience of the wider Konkani-speaking population.

## 4.2 Memory, Selection and Forgetting

As seen above collective memory is necessarily selective. Some experiences become foundational narratives while others remain marginal. Consequently, the history remembered by a particular community may not represent the entire historical experience of a linguistic population. The issue is not to reject the memories of GSBs or Catholic communities but to place them within a wider history of Konkani-speaking populations.

A more inclusive reconstruction must look into which communities migrated, which remained, how different groups experienced political and religious changes and how their movements differed. Such an approach also makes it possible to recognize that different groups could have experienced the same historical period in substantially different ways (Parobo 221–224).

# 5. Colonialism, Conversion and its Relationship

## 5.1 The Conventional Narrative

The conventional explanation presents a simple sequence. Portuguese rule led to conversion and persecution. Persecution forced people to leave (Priolkar 50–113). This resulted in migration to the Kanara coast and other regions. The Historical-Critical Method requires this sequence to be tested against documentary evidence rather than accepted as a complete explanation.

The Portuguese conquered Goa in 1510, while large-scale conversions took place particularly between 1545 and 1560. Yet the chronology and geographical evidence complicate the assumption that subsequent migration can be explained exclusively as flight from religious persecution. Other factors, including economic opportunity, political relationships, trade, employment and social mobility, also require consideration (Machado, *Goa's Inquisition* 294–300).

## 5.2 Portuguese Presence beyond Goa

Portuguese presence was not limited to Goa. It also extended to important commercial centres such as Mangaluru and Kochi. The Portuguese maintained a presence in the port of Mangaluru from 1520 to 1583 and established a factory at Bolar. Their presence in Kochi lasted from 1503 to 1663 (Kamath 215–19). These ports were part of wider Portuguese commercial networks. Konkani communities could have moved through these networks in search of employment, trade, and other opportunities.

A commonly transmitted Konkani narrative holds that Portuguese expansion and religious conversions forced communities to migrate southward, carrying their deities with them. However, the available evidence suggests that migration was more complex. Sanjay Subrahmanyam notes that about 80 percent of Portuguese tax collectors were Goan Brahmins or Saraswats, known as *rendas* (242–43). Saraswat trading families, including that of Govind Pai, Pandya, Kini and Nayaka, held important positions in regional commerce. They were involved in collecting revenue from commodities such as pepper, cotton, silk goods, minerals, and gold. Pearson also notes that members of Saraswat families sometimes served as guarantors within these administrative networks. The employment of Kochi Saraswats under the Dutch in botanical and commercial activities further shows their occupational mobility (101). These examples suggest that migration cannot be explained only through religious persecution. Political, economic, commercial, and occupational networks also played an important role in the movement of Konkani-speaking communities.

## 5.3 Evidence and Interpretation

Documentary evidence requires a distinction between what can be demonstrated historically and what subsequently became part of communal memory. The Historical-Critical Method does not dismiss the latter. Instead, it asks how such memory developed and whether its causal explanations are supported by documentary evidence. This distinction is especially important when literary narratives present several historical developments as a single chain of cause and effect. Conversion, persecution or religious restrictions, economic change, political instability, and migration may have been interconnected, but their relationship could differ across communities and periods. Literary memory, therefore, provides evidence of remembered experience, while archival material allows the historical claims within that memory to be critically examined (Law 140–80, 181–215).

# 6. Archival Evidence and the Complexity of Migration

## 6.1 Local Elites and Colonial Structures

Archival evidence indicates substantial participation of Brahmin merchants and elites from Goa in Portuguese commercial and administrative structures. Sanjay Subrahmanyam documents the significant presence of Saraswat tax collectors within Portuguese networks, while Michael Pearson examines the involvement of local groups in commercial and revenue administration. Pandurang Pissurlencar's *Agentes da Diplomacia Portuguesa na India (Hindus, Muçulmanos, Judeus e Parses)* records numerous Saraswats who occupied influential positions. Names such as Krishna Shenai (1540–46), Ramji Shenai Kothari (1661, 1663), Keshav Naik, Keshav Prabhu (1665), Vithoji Shenai Bhendo (1667), Baboolya Shenai Sukhtankar (1739), Vithoji Shenai Dhumo, Bagan Kamti Vag (1740–46), Narayan Prabhu Rao Desai (1739–40) and Mahabali Pai Ghonto (1740) appear in the records (Pissurlencar). Alan Machado gives a more elaborate list of local elites were Portuguese collaborators. They assisted the Portuguese both, in commerce and administration (Machado, *1501: The Taking of Goa* 51–80).

The documented provision of rented houses in the Inquisition Palace to Saraswat merchants further demonstrates their presence within colonial structures. Conversely, opposition to Portuguese rule among local Christians contributed to the Pinto Revolt of 1787 (Machado *Goa's Inquisition* 96–97). Such evidence complicates a binary interpretation of Portuguese authorities solely as persecutors and Konkani communities as uniformly persecuted subjects. Further, Goan Christians also participated in the military and naval establishment of the Marathas. They were recruited into Maratha military service, while the Goan Portuguese artisans Rui (Roe) Leitao Viegas and his brother Fernao Leitao Viegas assisted Shivaji in constructing his first twenty armed ships, contributing to the development of his naval force (Pissurlencar, *Portuguese-Mahratta Relations* 36). Colonial experiences varied according to social position, occupation and circumstance. These divergent experiences require examination within their broader political, economic and institutional contexts.

## 6.2 Religion and Politics

Religion and politics should therefore be examined together. As discussed earlier, Goan Brahmins held important positions within Portuguese networks, while local Christians also sought positions within the Church based on their former castes and even revolted against foreigners. Christian migrants to Kanara experienced persecution under Tipu Sultan had earlier experienced a safe haven under the Keladi Nayaka kings and other local rulers (Machado *Sarasvati's Children* 259–262, 274–284). These examples suggest that religious identity alone cannot explain political behaviour.

Political alliances did not always follow religious boundaries. Machado notes that the king of Sonda sought refuge with the Portuguese in Goa rather than with the neighbouring Maratha powers, although the Portuguese were Christian and the Marathas were predominantly Hindu (Machado, *Sarasvati's Children* 270). Similarly, Khem Sawant, the Bhonsales and the Ranes of Sattari at different times maintained relations with or supported the Portuguese against Maratha interests (Parobo 132). These alliances were influenced by changing political and territorial interests. Sawant territories were eventually incorporated into the Portuguese *Estado da Índia*, Goa between 1764 and 1788. Economic interests, caste structures, political relationships, and local circumstances shaped interactions between communities and colonial authorities. The history of the Konkani people cannot consequently be reduced to a simple Christian-Hindu conflict.

## 6.3 Migration as a Multidimensional Process

Migration was a multidimensional process, and its causes varied across communities and historical periods. Economic opportunities were an important factor, particularly for communities involved in trade, agriculture and other occupations. Commercial networks encouraged people to move to places where employment, trade and business opportunities were available. Political changes and new alliances also influenced patterns of movement, as communities sought security, patronage or better opportunities under different rulers. Famine, floods, wars and other forms of environmental and political instability could further encourage migration. Access to fertile land and better agricultural conditions also attracted communities to new regions. In some cases, the policies and protection offered by neighbouring rulers

created favourable conditions for settlement and encouraged people to move (Machado, *Sarasvati's Children* 262–76). Migration should be understood as a complex historical process shaped by multiple and interconnected circumstances.

## 7. The Historical Novel and the Problem of Historical Fact

# 7.1 Historical Fiction and Historical Memory

The novels examined here occupy an intermediate space between history and literary imagination. They draw upon historical settings, communities, events and collective memories while employing literary techniques to construct coherent narratives (Bhembre 9–16). Consequently, a historical novel may preserve and transmit communal memory without providing documentary evidence for every event or causal relationship it depicts (K. Pai 284 – 85).

Furthermore, many temples in Mangaluru and Kochi are dedicated to Venkataramana, whereas Gomes notes the absence of a Venkataramana temple in Goa during the relevant period (Gomes, *Hindu Temples and Deities*). This also asks for a deeper study on the flight of deities (Conlon, *A Caste in a Changing World* 26). The restrictions associated with the Inquisition also raise questions concerning mobility. If newly converted Christians were restricted from leaving their villages, the mechanisms through which Christian communities subsequently appeared in Karnataka require further historical investigation (Machado, *Goa's Inquisition* 300). These questions demonstrate the need to read literary memory alongside documentary evidence rather than treating as definitive in isolation.

# 7.2 When Literary Memory Becomes Historical Fact

The principal methodological danger occurs when literary representations are treated as straightforward historical records. The issue is not whether the novels are simply "true" or "false." Their significance lies also in what they reveal about the ways Konkani communities have remembered migration, persecution, homeland, religion and identity.

A literary narrative may combine events from different periods, give greater attention to particular communities, or establish causal relationships that are difficult to demonstrate through archival evidence. Historical criticism therefore requires researchers to distinguish between a historical event and its later literary representation. This distinction allows literature to be used productively without treating collective memory as documentary proof. Much of the connection between Konkani migration narratives and the Goan Inquisition draws on Priolkar's account of the Inquisition (Machado *Goa's Inquisition* 16–18). His interpretation, however, must also be examined critically in light of his views on Konkani and its relationship with Marathi. Therefore, the migration narratives based on his account should be compared with other historical and documentary sources rather than accepted as a complete account of the causes of migration.

## 8. Towards a More Inclusive History of Konkani Migration

## 8.1 Beyond a Single Narrative

A critical reconstruction of Konkani migration must move beyond a single community-centred explanation. This does not require abandoning memories of persecution, conversion, destruction, or displacement. Rather, these memories need to be situated within a broader historical framework that recognizes multiple communities and multiple causes. The aim should not be to substitute one simplified narrative for another. Instead, the evidence should be examined in a manner that allows different experiences of colonialism, religion, commerce, and migration to remain visible.

## 8.2 Recovering Diverse Experiences

Future research should examine the different communities that migrated, the chronology of their movements, their reasons for migration, and the networks through which they travelled. It should also examine those who remained in Goa and those who adapted to changing political, economic, and religious circumstances. Particular attention should be given to subaltern communities that remain underrepresented in literary narratives. Their inclusion would broaden the history of Konkani migration beyond the experiences most frequently represented in existing literary memory. The motivations and circumstances surrounding conversion also need to be examined from the perspective of the converts themselves, particularly in cases involving widows seeking to escape the threat of sati, orphaned children placed under Christian care, individuals responding to social stigma and exclusion, and women whose circumstances were altered through marriage with Portuguese soldiers and other colonial intermediaries (D'Costa 59–61, 136–40). Such evidence suggests that conversion cannot be understood solely through the framework of coercion or religious proselytization, but must also be examined in relation to the social, economic, political, and personal circumstances that shaped the choices available to individuals and communities.

## 8.3 Integrating Literary and Historical Evidence

The novels provide valuable evidence for understanding literary memory, while archival sources provide a means of testing historical claims. Oral traditions can preserve experiences that are absent from written records, while historiography can place those experiences within broader political and economic structures. Bringing these sources together allows researchers to identify both the persistence of community memory and the complexity of the historical processes behind it. Literature and archives should therefore be treated as complementary but distinct forms of evidence. The former reveals remembered experience; the latter provides documentary material through which historical claims can be examined.

# 9. Conclusion

Konkani migration from Goa to the Kanara coast cannot be adequately explained through a single narrative of persecution and flight. The literary works examined in this study preserve important memories of colonization, conversion, destruction, and displacement, contributing significantly to the

understanding of Konkani historical consciousness. However, documentary evidence reveals a more complex historical context. Portuguese political and commercial networks extended beyond Goa, while Brahmin merchants and other local elites participated in Portuguese administrative and commercial structures. Migration was also shaped by economic opportunities, political relationships, caste, occupation, environmental conditions, and access to land. Religious identity did not always determine political allegiance, as shown by alliances that crossed religious boundaries. The Historical-Critical Method provides a framework for examining these complexities by distinguishing documentary evidence from later literary reconstruction without dismissing collective memory. A fuller history of Konkani migration must bring literary sources, oral traditions, archival records and historiography into dialogue. Such an approach also requires a critical examination of dominant caste narratives, including claims of victimhood and the historical alliances these groups formed with colonial powers. Migration, therefore, emerges not as a single, linear movement but as a multidimensional process shaped by religion, politics, commerce, caste, mobility, memory, and identity.

## Declarations

**Ethics Declaration:** I confirm that the research was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines and standards prescribed by my university. The required ethical considerations regarding participation and conduct of the research have been duly followed as per the St. Aloysius Deemed to be University Ethics Approval Committee of the School of Languages and Cultural Studies.

**Author Information:** The required author information, including our names, city, country, institutional affiliation and email address, has already been provided in the manuscript.

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**Consent to Participate:** Both the authors, Jason Pinto SDB and Dr. Alwyn D'Sa hereby declare our consent of having participated in this research work.

# Author Contribution

J.P wrote the draft manuscript. A.D updated the draft. After that J.P. and A.D. together made the analysis of the novels. The draft was further revised. A.D did the final touches.

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