

A Room of Our Own?

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For decades, the creative process in Goa has been stymied by the lack of a market, of production facilities, of free speech (for a significant part of the 20th century), and even a shortage of role models. Goa needs to create rooms of its own to spur on the creative process. Are events like the Goa Arts and Literary Festival a step towards this?

Ruskin Bond recently commented on a paradox from today's India: all over the country, bookshops are closing down. And all over lit fests are springing up. There's another paradox here too: everyone claims to be doing so much for the written word, but so little is actually happening. Few people notice a new book when it's published, and books still struggle to find a decent audience.

In recent years, even tiny Goa has had its fair share of lit fests. Last year there were two. We've had the Goa Arts and Literary Festival (GALF) annually for the past five years. This year, the children's lit fest, Bookaroo also came to Goa only last weekend. While interestingly organised, the audiences were poor.

These festivals are in addition to the more traditional literary festivals, focussed on either Konkani (usually Devanagari) or Marathi, and known as sahitya sammelans, or something similar. Many sahitya sammelans might have done little to promote books and writing, but they did take quite a few political stands. Some stands against English education emerged here, before becoming part of State policy, now thankfully abandoned, but after Goa paid a heavy price.

The new form of lit fests are just more glamorous, better funded, and pull in participants (usually communicating with each other in English) not only from distant pockets of the country, but even from abroad.

In a place like Goa specially, events which offer space to the written word in English do need space. For too long, this language has received step-motherly treatment here.

Actually, Goa doesn't even have a direct colonial connect with English. Yet, the language plays a critical role in education, news dissemination, idea generation, creative expression and more.

While the 'regional' languages (or 'mother tongues') have garnered support and incentives not that this has really helped their growth – the language that the largest part of Goa uses to communicate has been treated as a step-child.

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There are no State awards for writers in English here. Despite its widespread use, it is still seen as 'foreign' and somehow not worthy of support; never mind that India is today the second largest producer worldwide of English books, and this language helps us communicate across boundaries.

The official website of the Directorate of Art and Culture has sections -- written, ironically enough, in English --- focusing on the 'Konkani Literature of Goa' and the 'Marathi Literature from Goa: An overview'. Browsing here, you might believe that no cultural expression happens in English. It is time even the Vishnu Wagh-headed Kala Academy begins recognising contributions made in the English language too.

In such a context, having a lit fest that focusses on English (but has space to talk with, and listen to, other languages too) could have been a blessing. But is this really the case? Participants in the event often have good things to say about the GALF. What we see depends on where we stand.

One count last year said India had sixty or so literary festivals, an average of over one each week. Global events like the Edinburgh Festival, the arts and cultural summer festival in the Scottish capital -- serve as the role for the bigger lit fests in India. These, in turn, act as the templates for the smaller ones, as Indrajit Hazra wrote for aljazeera.com.

Way back in 2010, the then Director and Chief Executive of The International Centre, Goa, Nandini Sahai, suggested a literary festival in Goa. Getting a crowd for events discussing serious issues can be tough in Goa; and this was the experience of the GALF too.

Like most serious events in Goa, initially the struggle was to get a decent crowd to attend. Over the years, that has improved, but three concerns still remain.

Sponsorships, including official ones, have helped in some way. It is not clear how much gets spent on the events, because the International Centre Goa claims it is not covered by the Right to Information Act.

But, three big challenges face events like the GALF: avoiding artificial hierarchies in classifying literature; becoming less top-down and arbitrary in its functioning; and creating a more participative approach.

For decades, the creative process in Goa has been stymied by the lack of a market, of production facilities, of free speech (for a significant part of the 20th century), and even a shortage of role models. It was not much different from what Virginia Woolf describes, in quite another context, in *A Room of One's Own*.

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Goa needs to create rooms of its own to spur on the creative process. But, now, just when writers from here have an enhanced chance of getting heard, we could be building new hierarchies. Local work needs to be validated by the tastes of someone in New Delhi or New York, before it can be deemed as significant and having value for Goa. This is a deeply disturbing idea, even if it is implemented subconsciously.

There seems to be little consultation happening to source out potential participants. In the case of national and international participants, one can go by what is said about them, or reputations built in other literary festivals. How does one choose participation from Goa when we are still to understand the field of who's doing what?

These issues are quite apart from questions over whether the money on such events is well spent, or invested. Or, about the criteria by which writers get selected for such event. It's not that such questions have not been raised.

Beyond this discussion, a look at Goa's wider reality reveals the abysmal lack of steps that could genuinely promote creativity in Goa. We have built a 'library cess' fund worth crores of rupees, levied oddly enough on alcohol sales, and spent as much to build a few showpiece buildings. Besides a couple of excellent libraries (at Panjim and Navelim), the library movement is more or less dead in Goa.

Books exhibitions tend to be so poorly organised here, that just a handful of people show up. This is even the case when so much government money is spent.

This, to my mind, is the harsh reality.