

## Multilingual Singapore: Language Policies and Linguistic Realities

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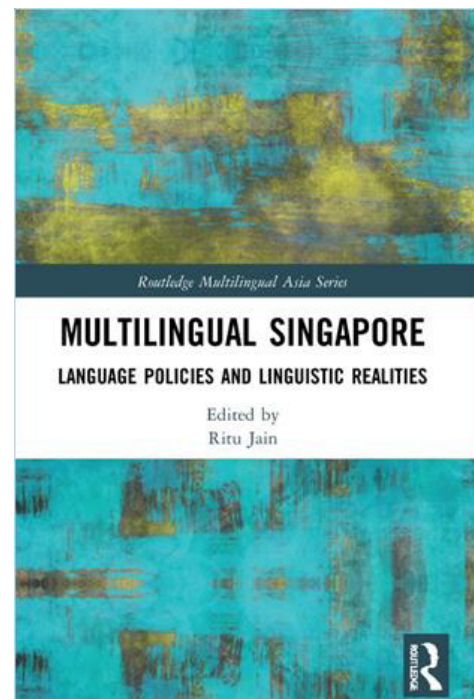
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## review

### Introduction

Singapore, a nation of 5.7 million people, is a spectacular rainbow of linguistic, ethno-ideological, and socio-cultural diversities. In 1994, I was a personal guest of India's High Commissioner. Singapore's airport, architecturally and functionally, looked impressive. Rather than waiting for hours for immigration clearance, I was whisked away by an official of the Indian High Commission. The chauffeur of a daunting Mercedes, a gentleman of Tamil origin, also served as a courteous tourist guide as he drove off through many iconic spots.



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I was thrilled to see the regulated, clean, and non-anarchic order of things in a modern Platonic city-state. Cultural diversity is well represented by the sweet smells and sights of in-and-outdoor restaurants on the fabulous waterfront. The heat and humidity did not bother me a bit. I had lived all my younger life in Aligarh, Agra, and Lucknow which had prepared me for any odds in life, let alone high humidity in Southeast Asia. The colorful Dixieland, in the US, is no less humid. This narrative brings me close to what Ritu Jain, with other co-authors, has studiously analyzed in thirteen well-organized chapters of this fascinating book. Language management, as she calls

it, is one the major themes that analyzes the homogeneity of three main languages within a wider heterogeneous whole. Officially, three main ethnic groups Chinese (74%), Malays (13%), and Indians (9%) are affiliated with their mother tongues, Mandarin, Malay and Tamil. Language policy and management seek to strengthen social heterogeneity with emphasis on different historical, linguistic, and cultural identities.

Of the 13 chapters, 2 are authored by Ritu Jain, sociolinguist currently working on Indian languages. Empirical, theoretical, and critical emphases are applied by all contributors while analyzing the history and cultural identities that unify diverse experiences. A brief narrative will unfold all the dimensions of that Dr Jain has sought to anthologize. Her introductory chapter defines the contours of language policies, its challenges, and responses. Lionel Wee deals with fetishization of official languages (Chapter 2). Next, Kingsley Bolton and Werner Botha both discuss Language mixing, English, and vernacular speech. Chapter 4 is about spoken Tamil in Singapore. Again, Ritu Jain comes back to many mother tongues that Indians speak in Singapore. In Chapter 6, Pillai and Rubdy illustrate the changing nature of Malayalam. Other Austronesian languages spoken in Singapore are discussed in Chapter 7 by Geoffrey Benjamin. "Baba Malay" is Anne Pakir's subject (Chapter 8). In chapter 9, Mukhlis and Wee highlight challenges of two different pronunciations for the Malay language and identity in Singapore. Chapters 10 and 11 discussion the languages of the Chinese communities. In the former, Ng and Cavallaro discuss the challenges faced by Mandarin as the official language of the Chinese community while Hock Huan and Lim hypothesise on the future of what are known as 'dialects' of the Chinese. The last two chapters, 12 and 13, take into account multilingualism and its liquidity in Singapore. A careful review of these well-written papers, studded with Figures (3.1 to 12.3) and Tables (3.1 to 11.8), attest to Singapore's dynamism and dexterity in societal multilingualism. From Sinitic to Austronesian to "Singlish" and many other vernaculars illustrate "alternate language ideologies."

Linguistic identities despite commonality of faith and religion may outweigh the traditional determinants of national character. Separation of East Bengal, as independent Bangladesh, from the Muslim Pakistan, is one of the most recent examples in world affairs. However, the balkanization of India in 1947, cannot be attributed solely to linguistic pluralism. Language, however, remains a foundational element in the structural unity of a nation. When I moved to the United States in 1975, the first attribute of this vast, pluralist country seemed to be a common

language, English, that most Americans spoke. Ethnic minorities continue to be marginalized and the need for bilingual policies in states like California seem to grow stronger. Global hegemony of the British Empire also weaponized English to rule and exploit distant colonies. India is an English-speaking country. The colonial rulers did not Anglicized Indians to liberate and modernize. New Delhi became a satellite of London and Macaulay's cunning insight worked so well that a huge English-speaking soon became "Jewel of the Crown." Singapore's history and evolutionary emergence as a strong and homogeneous state and its basic heterogeneous character remain unchanged.

The significant takeaways from the history and politics of linguistic chauvinism, imperialism, and subjugation are reflective of Singapore's uncanny brilliance as a sovereign nation balancing ethnic divergence and convergence in a complex world confounded by territorial-sectarian conflicts. Urdu, the national language of Pakistan, is distinctly spoken in Aligarh, Agra, and Lucknow where I grew up and went to schools. Alas, India's partition could not be averted as the Great Game Theory had other nefarious motives. The nation builders of Singapore have deconstructed the linguistic politics to the advantage of its citizens. Ritu Jain's book reflects facts and fissures that have been welded into a cement harmonizing different strands as a model of 'unity in diversity.' I highly recommend this book to all students, scholars, administrators, and policy makers who may want to learn from civility in politics, order in chaos, and vision amidst darkness.

### Biography

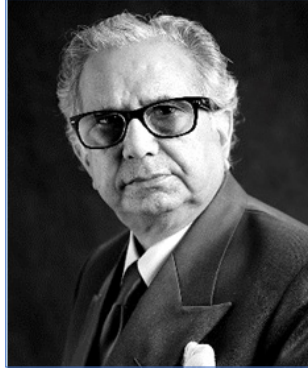
Ritu Jain is Lecturer at the Language and Communication Centre at Nanyang Technological University. Her research interests lie in the areas of language policy and planning, and language and identity. In her work, she has examined the role of language education policy in the maintenance and promotion of minority and heritage languages, and the implications this has for language maintenance and shift. She is currently exploring the interplay of language and identity among the Indian language communities of Singapore.



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## About the Reviewer

**Brij Mohan** Dean Emeritus & Professor of Social Work, Louisiana State University, USA, is an internationally renowned Scholar with expertise in social philosophy, social welfare, public policy and international social development.



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He is the author of 24 books and over 400 articles, papers, and reviews.

His most recent books include: *Development, Poverty of Culture and Social Policy* (Palgrave, 2011), *Climate,*

*Economy and Justice* (Palgrave, 2015), *The Future of Social Work* (Sage, 2018) and *Social Policy on the Cusp* (Nova, 2020). Mahatma Gandhi Kashi Vidyapith honored him with a Doctor of Letters (*honoris causa*) and the National Association of Professional Social Workers in India awarded him the *Life-Time Achievement Award*.

Currently, he is working on two new books, including his memoirs.

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