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## BOOK REVIEW

**Abbi, A. & Vatsyayan, K. (Eds.). (2022). *Linguistic Diversity in South and Southeast Asia*. Primus Books, Hardbound, pages 372, ISBN 9789391144180, Rs. 1495.**

*Reviewed by Ayesha Kidwai*

### **Imagining Language Revitalisation as Linguistic Diversity Erodes**

The essays in this well-produced volume of *Linguistic Diversity in South and Southeast Asia* bring together perspectives from Sri Lanka, Maldives, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal, Myanmar, Singapore, Vietnam, Thailand, Cambodia, Indonesia, and India on two important counts: One, the book comprehensively chronicles the vulnerabilities of minority languages in the few last surviving zones of linguistic diversity in the Global South, and two, it presents the contributors' recommendations about what is to be done for the preservation of linguistic diversity in these states in the years to come. This latter aspect distinguishes this extremely informative collection, which can be also seen as a commemorative volume to Dr. Kapila Vatsyayan, a towering personality in the study and documentation of the field of Indian culture, education and the arts, who unfortunately passed away before the book went to press. In this short review, I focus on both these strengths of the book, citing essays by author names rather than by title for the sake of brevity.

In their introductory chapter to the volume, Abbi and Vatsyayan lay out the deleterious effects of the current trend of 'single language domination' fostered by globalisation which has led to an emergency situation in the Asian region generally, which was a place that 'never felt the threat of losing their languages and the knowledge contained in them till very recent times'. Globalisation and discrimination between languages have created a situation of 'linguistic apartheid', in which the 'strict adherence to a dominant language as the medium of education', and in particular the use of English as the only medium, has created 'a big divide in society' and the marginalisation of children of the dominated languages, robbing them of claims to creativity in thinking and originality. Making

an impassioned plea to the political, judicial and education system to recognised the rupture caused by the modern focus on education and knowledge as exclusively residing in the written tradition, the editors locate the selected essays in the current volume as fleshing out the range of issues that are at stake in multilingual South and South East Asia, what the nature of struggles against linguistic apartheid are, and how such battles must be fought to create a world in which both diversity and inclusion become foundational principles.

What are the causes of language endangerment and how is it to be reversed? Various essays address this question and accord different emphases to them, but the whole set of answers is important for our understanding of the damage the process does and its reversal. The essays in this book recapitulate and exemplify oft-mentioned causes, but also flesh them out in novel detail, focusing on causes like:

**Lack of a script:** The lack of a script is a serious impediment preventing the use of such languages in the education system and the creation of cultural literary artefacts, e.g., literature, mass media, etc. Special attention is paid to this aspect by the essays on North Pakistan (Torwali), Nepal (Uprety), Bangladesh (Ali), and Thailand (Premisrat), but in all the essays, the importance of scripts as a form of empowerment that allows the dissemination of unwritten languages is a strong current. Most essays also underscore the lack of systematic language documentation as creating a serious hindrance in language maintenance and revitalisation efforts.

**Lack of recognition by the state:** Being unrecognised by constitutional frameworks of national states is another crucial factor that operates in almost all the countries covered in this book. This refusal of the state to 'see' minority languages is an oft-observed fact in all states with language endangerment, as this enforced invisibility has direct consequences to all spheres governed by the state; from law to education to media and culture. In addition, a new dimension of the issue is made apparent by the fact that in states which have actually attempted to alter their foundational blinkered nature, such as Thailand (Premisrat), Nepal (Uprety), and to a lesser extent Bangladesh (Ali) and Vietnam (Thai and Pham), increased possibilities for advocacy for preservation of languages open up. Thus, to halt the shift/endangerment process, the adoption of new and more nuanced state policies on language, including those on

Census enumeration, is a prerequisite. These must include, the essays by Devy and Pattanayak argue, to register the voices of the people who speak in tongues they consider to be distinct and for them to be 'given the dignity and respect they deserve' (Devy). This is all the more necessary in countries like Sri Lanka, whose Constitution is silent about the existence of any minority languages at all, as highlighted in the essay by Rassool.

**Persistence of anti-democratic categories:** A hallmark of the early notions of linguistic diversity that were first formulated by early Constitutions typically pivoted on a mother tongue/other tongue distinction, an idea that is often an inheritance from colonial conceptions of a monolingual identity of speech communities. The essays by Sunatri on the lego-lego performance in Indonesia and Sarkar's ruminations on the oral tradition in the worlds of labour from India place the importance of language plurality and multiplicity in the larger context of democracy, dignity, and peaceful co-existence. The essays by Pattanayak and Devy both reflect on the legacies left by colonial and imperial mythologies about linguistic diversity, which promote social inequalities between languages. In the political sphere, the essay by Sarangi contextualises the reorganisation of states in newly independent India as Jawaharlal Nehru's efforts to create a secular and participative democracy in India in which a balance could be struck between linguistic-cultural plurality and political unity.

**Diverse responses to multilingual language ecologies:** Several essays in the volume show that a more fine-grained conception is required, both at the level of understanding the multilingual language ecology within which languages become endangered and how the community itself participates or resists the process of endangerment. The essays by Mayani and Thai and Pham show that both in Indonesia and Vietnam what the state perceives to be the single language of a single 'ethnic' community is actually known by these communities to be three different ones. The essays on Dravidian tribal languages by Gnanasundaram and Narayanan (Toda) highlight important gender differences within communities with respect to shift, with Narayana establishing a further connection between gender and religion—women in Toda communities are largely excluded by their traditional religion and therefore prefer to convert to Christianity, which in turns triggers language shift. Other essays, such as the ones by Das (Tai-Singhpho) and Dharmadasa (Veddas of Sri Lanka) foreground the importance of understanding language shift

simultaneously at a micro- and macro-level. Das's essay demonstrates that a community's multilingual repertoire is based on immediate socio-geographical contexts, and generational distinctions appear in terms of the choice of lingua franca, given the state's promotion of Hindi as a lingua franca in the region. Dharmadasa's essay on the Veddas highlights the innovations that a scenario of community awareness about language attrition can engender, as the Veddas have evolved a Tamil-based creole with Vedda lexification in order to maintain a distinct identity.

**5. Exclusion from the education system:** Given that most, if not all, endangered languages, are undocumented, their exclusion from the education system, as specifically discussed in the essays by Pattanayak, Hashami, Mishra, and Thin, often ends up locating the school system as the primary zone of language endangerment. Lack of documentation combines with lack of social prestige and official neglect to impose the double burden of marginalisation on these languages, a burden that is made only heavier by the privileging of English in the education system post globalisation. One way to reverse this trend, the essays by Mishra and Mayani argue, is the adoption of multilingual education models in primary schools, by which local/endangered languages are inducted into the education system.

The rich discussion of the causes of language endangerment in this volume presents a compelling case for a multi-pronged approach to the problem. That such a concerted, synchronised effort is possible and yields promising results is shown to us by the in-depth discussion offered in the essay by Premsirat of the Mahidol Model in Thailand, a community-based language revitalisation model which involves the combined efforts of linguists, educationists, activists, social scientists, policymakers, along with the communities themselves. This well-thought-out model provides a basis for further discussion and adaptation in light of the various different language ecologies discussed in this book, and one hopes that this will be one of the spin-offs of this significant volume.

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