Status of Classical Language: An Explainer

(Ministry of Culture)

October 04, 2024

The Union Cabinet, under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, has approved to confer the status of Classical Language to Marathi, Pali, Prakrit, Assamese and Bengali languages. Classical languages are regarded as the custodians of India's ancient and profound cultural legacy, preserving the rich history, literature, and traditions of their respective communities. By conferring this status, the government seeks to honor and protect the linguistic milestones of Bharat's diverse cultural landscape, ensuring that future generations can access and appreciate the deep historical roots of these languages. This move not only reinforces the importance of linguistic diversity but also acknowledges the vital role these languages play in shaping the nation's cultural identity.

1. Why is a language declared as Classical?

The designation of a language as *classical* is intended to recognize its historical significance and its role as a guardian of Bharat's rich cultural and intellectual heritage. These languages have been essential in preserving and transmitting India's ancient knowledge systems, philosophies, and values across generations for thousands of years. By recognizing these languages as classical, the government acknowledges their deep-rooted antiquity, vast literary traditions, and their invaluable contribution to the cultural fabric of the nation. This recognition highlights the significant cultural and linguistic contributions these languages have made to India's heritage. It will not only elevate their stature but will also facilitate efforts toward the promotion, preservation, and further research of these languages, ensuring their continued relevance in the modern world

2. What are the criteria for declaring a language as classical?

In 2004, the Government of India, for the first time, created a new category of languages known as *Classical Languages*. It set the following as criteria for the status of Classical Language:

- High antiquity of its early texts/ recorded history over a thousand years.
- A body of ancient literature/ texts, which is considered a valuable heritage by generation of speakers.
- The literary tradition must be original and not borrowed from another speech community.

This criterion was revised in 2005 and 2024 based on the recommendations of Linguistic Experts Committees (LEC) under Sahitya Akademi to examine the proposed languages for the status of Classical Language.

The criteria were revised in November 2005 as follows, and Sanskrit was declared a Classical Language:

- High antiquity of its early texts/recorded history over a period of 1500-2000 years.
- A body of ancient literature/texts, which is considered a valuable heritage by generations of speakers.
- The literary tradition must be original and not borrowed from another speech community.
- The classical language and literature being distinct from modern, there may also be a discontinuity between the classical language and its later forms or its offshoots.

The criteria were revised in 2024 as follows:
- High antiquity of its early texts/recorded history over a period of 1500- 2000 years.
- A body of ancient literature/texts, which is considered a heritage by generations of speakers.
- Knowledge texts, especially prose texts in addition to poetry, epigraphical and inscriptional evidence.
- The Classical Languages and literature could be distinct from its current form or could be discontinuous with later forms of its offshoots.

The 2024 Linguistic Expert Committee also recommended the following languages to be fulfilling revised criteria to be considered as a Classical Language: Marathi, Pali, Prakrit, Assamese, Bengali

3. How many languages have been declared classical so far?

Six Indian languages namely Sanskrit, Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, Malayalam and Odia were earlier accorded the status of Classical Language. The Union Cabinet chaired by the Prime Minister Narendra Modi has approved to confer the status of Classical Language to Marathi, Pali, Prakrit, Assamese and Bengali languages on October 03, 2024, thus bringing the total number of classical languages to 11.

Language	Date of Recognition	Notification by	Source/Notification Date
Tamil	October 12, 2004	Ministry of Home Affairs	October 12, 2004
Sanskrit	November 25, 2005	Ministry of Home Affairs	November 25, 2005
Telugu	October 31, 2008	Ministry of Culture	October 31, 2008
Kannada	October 31, 2008	Ministry of Culture	October 31, 2008
Malayalam	August 8, 2013	Ministry of Culture	August 8, 2013
Odia	March 1, 2014	Ministry of Culture	March 1, 2014

The Ministry of Home Affairs initially granted the status to Tamil and Sanskrit, and the Ministry of Culture took over the responsibility for further implementations and future recognitions. The Ministry of Culture established the Linguistic Experts Committee (LEC) on November 1, 2004, to assess future proposals for the recognition of classical languages.

4. What steps have been taken to promote classical languages?

The Ministry of Education has taken various steps for advancing Classical Languages. In 2020, three Central Universities were established through an Act of Parliament to promote Sanskrit. The Central Institute of Classical Tamil was created to facilitate translating ancient Tamil texts, promoting research, and offering courses for university students and language scholars. To further enhance the

study and preservation of Classical Languages, the Centres for Excellence for studies in Classical Kannada, Telugu, Malayalam, and Odia were established under the auspices of the Central Institute of Indian Languages in Mysuru. Additionally, several national and international awards have been introduced to recognize and encourage achievements in the field of Classical Languages. Other benefits provided by the Ministry of Education include National Awards for Classical Languages, university chairs, and centers dedicated to promoting Classical Languages.

The details of funds provided for various classical languages for the last ten years are given.

Budget Grant Sanctioned to Classical Languages (Rs. In Lakhs)

Year	Kannada	Telugu	Odia	Malayalam	Tamil
2014-15	100.00	100.00			8.80
2015-16	100.00	100.00			11.89
2016-17	100.00	100.00			5.02
2017-18	100.00	100.00			10.27
2018-19	99.00	100.00			5.46
2019-20	107.00	107.00			9.83
2020-21	108.00	147.00	8.00	8.00	1200
2021-22	106.50	103.00	58.38	63.97	1200
2022-23	171.75	171.75	176.75	186.75	1200
2023-24	154.50	154.50	138.50	112.50	1525

5. What is the impact of a language being declared classical?

The inclusion of languages as Classical Languages will create significant employment opportunities, especially in the academic and research sectors. Additionally, the preservation, documentation, and digitization of ancient texts in these languages will generate jobs in areas such as archiving, translation, publishing, and digital media.

Recognizing the languages as classical encourage scholarly research, preservation, and the revitalization of ancient texts and knowledge systems, which are essential to India's intellectual and cultural identity. Furthermore, it instills a sense of pride and ownership among the speakers of these languages, promoting national integration and aligning with the broader vision of a self-reliant and culturally rooted India.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Union Cabinet's decision to confer Classical Language status to Marathi, Pali, Prakrit, Assamese, and Bengali reflects a deep recognition of the invaluable role these languages have played in shaping India's cultural and intellectual heritage. This step not only acknowledges their historical and literary significance but also underscores the government's commitment to preserving and promoting India's linguistic diversity. The initiative is expected to foster academic and research opportunities, enhance global collaborations, and contribute to the nation's cultural and economic growth. By safeguarding these languages for future generations, the government is reinforcing a broader vision of cultural self-reliance and national integration, in line with the objectives of *Atmanirbhar Bharat* and a culturally rooted India.

References

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