



Research Unit
Press Information Bureau
Government of India

Classical Language Status Awarded to Pali

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Introduction

India is a land of diverse cultures, traditions, and languages, each with a rich reservoir of literature that reflects the nation's vast history. Languages are a significant part of India's cultural heritage and have shaped its historical identity for centuries. One such ancient language is Pali, which has recently been conferred Classical Language status by the Government of India. This recognition highlights Pali's literary importance. Along with Pali, four other languages have also been added to the esteemed list of Classical Languages. This highlights India's commitment to preserving its linguistic heritage.

Historical Background

The term "Pali Bhasha" or "Pali language" is a modern coinage, and its exact origin remains a topic of debate among scholars. Up until the 6th or 7th century, there was no specific language known as Pali. The earliest references to Pali are found in the commentaries of the Buddhist scholar Buddhaghosa. Several theories have emerged regarding the origins of Pali. Max Walleiser (German Indologist) suggested that Pali is derived from "Patal" or "Padali," potentially indicating a connection to the language of Pataliputra. R.C. Childers (British Orientalist and the compiler of the first Pali–English dictionary) believed that Pali was a vernacular spoken by the common people. At the same time, James Alwis (Colonial era legislator from Ceylon) identified it as the language of Magadha, prevalent during the time of Gautama Buddha. Alwis argued that Magadhi was the original name for Pali, and it was used extensively until the time of Emperor Ashoka.

The study of Pali is crucial for reconstructing the history of ancient India, as its literature is rich in materials that offer valuable insights into the past. However, many Pali texts remain hidden in manuscripts that are not easily accessible. Pali continues to be studied in Buddhist countries such as Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, and regions like Chittagong, Japan, Korea, Tibet, China, and Mongolia, where the majority of Buddhists reside.¹

¹ https://ignca.gov.in/Asi_data/9150.pdf

Literary Contributions of the Pali Language

Pali is a rich tapestry woven from various dialects, adopted by Buddhist and Jain sects in ancient India as their sacred languages. Lord Buddha, who lived around 500 B.C., utilized Pali to deliver his sermons, making it a fundamental medium for disseminating his teachings. The entire corpus of Buddhist canonical literature is composed in Pali, most notably the Tipitaka, which translates to "Threefold Basket."

- The first basket, the **Vinaya Pitaka**, outlines the monastic rules for Buddhist monks, providing a framework for ethical conduct and community living.
- The second basket, the **Sutta Pitaka**, is a treasure trove of speeches and dialogues attributed to the Buddha, encapsulating his wisdom and philosophical insights.
- Lastly, the **Abhidhamma Pitaka** delves into various topics related to ethics, psychology, and the theory of knowledge, offering a profound analysis of the mind and reality.

In addition to canonical texts, Pali literature includes the **Jataka Kathas**, which are non-canonical tales narrating the stories of the Buddha's previous lives as the Bodhisattva or future Buddha. These narratives resonate with the common heritage of the Indian masses, reflecting shared moral values and cultural traditions. Together, these literary contributions underscore the significance of Pali as a vital language in preserving and transmitting ancient Indian thought and spirituality.²

Significance of Classical Language Status for Pali

By conferring Classical Language status on Pali, the long-lost language is poised for revival. This recognition will enable the government to develop and implement various plans to promote and conserve Pali. Through these initiatives, efforts can be made to enhance the study of Pali in educational institutions, preserve its rich literary heritage, and encourage research on its historical significance. Ultimately, this will contribute to the revitalisation of Pali, ensuring its continued relevance in modern times and its place within the broader tapestry of India's linguistic diversity.

References

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- <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2061660>

² <https://cctindia.gov.in/resources/literary-arts/>

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