



Research Unit
Press Information Bureau
Government of India

Classical Language Status Granted to Bengali

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Bengali, one of India's most prominent languages, holds a significant place in the cultural and linguistic history of the subcontinent. Bengali has nurtured a rich tradition of poets, authors, and scholars who have shaped not only Bengal's cultural identity but also India's national consciousness. From the earliest translations of Sanskrit epics to the revolutionary writings of the 19th and 20th centuries, Bengali literature has played a pivotal role in mobilizing social, political, and intellectual movements. Union Cabinet chaired by Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi has approved to confer the status of Classical Language to Bengali along with Marathi, Pali, Assamese and Prakrit languages on October 03, 2024. This recognition underscores the profound historical and literary milestones of Bengali while also promoting the preservation of its linguistic heritage for future generations.

Historical Background

Bengali, along with Assamese and Oriya, as well as Magadhi, Maithili, and Bhojpuri, in the south-east zone forms a linguistic group. Its immediate source can be traced back to the Magadhi Prakrit or Eastern Prakrit, brought from Magadh (or Bihar). The language of Gauda-Banga, with other eastern languages, developed through Magadh Apabhramsa. Genetically, Bengali is derived from Indo-Aryan (IA) languages, which belong to the Indic sub-branch of the Indo-Iranian branch of the Indo-European family. The literary documents of Indo-Aryan languages in the Indian Peninsula can be classified into three periods based on their linguistic changes:

1. **Old Indo-Aryan (OIA)** (1500 BC/1200 BC - 600 BC)
2. **Middle Indo-Aryan (MIA)** (600 BC - 1000 AD)
3. **New Indo-Aryan (NIA)** (1000 AD - Present Time)

Bengali belongs to the New Indo-Aryan category, broadly derived from the Middle Indo-Aryan. Documents like the Donha of Tantric Buddhists, Nathists, Saivaites, or Jainas mark the transitional shift from Middle Indo-Aryan to New Indo-Aryan, referred to as Avahattha or Proto New Indo-Aryan. However, the inadequacy of written documents from the immediate pre-Bengali period poses a significant challenge in tracing the gradual changes from Apabhramsa to the historic period of Bengali, which began in the 16th century AD.

After the 16th century, Bengali literature evolved into three distinct phases: Old Bengali (AD 950/1000 - AD 1200/1350), Middle Bengali (AD 1350 - AD 1800), and Modern Bengali (AD 1800 - Present). The Middle Bengali period was further divided into Early Middle Bengali (AD 1350 -

AD 1450/1600) and Late Middle Bengali (AD 1600 - AD 1800).

Literary Significance

Bengal has a long-standing tradition of poets and authors who have significantly influenced the cultural and intellectual landscape of not only the state but also the country. The earliest Bengali literary works can be traced back to the 10th and 12th centuries AD, initiated by extensive translations of great Sanskrit epics. The 16th century marked a turning point with religious reforms led by Chaitanya and the sacred law fostered by Raghunath and Raghunandan. The subsequent centuries witnessed the rise of original compositions, with notable figures such as Mukunda Ram, often referred to as the "Chaucer of Bengal," and later literary masters like Bharat Chandra and Ram Prasad.

The 19th century heralded a golden era for Bengali literature, with influential figures like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar making significant contributions. Newspapers like *Samvad Kaumudi*, *Som Prakash*, and *Bande Mataram* played pivotal roles during the freedom struggle, highlighting the power of the written word in mobilizing the masses. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee pioneered Bengali fiction, while poets like Rabindranath Tagore, Michael Madhusudan Dutta, Sukanta Bhattacharya, and Kaji Nazrul Islam significantly contributed to the literary revolution that fuelled the fight for independence. Slogans like 'Jai Hind' by Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose and 'Vande Mataram' by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay resonated throughout the nation, inspiring generations. Our National Anthem 'Jana Gana Mana', composed by Rabindranath Tagore and our National song 'Vande Mataram' by Bankim Chandra have both emerged out of Bengali poets. Notably, Rabindranath Tagore won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1913, showcasing Bengali literature on a global stage. He also established Shantiniketan, a renowned open arts and literature school that continues to thrive today.

Cabinet Declaration of Classical Language Status for Bengali

The recent decision by the Union Cabinet, led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, to confer Classical Language status on Bengali recognizes the significant cultural and historical contributions of the language to India's heritage. This designation acknowledges Bengali as a custodian of India's ancient cultural legacy, preserving its rich history, literature, and traditions. By granting this status, the government aims to honour the linguistic milestones of India's diverse cultural landscape and facilitate access to the profound historical roots of the Bengali language for future generations. This move reinforces the importance of linguistic diversity. It acknowledges the vital role that Bengali plays in shaping the nation's cultural identity, promoting scholarly research, and revitalizing ancient texts and knowledge systems.

Conclusion

Recognizing Bengali as a Classical Language marks a significant milestone in preserving and promoting India's linguistic heritage. With its deep-rooted history, vibrant literary tradition, and cultural significance, Bengali plays an essential role in reflecting the diverse and rich tapestry of

Indian identity. The government's commitment to promoting Classical Languages honours the past and paves the way for future generations to engage with and appreciate the immense contributions of languages like Bengali. This initiative promises to inspire academic research, foster cultural pride, and enhance national integration, aligning with the broader vision of a self-reliant and culturally rooted India.

References

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