



BACKGROUNDEERS

Press Information Bureau

Government of India

Classical Languages of India

Preserving India's Linguistic Heritage

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Key Takeaways

- The Government of India conferred the 'Classical Language' status to Marathi, Pali, Prakrit, Assamese, and Bengali languages on October 03, 2024
- As of October 2025, a **total of 11 Indian languages** hold the status of Classical Language.
- Six Indian languages —Tamil, Sanskrit, Kannada, Telugu, Malayalam, and Odia—were earlier accorded the status of classical languages between 2004 to 2024.

Introduction

India has a rich, diverse linguistic heritage, with many languages and dialects spoken across the country. The Government of India works for the preservation and promotion of the country's linguistic heritage through various policies, programmes and initiatives. One such means of recognition and promotion is assigning "Classical Language" status to languages with ancient roots, having a rich heritage of literature, philosophy, and culture over thousands of years that shape India's cultural identity. The Indian government grants "Classical Language" status to languages that meet certain specific criteria and provides support for the preservation and promotion of these languages. On October 3, 2024, the Union Cabinet approved adding Marathi, Pali, Prakrit, Assamese, and Bengali to this category, bringing the total of Classical Languages in the country to 11.¹

Classical Languages of India				
Pali 2024	Prakrit 2024	Bengali 2024	Marathi 2024	Assamese 2024
Odia 2014	Malayalam 2013	Kannada 2008	Telugu 2008	Sanskrit 2005
		Tamil 2004		

Why Classical Language Status Matters

Recognising a language as Classical is a way of honouring and acknowledging its historical importance and profound impact on India's cultural and intellectual identity, and in preserving and transmitting ancient knowledge, philosophies, and values over thousands of years. This status not

¹https://www.pmindia.gov.in/en/news_updates/cabinet-approves-conferring-status-of-classical-language-to-marathi-pali-prakrit-assamese-and-bengali-languages/

only enhances their prestige but also supports efforts to protect, promote, and further study these languages, helping to ensure they remain relevant in today's world.

What Makes a Language “Classical”

The Government of India, through the Ministry of Culture and in consultation with linguistic and historical experts, has established criteria for designating a language as a Classical Language².

The criteria for a language to be classified as a Classical Language include the following:

- High antiquity of its early texts or recorded history, spanning a period of 1,500-2,000 years.
- A body of ancient literature or texts that is considered heritage by generations of speakers.
- Knowledge texts, especially prose texts, in addition to poetry, epigraphical and inscriptional evidence.
- The Classical Language and its literature may be distinct from its current form or show discontinuity with later forms derived from the original.

Expanding India's Linguistic Heritage: New Additions in 2024

Six languages - Tamil, Sanskrit, Telugu, Kannada, Malayalam, and Odia—were recognised as Classical Languages between 2004 and 2014. On October 3, 2024, the Union Cabinet approved adding **Marathi, Pali, Prakrit, Assamese, and Bengali** to this category, expanding the recognised Classical Languages to eleven.

Marathi

Marathi is an **Indo-Aryan language** spoken predominantly in **Maharashtra, India**. It boasts a rich literary history spanning more than a thousand years. With approximately **110 million** native speakers, Marathi is **one of the world's top 15 most spoken languages**.³

It traces its roots back more than **2500 years**, originating from languages such as **Prachina Maharatthi, Marahatthi, Maharastri Prakrta**, and **Apabhramsa Marathi**. The language has undergone significant changes but has maintained its continuity through various historical phases.

- Modern Marathi evolved from ancient languages spoken in the region, starting with **Maharastri Prakrta**, a dialect of the Prakrit languages spoken during the **Satavahana era** (2nd century BCE to 2nd century CE).

Contribution of Marathi Literature

- The **Gathasaptasati**, the earliest known Marathi literary work, is around **2000 years old** and highlights the excellence of **early Marathi poetry**.
- It is a collection of poetry attributed to the **Satavahana King Hala**, believed to have been compiled in the **1st century CE**. Following this, **Lilacharitra** and **Jnanesvari** emerged after Marathi reached a mature linguistic stage about **eight centuries ago**.
- Many stone inscriptions, copper plates, manuscripts, and old religious texts (pothis) beautifully show Marathi's rich historical roots.
- The **Naneghata inscription** is an extraordinary artefact that highlights the use of Marathi over 2500 years ago.
- Additionally, Marathi is mentioned in ancient Indian writings, including the **Vinayapitaka, Dipavamsa, and Mahavamsa**, as well as works by renowned authors such as **Kalidasa** and **Vararuci**.
- Marathi's literary heritage includes works by saints such as **Sant Dnyaneshwar, Namdev, and Tukaram**, among many others, whose contributions remain widely revered.

²<https://www.pib.gov.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=103014>

³<https://www.pib.gov.in/FeaturesDeatils.aspx?NoteId=153318&ModuleId%20=%202>

Pali

The study of Pali is essential for reconstructing the history of ancient India, as its literature contains valuable materials that shed light on the past. Many Pali texts are still hidden in manuscripts that are difficult to access. Pali continues to be studied in Buddhist countries such as Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, and regions like Chittagong, as well as in Japan, Korea, Tibet, China, and Mongolia, where most Buddhists live.

- The earliest references to Pali are found in the commentaries of the Buddhist scholar Buddhaghosa.

Literary Contributions of Pali Language

Pali is a rich tapestry woven from various dialects, adopted by Buddhist and Jain sects in ancient India as their sacred language. Lord Buddha, who lived around 500 B.C., used Pali to deliver his sermons, making it a key medium for spreading his teachings. The entire corpus of Buddhist canonical literature is written in Pali, most notably the Tipitaka, which means "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.

Pali literature includes the Jataka Kathas, non-canonical tales of the Buddha's previous lives as the Bodhisattva or future Buddha. These stories connect with Indian common heritage, reflecting shared moral values and traditions. Together, they highlight Pali's role in preserving Indian thought and spirituality.

Prakrit

Prakrit, representing a spectrum of Middle Indo-Aryan languages, is integral to understanding India's rich linguistic and cultural heritage. This ancient language not only serves as a foundation for many modern Indian languages but also encapsulates the diverse traditions and philosophies that have shaped the subcontinent's historical narrative. According to Adi Shankaracharya, "Vachah Prakrit Sanskritau Shrutigiro"- Prakrit and Sanskrit languages are the true vehicles of Indian wisdom.

Contribution of Prakrit Language

The Prakrit is widely acknowledged among linguists and scholars. Acharyas like Panini, Chand, Vararuchi, and Samantbhadra shaped its grammar. Prakrit was used by Mahatma Buddha and Mahavira to deliver sermons, helping them reach the masses. Its influence is seen in regional literature, with dramatic, poetic, and philosophical works contributing to fields such as astrology, mathematics, geology, chemistry, and botany. Prakrit is vital to Indian linguistics and dialects and has a rich legacy. The Rastrabhasha Hindi tradition is developed from Prakrit-Apabhraṃsa. Vedic language also shows significant Prakrit elements, highlighting the importance of studying it to understand India's linguistic evolution. Prakrit inscriptions serve as vital historical records, providing insights into India's past. The inscriptions from the pre-Mauryan period, as well as those from King Ashoka and Kharvel, are primarily written in Prakrit.

- Acharya Bharatmuni, in his seminal work 'Natyashastra,' recognised Prakrit as the language of the majority of Indians, rich in artistic expression and cultural diversity.
- This acknowledgement emphasises Prakrit's accessibility and importance as a mode of communication among the common people.

Languages like Hindi, Bengali, and Marathi trace their development back to Prakrit, highlighting the importance of understanding Prakrit literature for a comprehensive grasp of the origins and evolution of modern languages.

Assamese

The official language of Assam has its roots in Sanskrit, with its development tracing back to as early as the 7th century A.D. Its direct ancestor, however, is the Magadhi Apabhramsa, a dialect closely linked to the Eastern Prakrit. Linguist G.A. Grierson noted that Magadhi was the predominant dialect of the region, while the eastern counterpart, Pracya Apabhramsa, spread south and southeast, ultimately evolving into modern Bengali. As Pracya Apabhramsa expanded eastward, it crossed north of the Ganges and reached the Assam valley, where it transformed into Assamese.⁴ The earliest recorded mention of Assamese can be found in the Katha Gurucharit. The etymology of the term "Axomiya" (Assamese) is subject to diverse interpretations; some scholars link it to geographical features, while others connect it to the Ahom dynasty, which ruled the region for six centuries. The Brahmaputra valley, including North Bengal, is referred to as Pragjyotishpura in the Mahabharata and as Kamrupa in the pillar inscription of Samudragupta from the fourth century A.D. The anglicised term "Assam" originated from "Axom," denoting the Brahmaputra valley, and from this evolved "Assamese," referring to the language spoken in the region. By the eighth century A.D., Assamese was already flourishing as a language. Assamese shares a common linguistic heritage with Oriya and Bengali, all of which descended from the same parent dialect, Magadhi Apabhramsa.

Literary Contributions of Assamese Language

- The earliest example of pre-modern Assamese script is found in the Charyapadas, which are ancient Buddhist Tantric texts composed by Buddhist Siddhacharyas and dates back to times between the 8th and 12th centuries.
- The Charyapadas share a close relationship with Assamese and other Magadhan languages, revealing the evolutionary stages of several Indian languages.
- The vocabulary in the Charyapadas includes words that are distinctly Assamese.
- Additionally, in terms of phonetics and morphology, the vocabulary closely resembles typical Assamese words, many of which have remained in the modern language.

Bengali

Bengali, one of India's most prominent languages, holds a significant place in the cultural and linguistic history of the subcontinent. Bengali has poets, authors, and scholars who have shaped not only Bengal's cultural identity but also India's national consciousness. The earliest works in Bengali can be traced back to the 10th and 12th Century AD⁵. 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 mobilising social, political, and intellectual movements.

- Bengali, along with Assamese and Oriya, as well as Magadhi, Maithili, and Bhojpuri, forms a linguistic group in the south-east zone, along with the languages. Its immediate source can be traced back to the Magadhi Prakrit, also known as Eastern Prakrit, which originated 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.

Literary Contributions of Bengali Language

The earliest extant specimens of ancient Bangla are the 47 spiritual hymns now known as charyapada composed by Buddhist monks. The Charyapada hymns possess both linguistic and literary value. The Siddhacharya, or composers of the Charyapada hymns, include Luipa, Bhusukupa, kahnapa and Savarpa.

⁴ History Of Assamese Literature by Birinchi Kumar Barua <https://www.indianculture.gov.in/rarebooks/linguistic-survey-india-vol-i-0> Page No. 125-126 of Indian Linguistic Survey

⁵ <https://wb.gov.in/our-culture-literature.aspx>

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 marked a golden era for Bengali literature, with influential figures such as 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 mobilising 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.

Steps Undertaken to Promote Classical Languages

The promotion of all Indian languages, including Classical Languages, is done through the Central Institute of Indian Languages (CIIL), part of the Language Bureau of Ministry of Education. In addition to this special centres have been set up for the study and promotion of the classical languages, either independently or under CIIL.

In 2020, three Central Universities were established through an Act of Parliament to promote the study of Sanskrit. These are the Central Sanskrit University and Shri Lal Bahadur Shastri National Sanskrit University in New Delhi, and the National Sanskrit University in Tirupati. In addition to this, financial assistance is provided to Adarsh Sanskrit Mahavidyalayas and Shodha Sansthan.

The Central Institute of Classical Tamil has been established to promote and preserve classical Tamil literature by facilitating the translation of ancient Tamil texts, supporting research, and providing courses for university students and scholars in Classical Tamil.

To further support the study and preservation of classical languages, the Centres for Excellence in Classical Kannada, Telugu, Malayalam, and Odia have also been established under the Central Institute of Indian Languages (CIIL) in Mysuru.

Key Activities and Objectives of the Centres for Classical Languages

- Promote, propagate, and preserve India's Classical Languages and Literatures.
- Research and Documentation.
- Digitizing manuscripts in collaboration with State Museums and Archives.
- Publishing books, research reports, and manuscript catalogues.
- Translating classical texts into Indian and foreign languages.
- Audio-Visual Documentation: Producing documentaries on eminent scholars and classical texts.
- Promoting studies linking classical languages with epigraphy, archaeology, anthropology, numismatics, and ancient history.
- Conducting epistemological studies linking classical heritage with indigenous knowledge systems.

- **The Central Institute of Classical Tamil at Chennai** is doing extensive research relating to the classical phase of Tamil, from the early period to 600 A.D. This includes texts like *Tolkāppiyam*—the most ancient extant Tamil grammar text, forty-one ancient Tamil Texts like *Natṛṇai*, *Puranānūru*, *Kār Nārpatu* and others. The Centre is engaging multidisciplinary scholars to study the antiquity of Tamil, carrying out researches on Dravidian comparative grammar and the study of Tamil dialects, creating Tamil Chairs in world-class Universities, providing Grant-in-Aid for short term research projects to Institutes and researchers, among its many activities.

The Centre is also translating ancient Tamil texts into multiple Indian and foreign languages. Under this project Tirukkuraḷ has been translated into 28 Indian and over 30 world languages and also in Braille. The Centre is publishing the classical Tamil texts into Braille and compiling a classical Tamil thesaurus

- **The Centre of Excellence for Studies in Classical Telugu (CESCT)** has been set up under CIIL and operates from a campus at Venkatachalam, SPSR Nellore (Andhra Pradesh). CESCT has compiled a database containing approximately 10,000 classical epics with detailed information. This includes dramas, temples of Andhra and Telangana, village records etc. All Telugu inscriptions have been edited and compiled into a book titled “Telugu Sasanaalu.” The first Telugu grammar, ‘Andhra Sabda Chintamani,’ and the pioneering prosody work, ‘Kavijanasramam,’ have been translated into English.
- **The Centre of Excellence for Studies in Classical Kannada (CESCK)** has been set up under CIIL and operates on the University of Mysuru campus, Mysuru, with a dedicated library, cultural laboratory, and new conference facilities. The CESCK has initiated various programs like Roadmap Meetings and Dissemination of Classical Kannada through its Training Programmes. The Centre functions in four foundational areas: Research, Teaching, Documentation, and Dissemination. It has published 7 books, and 22 more are ready for release. First musical notations ‘Sankeerthana Lakshanaṃ’ by poet-saint Annamacharya, which was originally written in Sanskrit, translated into Kannada.
- **The Centre of Excellence for Studies in Classical Odia (CESCO)**, has been set up under CIIL and is located at the Eastern Regional Language Centre in Bhubaneswar. The Centre works to promote, propagate, and preserve the heritage of Classical Languages and Literatures, as well as to undertake and encourage research and documentation. It has undertaken projects based on sources of Classical languages like Odia, including analysis of inscriptions, linguistic study of mural paintings, archaeological remains, old palm leaf manuscripts, and compiling references from various ancient texts.
- **The Centre of Excellence for Studies in Classical Malayalam (CESCM)** has been set up under CIIL. It has been established at Thunchath Ezhuthachan Malayalam University, Tirur, Malappuram, Kerala, provided by the state government.

Conclusion

“Virasat Bhi, Vikas Bhi”—this inspiring mantra from Prime Minister of India captures the essence of balancing India’s rich heritage with progressive development. The country’s classical languages—Sanskrit, Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, Malayalam, and Odia—serve as living symbols of this vision, showcasing the intellectual and cultural treasures of our civilisation. Further, the government’s decision to confer Classical Languages status on Marathi, Pali, Prakrit, Assamese, and Bengali also reflects a profound recognition of the invaluable role these languages have played in shaping India’s intellectual heritage. The government’s efforts have enabled institutions, scholars, and young people to connect with our ancient traditions. By safeguarding these languages for future generations, PM Modi 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. Through his dedication, India’s historic voices continue to echo in a modern, confident Bharat.

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