

THE CLASSICAL LANGUAGES OF INDIA: A NEW CHAPTER IN LINGUISTIC HERITAGE – PAPER I



India is a land of immense cultural, linguistic, and historical diversity. Its languages, spanning across millennia, have contributed significantly to the development of human civilization. Among these, certain languages hold a special place due to their antiquity, rich literary tradition, and cultural significance. The Union Cabinet of India recently extended the prestigious “classical language” tag to Marathi, Pali, Prakrit, Assamese, and Bengali, marking a momentous chapter in the recognition of India's linguistic heritage. This development comes nearly two decades after the creation of the classical language status in India, underscoring the importance of linguistic preservation and the broader implications for academia and culture.

In this article, we explore the concept of classical languages in India, the privileges associated with this status, the recently included languages, and their relevance to Indian history. Additionally, we will examine the impact of these new inclusions on India's socio-cultural fabric and educational system.

The Concept of Classical Languages in India

The notion of “classical languages” in India is a relatively recent development. It was first introduced during the tenure of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA-1) government, in response to growing demands from various states to recognize the antiquity and unique cultural contributions of their respective languages. On October 12, 2004, Tamil became the first Indian language to receive the classical status, based on its unparalleled literary heritage and ancient origins.

The Ministry of Culture later established a Linguistic Experts Committee (LEC) under the Sahitya Akademi to evaluate the eligibility of other languages for the classical status. Since then, several languages have been granted this prestigious designation, reflecting their contributions to India’s intellectual, literary, and cultural landscape.

Criteria for Granting Classical Language Status

Over time, the LEC refined the criteria for determining whether a language could be considered classical. The current criteria, as revised on July 25, 2023, include:

1. **High Antiquity:** A classical language must have a long and documented history, with early texts or inscriptions spanning at least 1500-2000 years.
2. **A Rich Literary Heritage:** The language should have a significant body of ancient texts or literature, considered a cultural treasure by generations of speakers.
3. **Epigraphic Evidence:** There must be evidence of the language’s use in ancient inscriptions.
4. **Knowledge Texts:** The existence of prose texts, especially in knowledge disciplines such as philosophy, science, and history, is essential in addition to poetry.
5. **Distinct Evolution:** The language must demonstrate clear distinctions from its later forms or its offshoots, representing a discontinuous evolution.

The inclusion of these factors helps ensure that languages recognized as classical are not only linguistically significant but also integral to the cultural and intellectual development of India.

Privileges of Classical Language Status

Being conferred the status of a classical language is not just a symbolic honor. It comes with tangible privileges that contribute to the preservation, promotion, and study of the language:

1. **Cultural and Academic Promotion:** The Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Culture take active steps to promote classical languages, both nationally and internationally. This includes setting up specialized research centers, universities, and departments dedicated to the study and dissemination of these languages.
2. **Increased Funding for Research:** The government allocates funds for academic research, translation of ancient texts, and the digitization of manuscripts.
3. **Greater Educational Focus:** The National Education Policy (NEP) advocates for the inclusion of classical languages in the school curriculum, allowing future generations to learn about their linguistic and cultural heritage.
4. **International Recognition:** Languages designated as classical receive greater visibility and respect at global academic forums, fostering international collaboration in linguistic studies.

In 2008, the **Central Institute of Classical Tamil** was set up for the promotion of Tamil. Similar institutions have since been established for Kannada, Telugu, Malayalam, and Odia. The newly added classical languages are expected to benefit from similar initiatives.

List of Classical Languages in India

Before the recent inclusions, six languages had already been conferred classical status:

1. **Tamil** (2004)
2. **Sanskrit** (2005)
3. **Telugu** (2008)
4. **Kannada** (2008)
5. **Malayalam** (2013)
6. **Odia** (2014)

On October 5, 2023, the Union Cabinet extended the classical status to five additional languages, bringing the total number to 11:

7. **Marathi**
8. **Bengali**
9. **Assamese**
10. **Prakrit**
11. **Pali**

Recent Inclusions: Marathi, Bengali, Assamese, Prakrit, and Pali

The five newly added classical languages have long histories and deep cultural significance:

1. **Marathi:** Modern Marathi descends from Maharashtri Prakrit, an ancient language spoken in western India during the Satvahana period. The earliest evidence of Maharashtri Prakrit dates back to the 1st century BCE, and early inscriptions in Marathi have been found dating back to the 8th century CE. Marathi has since developed a rich literary tradition and is the dominant language of Maharashtra.
2. **Bengali & Assamese:** Both these languages have their roots in Magadhi Prakrit, the language of the Magadha court in ancient East India. Bengali and Assamese evolved over centuries, with their recognizably modern forms emerging between the 6th and 12th centuries CE. Bengali has a celebrated literary tradition, exemplified by luminaries like Rabindranath Tagore. Assamese also has a rich literary and cultural heritage, with early evidence dating back to the medieval period.
3. **Prakrit:** The term Prakrit refers to a group of vernacular languages used by the masses in contrast to the elite language, Sanskrit. It played a key role in disseminating the teachings of Jainism and Buddhism, as seen in works like the Jain Agamas and the Gatha Saptashati. Prakrit languages remain significant for understanding early Indian literary and religious traditions.
4. **Pali:** Pali, often associated with the Buddhist Canon (Tipitaka), was the language of Theravada Buddhism. It played a pivotal role in transmitting the teachings of the Buddha

and remains an important liturgical language in countries such as Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Thailand.

Significance of These New Inclusions

The inclusion of these languages as classical languages is not just about honoring their ancient roots but about recognizing their ongoing influence on modern culture and society. The recent additions have important implications:

1. **Cultural Recognition:** The inclusion of Marathi, Bengali, Assamese, Prakrit, and Pali reflects the government's recognition of their historical and cultural significance, not only in India but across South Asia and beyond.
2. **Educational Opportunities:** As these languages gain classical status, they will receive increased attention in school curricula, creating new opportunities for students to engage with India's linguistic and cultural heritage.
3. **Global Visibility:** The classical status elevates these languages on the international stage, encouraging further linguistic research and cross-cultural exchange.
4. **Preservation of Heritage:** This status helps ensure that ancient manuscripts and texts in these languages are preserved, digitized, and made accessible to scholars worldwide.

Relevance to Indian History

The languages that have been granted classical status are not only a part of India's linguistic history but also central to its cultural and religious traditions. For example, Sanskrit served as the foundation of classical Indian philosophy, science, and literature, while Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, and others contributed significantly to regional and pan-Indian traditions. The recent additions continue this tradition: Marathi connects to the history of the Maratha Empire, Bengali to the cultural renaissance of Bengal, and Pali to the spread of Buddhism across Asia.

Conclusion

The recognition of classical languages in India is a testament to the nation's rich linguistic diversity and its commitment to preserving its cultural heritage. The recent inclusion of Marathi,

Bengali, Assamese, Prakrit, and Pali highlights the continuing importance of these languages in shaping India's intellectual and cultural landscape. As India moves forward, these classical languages will continue to play a critical role in promoting scholarship, preserving ancient knowledge, and enriching modern discourse. This is not just a recognition of the past but a step toward a vibrant future where linguistic diversity is celebrated and preserved for generations to come.

Main Practice question

Discuss the significance of the "classical language" status in India, with reference to the recent inclusion of Marathi, Bengali, Assamese, Prakrit, and Pali. How does this designation impact cultural preservation, academic research, and national identity? (250 words)

Answer Guidelines:

1. Introduction:

- Briefly explain the concept of "classical language" in India.
- Mention the criteria used for granting this status, such as antiquity, literary heritage, and epigraphic evidence.

2. Recent Additions:

- Discuss the Union Cabinet's recent decision (2023) to grant classical language status to Marathi, Bengali, Assamese, Prakrit, and Pali.
- Highlight the historical and cultural background of these languages, including their roots in Prakrit, Magadhi Prakrit, and their association with specific historical periods.

3. Significance of the Classical Language Status:

- **Cultural Preservation:** Emphasize the importance of classical status in safeguarding ancient texts, literature, and manuscripts. Mention how this contributes to maintaining India's diverse cultural heritage.

- **Academic Research:** Discuss how classical status enhances funding for research, translation projects, and digitization efforts, facilitating greater access to ancient knowledge.
- **National Identity:** Explain how recognizing classical languages strengthens regional pride while promoting a unified national identity that values linguistic diversity.

4. **Impact on Education:**

- Mention the role of classical languages in the National Education Policy and their potential to shape future generations through school curricula.

5. **Conclusion:**

- Summarize the long-term benefits of the classical language designation for both India's intellectual heritage and its global cultural standing.