

1. Classical Languages of India – Polity

As of 2025, a total of 11 Indian languages holds the status of Classical Language

Classical Languages of India – Overview

Definition – Classical Languages are those which possess a rich and ancient literary tradition, distinct grammar and structure, and have made a profound contribution to the cultural and intellectual heritage of India.

Latest Addition (2024) – In 2024, the Government of India granted Classical Language status to Marathi, Pali, Prakrit, Assamese, and Bengali.

Earlier Recognised Languages (2004–2024) – Earlier, six Indian languages had been accorded the status of Classical Language – Tamil (2004), Sanskrit (2005), Kannada (2008), Telugu (2008), Malayalam (2013), and Odia (2014).

Total Number of Classical Languages (as of 2024) – 11 Classical Languages – Tamil, Sanskrit, Kannada, Telugu, Malayalam, Odia, Marathi, Pali, Prakrit, Assamese, and Bengali.

Criteria for Declaring a Classical Language

The Ministry of Education (earlier Ministry of Culture) has laid down the following four key criteria

High Antiquity – The language must have early texts or recorded history over 1,500–2,000 years old, showing continuous literary usage.

Rich Heritage of Literature – It must have a large body of ancient literary works that are valued as a heritage by generations of speakers.

Variety and Depth of Texts – There should be a diverse range of knowledge texts, including prose, poetry, inscriptions, and philosophical writings, representing different fields of knowledge.

Distinct Historical Identity – The classical form must be distinct from the modern spoken form and may exhibit discontinuity with later derivatives.

Significance of Classical Language Status

Cultural Recognition – It formally acknowledges the deep cultural, historical, and intellectual roots of the language in India's civilisation.

Preservation of Ancient Knowledge – Encourages the preservation and study of ancient literature, philosophies, and moral values embedded in classical texts.

Academic Promotion – Enables the establishment of research institutions, scholarships, and academic chairs for language study in universities.

National Prestige – The recognition enhances the linguistic prestige and global visibility of India's rich linguistic heritage.

Policy Support and Funding – Once recognised, a Classical Language receives special grants and institutional support from the Union Government for promotion and research.

Steps Taken by the Government to Promote Classical Languages

1. Central Institute of Indian Languages (CIIL), Mysuru

Establishment – Set up in 1969 under the Ministry of Education as a subordinate office.

Objective – To promote, document, and research Indian languages, including the Classical ones.

Schemes – CIIL implements schemes like the Scheme for Protection and Preservation of Endangered Languages (SPPEL) and language corpus creation programs.

2. Dedicated Centres for Classical Languages – Special centres have been created for specific Classical Languages to conduct advanced research, publish texts, and train scholars.

Centres under CIIL –

1. Centre for Classical Kannada (CIIL, Mysuru)
2. Centre for Classical Telugu (CIIL, Mysuru)
3. Centre for Classical Malayalam (CIIL, Mysuru)
4. Centre for Classical Odia (CIIL, Mysuru)

Autonomous Centre – Central Institute of Classical Tamil (CICT), Chennai – operates autonomously under the Ministry of Education.

Support for Sanskrit – Dedicated Sanskrit Universities like Rashtriya Sanskrit Sansthan (New Delhi), Sampurnanand Sanskrit University (Varanasi), and Kameshwar Singh Darbhanga Sanskrit University receive direct central funding.

3. Financial Assistance and Research Grants

Funds are provided to –

1. Promote publication of classical literature.
2. Digitize ancient manuscripts.
3. Encourage translation projects and comparative linguistic research.

4. Academic and Cultural Programs

National Seminars, workshops, and awards are organized to honour scholars and promote awareness about the importance of classical languages in national life.

The Eighth Schedule of the Constitution

1. Constitutional Basis – Part XVII (Articles 343–351) of the Constitution deals with official languages. The Eighth Schedule specifies the official languages of the Republic of India.

2. Present Status

Total Languages – 22

Original 14 Languages (1950) –

Assamese, Bengali, Gujarati, Hindi, Kannada, Kashmiri, Malayalam, Marathi, Odia, Punjabi, Sanskrit, Tamil, Telugu, Urdu.

Added Later –

Sindhi (1967) – by the 21st Constitutional Amendment.

Konkani, Manipuri, Nepali (1992) – by the 71st Constitutional Amendment.

Bodo, Dogri, Maithili, Santhali (2003) – by the 92nd Constitutional Amendment.

3. Link with Classical Languages

All Classical Languages are included in the Eighth Schedule, ensuring constitutional recognition and linguistic legitimacy.

Institutional and Academic Impact

Establishment of Chairs – University Chairs in the name of eminent classical scholars are set up to promote linguistic and cultural studies.

Digitisation of Ancient Texts – Projects under the National Mission for Manuscripts and Digital Library of India have preserved thousands of ancient manuscripts in Classical Languages.

UNESCO Linkages – Classical Languages also gain global recognition through UNESCO-supported cultural and linguistic heritage programs.

Conclusion

India's recognition of 11 Classical Languages reflects its linguistic pluralism and civilisational depth. The Classical Language status not only honours ancient intellectual traditions but also ensures systematic preservation, promotion, and propagation of these languages for future generations. These languages together represent India's composite heritage, showcasing the unity in diversity that defines the nation's cultural identity.

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