

## Classical languages - Recent Additions and Their Contributions

**Mains:** *GS I - Indian Culture - Salient aspects of Art Forms, Literature*

### Why in News?

*The classical languages of India have contributed a large to the Indian literature and it is important to mention some of them.*

### What are the recently added classical languages?

- **Already recognised languages** - Tamil, Sanskrit, Kannada, Telugu, Malayalam, and Odia, were earlier accorded the status of classical languages between 2004 to 2024.
- **Languages added in 2024** - Marathi, Pali, Prakrit, Assamese, and Bengali.
- **Marathi** - It 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.
- It traces its roots back more than 2500 years, originating from languages such as
  - Prachina Maharatthi
  - Marahatthi
  - Maharastri Prakrta
  - 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).
- **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.
- **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.
- **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.
- 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.
- **Bengali** - It is 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 AD.
- 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.

### What are the contribution of the recently added classical languages?

- **Contribution of Marathi languages** - 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.
- **Contribution 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."*
  - **Vinaya Pitaka** – It outlines the monastic rules for Buddhist monks, providing a framework for ethical conduct and community living.
  - **Sutta Pitaka** – It is a treasure trove of speeches and dialogues attributed to the Buddha, encapsulating his wisdom and philosophical insights.
  - **Abhidhamma Pitaka** – It explores 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.
- **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-Apabhramsa.
- 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.
- **Literary Contributions of Assamese Language** - The earliest example of pre-modern Assamese script is found in the Charyapadas.
- Charyapadas 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.
- **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.
- 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.

## Reference

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