Malayalam Language Bill, 2025

Mains: *GS II – Issues pertaining to federal structure*

Why in News?

The passage of the Malayalam Language Bill, 2025 by the Kerala Legislative Assembly has reopened debates on linguistic policy, minority rights and Centre–State relations in India.

What is the Malayalam Language Bill, 2025?

- **Recognition of state language** – The Malayalam Language Bill, 2025 seeks to formally declare Malayalam as the sole official language of the State of Kerala.
- **Wider use of malayalam** – It mandates the use of Malayalam across a wide spectrum of domains, including:
  - Government administration
  - Education
  - Judiciary
  - Public communication
  - Commerce and business
  - Digital and information technology platforms
- At present, Kerala recognises both Malayalam and English as official languages.
- The Bill proposes a decisive shift towards Malayalam, while stating that all provisions will operate subject to the Constitution of India.

What are the key provisions of the bill?

- **Education –** Malayalam will be the compulsory first language in all government and aided schools in Kerala up to Class 10.
- Provisions exist for linguistic minority students to continue studying their mother tongue where such options are available, in line with the National Education Curriculum.
- **Judiciary and legislature –** All Bills and Ordinances will be introduced in Malayalam.
- Judgments and court proceedings will be translated into Malayalam in a phased manner.
- Important Central and State Acts published in English will be translated into Malayalam.
- **Administration and governance –** Malayalam will be used for official correspondence and public communication.
- Linguistic minorities will be allowed to use their mother tongues for correspondence with the Secretariat, Heads of Departments and local government offices in designated

areas.

- **Digital and technological domain –** The Information Technology Department will develop open-source software and digital tools to facilitate the effective use of Malayalam in IT and e-governance.
- **Institutional framework –** The existing Personnel and Administrative Reforms (Official Language) Department will be renamed as the Malayalam Language Development Department.
- A Malayalam Language Development Directorate will be established to oversee policy implementation.

Why was the bill introduced?

- **Extensive effort** – The Bill is rooted in Kerala's long-standing effort to strengthen Malayalam as the principal language of governance.
- **2015 Bill** – The State had passed the Malayalam Language (Dissemination and Enrichment) Bill with similar objectives.
- However, that Bill was reserved for the President's consideration and assent was withheld.
- The earlier Bill faced objections on multiple grounds:
    - Conflict with the Official Language Act, 1963
    - Concerns over the protection of linguistic minorities
    - Alleged violation of the Three Language Formula under the National Education Curriculum
    - Inconsistencies with provisions of the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009
- **2025 Bill** – It was introduced after removing or modifying the contentious provisions, with the State government claiming that constitutional safeguards and minority protections have been adequately addressed.

What has triggered the opposition outside kerala?

- **Karnataka's opposition** – The strongest opposition has emerged from the Karnataka government, which has termed the Bill "unconstitutional" and contrary to the interests of Kannada-speaking linguistic minorities in Kerala, especially in the border district of Kasaragod.
- Key concerns raised:
    - The provision making Malayalam the compulsory first language in all schools, which Karnataka argues undermines the rights of Kannada-speaking students who currently study Kannada as their first language.
    - Fears that the implementation of the Bill in Kasaragod could weaken the Kannada language and cultural identity in the region.
- A delegation from the Karnataka Border Area Development Authority submitted a memorandum to the Kerala Governor, urging him to withhold assent to the Bill.
- **Kerala government's defence –** The Kerala government has rejected the charge that the Bill infringes minority rights.
- Kerala government has emphasised that the Bill contains explicit safeguards for linguistic minorities, including speakers of Tamil, Kannada, Tulu and Konkani.

- According to the State:
- Linguistic minorities will be permitted to use their own languages for official correspondence with government authorities in relevant areas.
- Students whose mother tongue is not Malayalam can continue education in their preferred languages where such options exist, in accordance with national education policy.
- Students from other States and foreign countries will be exempted from writing Malayalam language examinations in Classes 9, 10 and higher secondary levels.
- The government argues that the Bill balances the promotion of Malayalam with constitutional guarantees under Articles 29 and 30, which protect the cultural and educational rights of minorities.
- **Constitutional and federal dimensions –** Language is a sensitive subject in India's federal structure.
- While States have the power to adopt official languages for their administration, such measures must comply with:
    - Fundamental rights
    - Minority protections
    - Central laws such as the Official Language Act
- The controversy highlights the tension between linguistic assertion by States and the need to accommodate diversity in border regions. The Governor's decision on assent may therefore have broader implications for language policy and Centre–State relations.

What lies ahead?

- The Malayalam Language Bill, 2025 represents Kerala's attempt to assert its linguistic identity and strengthen the role of Malayalam in governance, education and technology.
- At the same time, opposition from Karnataka underscores the challenges of implementing language policy in a multilingual and federal polity.
- The final outcome will depend on constitutional scrutiny and political accommodation, making the Bill an important case study for understanding language, federalism and minority rights in India.

Reference

[The Hindu| Malayalam Language Bill, 2025]

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