# New Classical Languages

## Why in news?

Recently, the Union Cabinet has approved to confer the status of Classical Language to five Indian languages.

## What is a classical language?

- **Need for classical status** – To *recognize the historical significance* and role of the language as a guardian of Bharat's rich cultural and intellectual heritage.
- **Classical languages** – They are ancient languages with independent traditions and a rich literary history that continue to influence various literary styles and philosophical texts.
- **Introduction**– It was first introduced ***in 2004*** in India.

  ***Tamil*** *was the first language to get the Classical language status in 2004.*

- **Responsible authority** – *Earlier, it was the Ministry of Home* Affairs but then the ***Ministry of Culture*** took over the responsibility since 2005 for further implementations and future recognitions.
- **Linguistic Experts Committee (LEC)** – It is established by the Ministry of Culture to assess future proposals for the recognition of classical languages.
  - **Composition** - Representatives of the Union Ministries of Home, Culture and four to five linguistic experts.
  - **Chaired by** - The *president of the Sahitya Akademi*.
- It was established the in 2004 and in 2024.
- **Importance** – By recognizing a language as classical, the government acknowledges their deep-rooted antiquity, vast literary traditions, and their invaluable contribution to the cultural fabric of the nation.

## What are the criteria for declaring a language as classical?

- **Criteria in 2004 –** High antiquity of its early texts/ recorded history *over a thousand years.*
- A body of ancient literature/ texts, which is considered a valuable heritage by generation of speakers.
- The literary tradition must be original and not borrowed from another speech community.
- **Revision of criteria** – It was ***revised two times, in 2005 and 2024***, based on the recommendations of Linguistic Experts Committees (LEC).

| 2005 Criteria for Classical Language Status |
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| • **Existing** – A body of ancient literature/texts, which is considered a valuable heritage by generations of speakers.<br>• The literary tradition must be original and not borrowed from another speech community.<br>• **Modified** – High antiquity of its early texts/recorded history over a *period of 1500-2000 years.*<br>• **Added** - The classical language and literature being *distinct from modern*, there may also *be a discontinuity* between the classical language and its later forms or its offshoots. |
| **2024 Criteria for Classical Language Status** |
| • **Existing** – High antiquity of its early texts/recorded history over a period of 1500- 2000 years.<br>• A body of ancient literature/texts, which is considered a valuable heritage by generations of speakers.<br>• The Classical Languages and literature could be distinct from its current form or could be discontinuous with later forms of its offshoots.<br>• **Added** - *Knowledge texts*, especially prose texts in addition to poetry, epigraphical and inscriptional evidence.<br>• **Deleted** - The literary tradition must be original and not borrowed from another speech community. |

## How many languages have been declared so far?

- As of October 2024, there are ***totally 11*** classical language in India.
- 5 languages were added in 2024.

| Language | Year of Notification | Notification by |
|---|---|---|
| Tamil | 2004 | **Ministry of Home Affairs** |
| Sanskrit | 2005 | |
| Kannada | 2008 | **Ministry of Culture** |
| Telugu | 2008 | |
| Malayalam | 2013 | |
| Odia | 2014 | |
| Marathi | 2024 | |
| Pali | 2024 | |
| Prakrit | 2024 | |
| Assamese | 2024 | |
| Bengali | 2024 | |

## What are the features of new classical languages?

- **Prakrit** - It was the vernacular of the common folk in ancient India, and the language of *heterodox religions like Buddhism and Jainism*.
- The term 'Prakrit' derived from Sanskrit word 'prakriti' meaning 'source' or 'origin'.
    - **Linguistic group** - Middle Indo-Aryan languages

| Different dialects of Prakrit |
|---|

| | |
|---|---|
| **Magadhi** | • It is the official language of the Mauryan court and used in the Ashokan edicts.<br>• It evolved into modern-day languages such as Bengali, Assamese, Odia, Bhojpuri, Magahi, and Maithili. |
| **Ardhamagadhi** | • Literally "half-Magadhi" which is prominently used by Jain scholars. |
| **Shauraseni** | • It was used by the women from lower class women and people in plays.<br>• It later evolved into Hindustani, Punjabi, and other languages of the Hindi group. |

- **Pali** – It is the *variant of Ardhamagadhi Prakrit*.
- It was the language of Theravada Buddhist canon.
    - **Linguistic group** - Middle Indo-Aryan languages
- After Theravada Buddhism declined in India, Pali survived as a *religious language in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia*, where this Buddhist school continued to prosper.
- **Marathi** – It belongs to the *Indo-Aryan family* are *derived from early forms of Prakrit.*
    - Official language- In Maharashtra and UT of Dadra and Nagar Haveli and Daman and Diu.

*While Konkani is the official language of Goa, it allows Marathi to be used for official purpose sometimes.*

- **Assamese** – It belongs to *Indo-Aryan family.*
    - **Official language -** Assam
- **Bengali** – It belongs to *India – European language family*
    - **Official language -** West Bengal, Tripura, Assam (Barak Valley), Jharkhand (additional official language) and Bangladesh.

## What steps have been taken to promote classical languages?

- *Ministry of Education* has taken various steps for advancing Classical Languages.
- **Establishing universities** – In 2020, *three Central Universities* were established through an Act of Parliament *to promote Sanskrit*.
- The *Central Institute of Classical Tamil* was created to facilitate translating ancient Tamil texts, promoting research, and offering courses for university students and language scholars.
- **Establishing Centres for Excellence** – It was established for studies in Classical *Kannada, Telugu, Malayalam, and Odia* under the auspices of the *Central Institute of Indian Languages in Mysuru*.
- It also takes steps in establishing Centers for promoting Classical Languages.
- **Recognition through awards** – Several *national and international* awards have been introduced to recognize and encourage achievements in the field of Classical Languages.
- **Chairs in Universities** - As UGC recommended, *professional chairs in central universities* were established.

## What is the impact of classical language status?

- **Revives intellectual and cultural identity** - It encourage scholarly research, preservation, and the revitalization of ancient texts and knowledge systems.
- **Promotes national integration** - It instills a sense of pride and ownership among the speakers of these languages.
- **Self-reliance** – It aligns with the broader vision of a self-reliant and culturally rooted India.
- It will elevate their stature and will ensure their continued relevance in the modern world.
- **Employment generation** – It will create significant employment opportunities, particularly in academic and research fields.
- Additionally, the preservation, documentation, and *digitization of ancient texts of these languages* will generate jobs in archiving, translation, publishing, and digital media.

## What lies ahead?

- Government shall continue providing technical and financial support for the development and preservation of language.
- Promote academic and cultural initiatives to increase public awareness and motivate more scholars to contribute language development.
- Research and document literary provision and transform to next generation.

## References


1. The Indian Express| Classical Language Status to 5 New Languages
2. PIB| Status of Classical Language



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