North Dravidian Languages

Mains Syllabus: GS I - Indian culture will cover the salient aspects of Art Forms, literature and Architecture from ancient to modern times; Salient features of Indian Society, Diversity of India.

Why in the News?

Recent controversy between Tamil and Kannada language has led to discussions on Dravidian languages.

What are Dravidian languages?

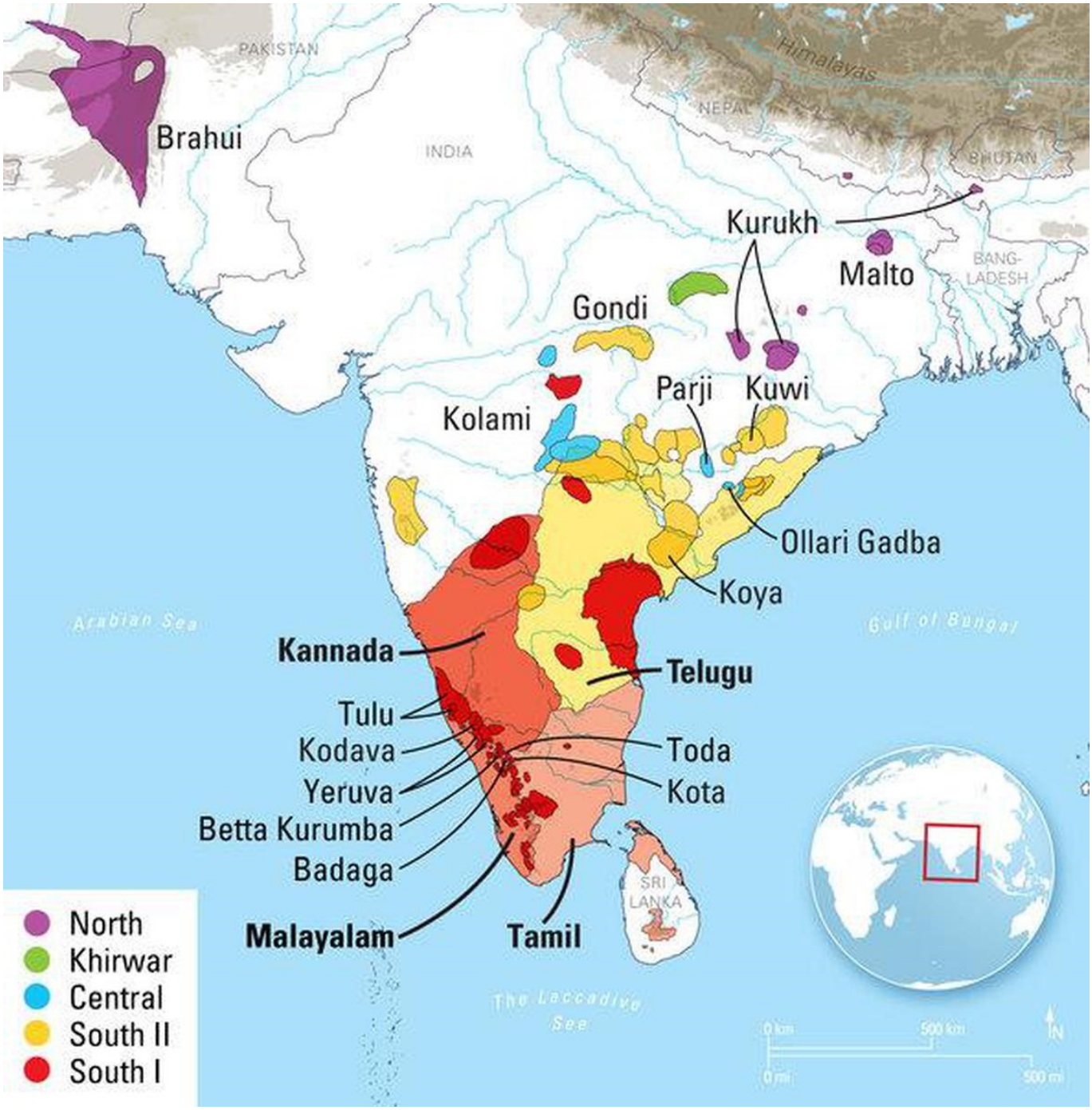
British missionary Robert Caldwell was the first to use 'Dravidian' as a generic name for the major language family.

- **Dravidian Languages** – It is a family of some 70 languages spoken primarily in South Asia.
- **Major Languages** - The Dravidian language family's four largest languages are Kannada, Malayalam, Tamil and Telugu.

Groups	Language	Speakers	Area
Northern			
	Brahui	2,200,000	Baluchistan province in Pakistan
	Kurux (Kurukh)	2,100,000	Jharkhand, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Orissa, West Bengal[1]
	Malto	136,000	Jharkhand, Bihar, Bangladesh
Central			
	Kolami	120,000	East Maharashtra, NW Andhra Pradesh
	Naiki	10,000	NW Andhra Pradesh, East Maharashtra
	Parji (Duruwa)	50,000	South Chhattisgarh, South Orissa
	Gadaba	25,000	South Orissa, NE Andhra Pradesh
South-Central			
	Telugu	86,000,000	Andhra Pradesh
	Gondi[2]	3,200,000	Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, A.
	Konda (Kubi)	20,000	NE Andhra Pradesh Pradesh
	Kui	765,000	South Orissa
	Kuvi	350,000	South Orissa, NE Andhra Pradesh
	Manda	4,000	South Orissa (Navrangpur district)
	Pengo	1,300	South Orissa (Navrangpur district)
Southern			
	Tamil	78,000,000	Tamilnadu, North Sri Lanka, Malaysia
	Kannada	44,000,000	Karnataka
	Malayalam	39,000,000	Kerala
	Tulu	2,000,000	Southwest Karnataka
	Kodagu	200,000	South Karnataka near Kerala border
	Badaga	135,000	Nilgiri Hills, Tamilnadu
	Irula	5,000	Nilgiri Hills, Tamilnadu
	Toda	1,100	Nilgiri Hills, Tamilnadu
	Kota	900	Nilgiri Hills, Tamilnadu

1. There are some minorities in Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal
2. Includes de Koya dialect of Andhra Pradesh

- **Geographical Distribution** - While its speakers in India are primarily concentrated in the southern and central belts, these languages are also spoken in other South Asian countries, including Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka.



- **Differences** - The North Dravidian language subgroup is distinguished from the other Dravidian languages by various phonological, morphological, and lexical features.
- Kurux shares 73% of its Dravidian-sourced words with Malto, but only 12% with Tamil and 14.5% with Telugu.
- **Greatness** - In the book The Dravidian Languages (2015), American linguist Sanford B Steever argues that the Dravidian language family is the fourth or fifth largest language family in the world.
- **Historical Significance** – This language family may have been spoken for millennia in different parts of South Asia and is believed by many scholars to have been spoken in the Indus Valley.
- **Contribution to Other Languages** – Dravidian system of languages have loaned generously to vocabularies of other families.

Northern Dravidian Family

Kurux	• It goes by several names, including Kurukh/Oraon/Dhangar/Uraon/Kisan. • Oraon appears to be a 'clan' name. • Dhangar is the name of Kurux spoken in the Terai in Nepal. • Kisan is spoken by a subset of Kurux speakers, involved in agriculture. • Approximately two million people speak these languages across India, Bangladesh, and Nepal, where it reached through a group of migrant labourers.
Malto or 'Hillman'	• It is classified as the northernmost of Dravidian languages in India, is spoken by nearly 100,000 people in the Rajmahal hills of Bihar, West Bengal, Tripura, and Odisha. • According to Steever, Malto has at least three dialects (Kumarbhag, Malpaharia, and Sawriya) distinguished based on phonology, morphology, and lexicon.
Brahui	• As per Krishnamurti, every language is separated from Brahui by over 5,000 years, including its closest 'sisters' Kurux (by 5,505 years) and Malto (5,874 years). • Brahui has traditionally been written in Perso-Arabic and "might well constitute its own subgroup, the first to branch off from the Dravidian proto-languages," says Steever.

How have Dravidian languages evolved?

- **Split from Proto Dravidian** - According to Krishnamurti, the first branch to split off from the Proto Dravidian family was the North subgroup, comprising Kurux, Malto, and Brahui.
- The fact that Kurux, Malto and Brahui share past forms with the suffix -k/-g made scholars believe that these languages branched off first from the rest of Dravidian.

The 1981 Census, which required a language to have at least 10,000 speakers to be listed, mentioned Malto and Kurux as non-scheduled languages while omitting Brahui as it had no speakers living within the Indian Union.

- Emergence of Other Groups - Subsequently, Central Dravidian emerged with languages like Kolami, Parji, followed by Proto-South, which further split into South-Central, comprising Telugu, Kuwi, and Southern, which includes Tamil and Tulu.
- **Branching Out** - The main branches of Dravidian—South Dravidian I (including pre-Tamil), South Dravidian II (including pre-Telugu), and others—began to split around the 11th century BCE, with earlier splits likely occurring in the millennia prior
- **Indigenous vs. Migratory Origins** - While some theories propose that Dravidian languages were brought to India by migrations from the Iranian Plateau, the majority of linguistic and genetic evidence supports the view that the Dravidian language family is indigenous to the Indian subcontinent.
- **Contact with Indo-Aryan Languages** - Dravidian languages influenced early Sanskrit, especially through loanwords and the introduction of retroflex consonants.
- This indicates contact between Dravidian and Indo-Aryan speakers by at least the 2nd millennium BCE, well before Sanskrit had a significant impact on southern India.

- **Indus Valley Linkage** – Presence of Brahui speakers across the continent- Karachi, Hyderabad, Sukkur, and Larkana led to the conjecture that Dravidian was the language of the Indus Valley Civilisation.
- The presence of Brahui in the highlands of southwestern Pakistan is also cited as a determining factor in associating the Indus Valley Civilisation with Dravidian.

References

[The Indian Express | Dravidian Family]

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