

6 Classical Languages of India 2024, Criteria, Benefits, List

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Classical languages are ancient, independent traditions with rich ancient literature, influencing various literary styles, genres, and philosophical texts. In 2004, the Indian Government recognised languages meeting criteria like **antiquity, literary richness, and distinctiveness** as “Classical Languages”. Among Indian languages, currently, Tamil, Telugu, Sanskrit, Kannada, Malayalam, and Odia have been given the status of classical languages.

To preserve and promote these foundational pillars, the Indian Government has established the **Center of Excellence for Studies** in Classical Languages at the **Central Institute of Indian Languages(CIIL), Mysore**, under the Department of Higher Education. This initiative underscores the enduring relevance of classical languages in today's linguistic landscape, strengthening a deep appreciation for India's cultural and linguistic diversity.

Classical Languages of India

India has recognised six languages as 'Classical Languages' due to their rich literary and historical heritage dating back to ancient times. These languages are **Tamil, Sanskrit, Telugu, Kannada, Malayalam, and Odia**.

- **The National Education Policy 2020** also mandates the preservation of works of literature in three additional languages: **Pali, Persian (Farsi), and Prakrit**, raising the total to **nine** classical languages.

Language	Key description
Tamil (2004)	- Script family: Tamil-Brahmi derivative - Literary history: Over 2000 years - Notable works: Tirukkural, Tolkappiyam, Ettuthogai, Pathirruppaththu, Pathinenkilkanakku, Silappathikaram, Manimegalai. - Influenced the evolution of other languages like Malayalam, Sinhala, and Southeast Asian languages.
Sanskrit (2005)	- Script family: Brahmi derivative Devangari - Literary history: Over 3000 years - Notable works: Vedas, Upanishads, Puranas, Ramayana, Mahabharata, works on grammar, medicine, astronomy, yoga, dance, architecture, etc. - Influenced the evolution of Indo-Aryan languages like Hindi, Bangla, Marathi, etc. - Strong imprint on Indian philosophy and worldview, shaping Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism.
Kannada (2008)	- Script used: Brahmi derivative - Literary history: Over 1500 years - Notable works: Vachana Sahitya, Basava Purana, Surya Siddhanta, Chavundaraya Purana, Kavirajamarga. - Influenced the development of other languages like Telugu, Konkani, and Tulu.
Telugu (2008)	- Script used: Brahmi derivative - Literary history: Over 1000 years - Notable works: Telugu Bhagavatam, Ranganatha Ramayana, Andhra Mahabharatam, Vemana Satakam, Sumati Satakam, Panduranga Mahatyam, Narayana Rao Kathalu, Annamacharya Kirtanas, Andhra Shabda Chintamani. - Influenced the evolution of other languages like Kannada, Marathi, and Southeast Asian languages.

Malayalam (2013)	- Script used: Brahmi derivative influenced by Grantha - Literary history: Over 1300 years - Notable works: Vazhappally Copper Plate Grant, Ramacharitam, Bhashakautaliyam, Lilatilakam, Manipravalam era literary works. - Modern Malayalam script evolved from Grantha and Kolezhuttu alphabets.
Odia (2014)	- Script used: Brahmi derivative - Literary history: Over 1000 years - Notable works: Jajpur copper plate grant, Panchasakha writings (Bhagabata, Rukmini Bibha, Usabhilasa), palm leaf manuscripts. - Influenced by the Eastern Ganga dynasty rule.

Criteria for Classical Language Status

The **Ministry of Culture in 2014**, laid down the following criteria for declaring a language as 'Classical' in India:

Criteria	Description
Ancient History	- The language must have an ancient history and literary tradition over 1500-2000 years .
Large Body of Literature	- It must have a large body of ancient texts and literature appreciated even today.
Distinguished Literary Heritage	- The language must have a distinguished literary heritage not derived from another language.
Discontinuity	- There may be a discontinuity between the classical language and its later forms or its offshoots, given that the classical language and literature are distinct from modern.

Benefits of Classical Status

The languages declared as 'classical' receive several benefits from the government to promote them further such as:

- **Two international awards** are instituted annually for scholars who have made exemplary research contributions, teaching or promoting the classical languages of India. This honours their service to preserving heritage.
- A **Centre of Excellence** is established by the Government to stimulate advanced research specifically focused on each of the classical languages declared. This powers further literary and linguistic study.

- The **University Grants Commission(UGC)** sponsors the creation of Professional Chairs related to the classical languages of India in central universities and research institutions. This enables focused teaching and research capacity building.

Classical Languages of India UPSC PYQs

Question 1: Which one of the following was given classical language status recently? **(UPSC Prelims 2015)**

1. Odia
2. Konkani
3. Bhojpuri
4. Assamese

Answer: (a)

Question 2: Consider the following languages: **(UPSC Prelims 2014)**

1. Gujarati
2. Kannada
3. Telugu

Which of the above has/have been declared as 'classical language/languages' by the Government?

1. 1 and 2 only
2. 3 only
3. 2 and 3 only
4. 1, 2 and 3

Answer: (c)

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