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Officials say that the broader cultural and academic impact of this designation will extend nationally and internationally.

The Union Cabinet on Thursday extended the “classical language” tag to Marathi, Pali, Prakrit, Assamese, and Bengali. Tamil, Sanskrit, Telugu, Kannada, Malayalam, and Odia already enjoy this status.

When and how did the concept of “classical language” arise?

Following demands from various states, the UPA-1 government decided to create a category of Indian languages known as “classical languages”, and lay down various criteria for this status.

On October 12, 2004, Tamil became the first Indian language to receive “classical” status due to its high antiquity and rich literary tradition.

In the following month, the Ministry of Culture set up a Linguistic Experts Committee (LEC) under the Sahitya Akademi to examine proposals for “classical language” status from various states and bodies.

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On November 25, Sanskrit was declared a classical language. Subsequently, status was conferred upon Telugu (2008), Kannada (2008), Malayalam (2013), and Odia (2014).



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What are the latest criteria for “classical languages”?

On July 25 this year, the LEC unanimously revised the criteria for classical status. The criteria now includes:

High antiquity of early texts, and recorded history over a period of 1500- 2000 years;

A body of ancient literature/ texts, which is considered a heritage by generations of speakers;

Epigraphic and inscriptional evidence;

Knowledge texts, especially prose texts in addition to poetry; and

That classical languages and literature could be distinct from its current form or could be discontinuous with later forms of its offshoots.

Following this, the committee recommended the addition of the five new classical languages, the proposals for which had been with the Centre for some years. This was approved by the Union Cabinet on Thursday.

What is behind the recent additions?

Marathi: With the state Assembly elections just weeks away, the inclusion of Marathi comes over a decade after the state government first forwarded the proposal to the Centre in 2013.

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Modern Marathi descends from Maharashtri Prakrit, a Prakrit dialect used in western India which was the official language of the Satvahanas. Some Marathi scholars have claimed that this was the first among Prakrit languages, but this claim is contested. The oldest evidence of Maharashtri Prakrit can be found in a stone inscription in [Pune](#) district, dated to the 1st century BCE. The earliest evidence of the more modern Marathi can be traced to a copper-plate inscription found in Satara, dated to 739 CE.

Bengali & Assamese: The [West Bengal](#) and Assam state governments had also sought “classical” status for their respective languages.

Both these languages can find their origin in Magadhi Prakrit, a form of Prakrit popular in East India, and the official language of the Magadha court. The exact date in which they emerged is contested, with scholars putting forward dates of origin ranging from the 6th to the 12th centuries. They took on a form which may be recognisable today well into the second millennium CE. The legendary linguist Suniti Kumar Chatterji suggested that the Indo-Aryan vernacular likely differentiated itself in Assam before Bengal.

Prakrit & Pali: There is no single Prakrit language. Rather, the term refers to a group of closely-related Indo-Aryan languages, whose defining feature was that they were the language of the masses as opposed to Sanskrit, which was restricted to the elites and high literature. Historian A L Basham wrote in *The Wonder that was India* (1954): “By the time of the Buddha the masses were speaking languages which were much simpler than Sanskrit. These were the Prakrits, of which several dialects have been attested.”

These vernaculars were thus also the language of popular heterodox religions that emerged in the first millennium BCE.

Jain agamas and the Gatha Saptashati are in Ardhamagadhi, a Prakrit dialect some scholars consider to be its definitive form. This Prakrit thus continues resonance among the Jain community, and still sees use in the religion's ritual practices.

Pali, likely a form of somewhat Sanskritised Magadhi Prakrit, was the language of the Theravada Buddhist Canon — the Tipitakas. Considered to be the language of the Buddha himself, Pali survived in places like Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia, where the Theravada school prospered.

What will the 'classical' tag mean for these languages?

Officials say that the broader cultural and academic impact of this designation will extend nationally and internationally.

The Ministry of Education takes steps to promote classical languages. Three Central Universities were established in 2020 for the promotion of Sanskrit. The Central Institute of Classical Tamil was set up in 2008 to facilitate the translation of ancient Tamil texts, and offer courses in Tamil. Similar Centres of Excellence have also been set up for the study of Kannada, Telugu, Malayalam, and Odia.

Officials told [The Indian Express](#) that the newly added classical languages will be promoted in a similar fashion.

The National Education Policy also calls for the inclusion of classical languages in school education. The Ministry of Culture (through the various academies), the Ministry of Education, and respective state governments, will come together for greater knowledge-sharing and research in these languages. Besides, manuscripts in these languages will be digitised for greater access to scholars, the officials said.

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Divya A reports on travel, tourism, culture and social issues - not necessarily in that order - for The Indian Express. She's been a journalist for over a decade now, worki

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