

# INDIAN LANGUAGES

*Stuart Blackburn, Ph.D.*

**Overview** No accurate figure exists for the total number of languages in India, largely due to insufficient field research and the difficulty in distinguishing between languages and dialects. A consensus figure would be about 500, although some scholars suggest 900. We do know, however, that the languages fall into two large families: 1) Indo-Aryan, including Hindi and most north Indian languages, is spoken by about 74% of the population and 2) Dravidian, mostly in south India, spoken by about 24%. Other people speak Austro-Asiatic languages (1.2% of the population) or Tibeto-Burman languages (0.6%). Most people are bi-lingual and many are trilingual. 23 languages are recognised as 'official languages.'

## Status

**Pan-India** Sanskrit (an Indo-Aryan language) has been the language of culture and learning since ancient times and retains considerable prestige today. Arabic (not one of the 23 official languages) occupies a similar position in some Muslim communities (although, or because, few Indian Muslims actually speak Arabic). Persian became a court language during the Delhi Sultanate (11<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> c. CE), gained even greater status during the Mughal Empire (16<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> c. CE) and remained an official language even during the early period of British rule. After the demise of the Mughals, Urdu and then English (both among the 23 official languages) supplanted Persian and took its place as prestige languages.

**South** In south India, and especially in the far south, Tamil (a Dravidian language) has been the language of culture and status since the early centuries of the Common Era. The origins of Tamil, and its possible relation to other language families, are unclear and remain a field of research. Although it often co-existed with Sanskrit in courts and intermingled with it to form Malayalam (spoken in Kerala), Tamil remains a distinct tongue and a potent sign of cultural identity

**Official Language** The Indian Constitution of 1950, called for Hindi to replace English as the official language by the year 1965. When that date came, however, English was in fact retained as an 'associate official language' alongside Hindi as the 'official language.' This decision was taken, in part, to avoid offending south Indians since they would not welcome Hindi as the sole national language.

**Classical** One indication of the cultural weight of language status in India is that in 2004 the government in New Delhi created the category of 'classical languages.' To qualify, a language must have been in existence for at least 1000 years and possess a considerable textual history. Thus far (2014), six languages have been officially declared as classical: Sanskrit, Tamil, Kannada, Telugu, Malayalam, Oriya (Odia).

## Politics

**North-South** The geographic cleavage between Indo-Aryan languages in the north and Dravidian languages in the south runs deep in Indian culture and politics. The now-discredited 'Aryan invasion theory' held that light-skinned, Sanskrit-speakers invaded and conquered an India inhabited by dark-skinned Dravidian-speakers. This idea, which

has only been discarded by scholars in the past few decades, is still present in popular thinking and continues to influence political and cultural life, particularly in the south.

**Separatism** In the 1950s new states were established on the basis of language: Madras State for Tamil-speakers, Andhra Pradesh for Telugu-speakers, Maharashtra for Marathi-speakers, Gujarat for Gujarati-speakers, Mysore for Kannada-speakers and Kerala for Malayalam-speakers. In the 1960s, Tamils led a successful campaign to rename 'Madras State' as 'Tamil Nadu' ('Tamil Land').

## Tribal

**Overview** Most of the approximately 500 languages/dialects in India are spoken by tribal communities (roughly defined as geographically isolated populations on the margins of the social and political mainstream). Only about 100 of these tribal languages have been adequately documented, most of which are Tibeto-Burman (in northeast India), though some are Dravidian (central and southern India), Austro-Asiatic (northeast India) and Indo-Aryan (central India).

**Status** Of these hundreds of tribal languages, only two (Santali, an Austro-Asiatic language, and Bodo, a Tibeto-Burman language) are included among the nation's 23 official languages. Each state has one or more official languages, but again only a few (Santali in Jharkhand, Bodo in Assam, Khasi and Garo in Meghalaya, Kokborok in Tripura and Mizo in Mizoram) are tribal languages.

**Endangered** Tribal languages are also marginalised in the market place of speech. Most are endangered, dozens are on the brink of extinction and a few (Tolcha, Paite, Sengmai and Rangkas) are no longer spoken. An alarming statistic is that only 50% of tribal people speak a tribal language as their first language; the other 50% have acquired a dominant regional language (Bengali, Hindi, Tamil, etc.) as their mother tongue. Similarly, while most Indians speak two or three languages, very few speak a tribal language as their second or third tongue.

## Reading

A.L. Basham, *The Wonder that was India* (Sidgwick & Jackson, 1982), pp. 386-399

Braj Kachru, Yamuna Kachru and S.N. Sridhar, *Language in South Asia* (Cambridge, 2008)

Paul R. Brass, *Language, Religion and Politics in North India* (Cambridge, 1974)

Muzaffar Alam, *The Languages of Political Islam: India 1200-1800* (Hurst, 2004)

Murray B. Emeneau, *Language and Linguistic Areas* (Stanford, 1980)

Eugene Irschick, *Politics and Social Conflict in South India: The Non-Brahman Movement and Tamil Separatism 1916-1929* (California, 1974)

Asha Sarangi, *Language and Politics in India* (OUP Delhi, 2010)

Christopher King, *One Language, Two Scripts: the Hindi Movement in Nineteenth Century North India* (Oxford, 1994)

Stuart Blackburn, The formation of tribal identities. In Vasudha Dalmia and Rashmi Sadana (eds.), *Modern Indian Culture* (Cambridge, 2012), pp. 30-48

K.S. Singh, *Tribal Movements in India* (Manohar, 1982) Christopher Mosley (ed.), *Atlas of the World's Endangered Languages* (UNESCO, 2010)

## Discussion questions

Indian history is punctuated by linguistic controversies. Sanskrit vs. Tamil, and Urdu vs. Hindi are the best-known, but others include Assamese vs. Bengali, Persian vs. English, Malayalam vs. Kannada. Add to this the terminological chaos regarding status languages: 'national languages,' 'official languages,' 'state languages' and 'classical languages.' Analyse either the Sanskrit-Tamil or the Urdu-Hindi debate, with a focus on the politics of linguistic identity.

Stories of a 'lost script' are common among the tribes of India, as a compensatory narrative to explain their lack of literacy. Analyse this phenomenon for its cultural and political significance in a highly literate culture such as India.

Linguistic separatism has plagued the history of post-Independence India. The example with the longest and best-documented history is the Tamil/Dravidian movement in south India, with its roots in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Analyse this movement as a microcosm of the linguistic centrifugal force in Indian history.

Linguistic diversity (more than 500 languages/dialects) and multilingualism are often cited as distinct features of India. Compare this diversity and multilingualism with the linguistic landscape in another large country with a long history, such as Nigeria, Russia, China, Australia or South Africa. Analyse the similarities and differences between the two case studies and then suggest why India is held up as a model of diversity.

Endangered languages are now a popular topic in the world's media (though perhaps not as popular as it should be). Study the rise of this category and then analyse both the scholarship and the politics behind it. What constitutes an 'endangered' language? Why should we be concerned if a language disappears?

Is English an Indian language? What are the criteria of an 'Indian' language? What about other 'outside' languages, such as Sanskrit? Research the beginnings of Indian writing in English and follow its development through the nationalist and post-Independence eras. Then analyse the position of English in the broader context of language politics in India.