

## *What is the National Language of India?*

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Many languages are spoken in India. A proverb says that as you travel, the water changes every two miles and the language changes every four miles. We hope that the articles included here will help answer some of the questions that are bound to arise when language and India are discussed.

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### **Hindi**

Hindi is a major language of India and most important of the many languages spoken in India. Nearly half a billion people, or 40 percent of the population of India, speak some form of Hindi as their first language. No other Indian language is spoken as a first language by more than 10 percent of the nation's people. Hindi is a second language for many more Indians. Among the world's languages, only Chinese and Arabic are thought to have more speakers than Hindi. Hindi is widespread outside India as well. Sizeable Indian communities speak it in the Fiji Islands, Mauritius, South Africa, and parts of the Middle East and East Africa.

India's constitution recognizes 22<sup>1</sup> different Indian languages, but Hindi and English are considered to be the official national languages. The central government allows each state to choose its own official language. Within India, native speakers of Hindi are concentrated in the states of Bihār, Madhya Pradesh, Rājasthān, and Uttar Pradesh in northern and central India.

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<sup>1</sup> Source: [http://india.gov.in/knowindia/india\\_at\\_a\\_glance.php](http://india.gov.in/knowindia/india_at_a_glance.php)

Hindi belongs to the Indo-Iranian branch of the Indo-European language family. It is a direct descendent of Sanskrit, the ancient sacred and literary language of India. It is written in the Devanagari script, an alphabet also used for writing Sanskrit. This alphabet dates back to the 7th century and is characterized by a horizontal line on the top of letters, which extends across the row.

Hindi draws much of its vocabulary from Sanskrit. Compared with Sanskrit, it has a greatly simplified structure and syntax. There are two genders, masculine and feminine, and two basic noun cases in Hindi, although the verb system remains fairly complex.

Hindi and Urdu, the official language of Pakistan, are essentially two dialects of the same language. Urdu, however, is written in the Persian-Arabic script and has adopted many words from the Persian and Arabic languages. In India, Urdu is primarily spoken by Muslims. The two languages, Hindi and Urdu, are sometimes referred to jointly as Hindustani.

### **The Diversity Of Languages In India**

India's large diversity of languages contributed to internal political problems during the 1950s and early 1960s. Although Gandhi had reorganized the Congress movement in 1920 to reflect linguistic divisions, and although the nationalist movement had always promised a reorganization of provincial boundaries once independence was achieved, Nehru resisted a demand to bring together the Telugu-speaking areas of the former British province of Madras and Hyderābād state. He yielded only when the leader of the movement fasted to death, and severe riots broke out. A States Reorganization Commission was appointed, and in 1956 the interior boundaries of India were redrawn along linguistic lines. In 1960 much of the land making up Bombay state was divided into Mahārāshtra and Gujarāt states, with the remainder going to Karnātaka

state. In 1966 most of Punjab was split into the states of Punjab and Haryāna after significant public protest. Aside from some minor border disputes, and with additional states formed mainly in northeast India, the reorganization generally strengthened India's unity.

The thorny problem of a national language for the country remained. The constitution specified that Hindi, spoken in many dialects by 40 percent of Indians, would become the official language in 1965, after a transition in which English, spoken by the educated elite of the country, would serve. Non-Hindi speakers, especially in the south Indian state of Madras (later renamed Tamil Nādu), mobilized against central government efforts to impose Hindi. To settle the dispute, the government allowed continued use of English for states that wished to keep it.

### **Official Languages**

No one common language is spoken on the Indian subcontinent. Hindi and English are the coofficial national languages of India, and both tongues are used as lingua francas in the various linguistic regions. In Pakistan, the official language is Urdu; the official language of Bangladesh is Bengali.

Also see: [http://india.gov.in/knowindia/official\\_language.php](http://india.gov.in/knowindia/official_language.php)

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## The Hindi Alphabet





**FUN FACT**

This is the reverse side of a five rupee banknote – see five rupees written in 15 languages on the left hand side. From top to bottom<sup>2</sup> they are Assamese, Bengali, Gujarati, Kannada, Kashmiri, Konkani, Malayalam, Marathi, Nepali, Oriya, Punjabi, Sanskrit, Tamil, Telugu, Urdu.



<sup>2</sup> Source: [http://www.rbi.org.in/Scripts/ic\\_languagepanel.aspx](http://www.rbi.org.in/Scripts/ic_languagepanel.aspx)