



# Linguistic Diversity and Education

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## Why in News?

A [United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization \(UNESCO\)](#) report, titled "*Languages Matter: Global Guidance on Multilingual Education*," released on the **25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of International Mother Language Day**, highlights the impact of language barriers on global education outcomes.

## What are the Key Highlights of the UNESCO Report on Language?

- **Language Barrier in Education:** **40% of the global population** lacks access to education in a language they **speak or understand**. In **low- and middle-income countries**, this percentage **rises to 90%**, affecting **over 250 million learners**.
  - Migration is **increasing linguistic diversity**, with over 31 million displaced youth facing language barriers in education.
- **Legacy of Colonialism:** Many **post-colonial nations** continue to use non-native languages as the **medium of instruction**. Local languages remain **undervalued in formal education**, disadvantaging native speakers.
- **Immigration and Education:** Immigration has led to **linguistically diverse classrooms**, especially in **high-income countries**. These countries struggle with **language acquisition support, inclusive curricula, and fair assessments**.
  - **Policy responses vary**, some countries promote bilingual education, while others prioritize quick immersion in the dominant language.
- **Challenges in Implementation:** Despite growing awareness, challenges like **limited teacher capacity, lack of materials, and community opposition** hinder the adoption of multilingual education.
- **Policy Recommendations:** The report calls for context-specific language policies and curriculum adjustments.
  - Support for teacher training, multilingual materials, and inclusive learning environments.
  - Focus on fostering inclusion through school leadership and community collaboration.

**Note:** International Mother Language Day was proposed by **Bangladesh**, approved during the **1999 UNESCO General Conference**, and has been observed globally on 21st February since 2000.

- The day also honors **Bangladesh's struggle to protect its mother language, Bangla**.
- UNESCO advocates for cultural and linguistic diversity to promote sustainability, tolerance, respect, and peace.

## How Has India's Linguistic Landscape Evolved?

- **Prehistoric Times:** While human habitation in India predates Sanskrit, **no written records exist**

from prehistoric times, making it difficult to reconstruct early languages.

- **Indus Valley Civilization:** The [Indus script \(2600-1900 BCE\)](#) remains undeciphered, making it unclear whether it represents an early form of Dravidian, Indo-Aryan, or another language family.
- **The Rise of Sanskrit, Prakrits, and Tamil:** Writing appeared in India **24 centuries ago**, mainly through **inscriptions and manuscripts**.
  - **Sanskrit and Prakrits:** [Sanskrit](#) emerged as a dominant **literary and scholarly language**, while **Prakrits** (a group of vernacular classical Middle Indo-Aryan languages) coexisted with it.
  - **Tamil:** Tamil developed as an **independent classical language**, with the [Sangam literature \(3rd century BCE – 3rd century CE\)](#) marking its rich literary tradition.
- **Influence of Foreign and Regional Languages:**
  - **Foreign Languages:** With the spread of **Islamic rule**, **Persian and Arabic** influenced **Indian languages**, leading to linguistic amalgamations like **Urdu**.
    - Over the last 5,000 years, India absorbed languages like **Avestan, Austro-Asiatic, Tibeto-Burman, and Indo-Aryan**, creating a rich linguistic legacy.
  - **Dravidian and Tibeto-Burman Growth:** The **Dravidian languages** (Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, Malayalam) and **Tibeto-Burman languages of the Northeast** flourished with **regional literature and administrative use**.
- **Printing Revolution:** The **use of paper and later printing** transformed literacy, leading to **mass production of books** in regional languages.
- **Post-Colonial Language Shift:**
  - **Colonial Impact:** English became a **language of administration, education, and economic opportunity** under British rule.
  - **Decline of Persian and Sanskrit:** As English gained prominence, **Persian declined in administration** and **Sanskrit remained confined to religious and scholarly use**.
- **Emergence of Modern Indian Languages:** Regional languages like **Hindi, Tamil, Bengali, Kannada, Marathi, and Telugu** gained **literary and political recognition**.
  - Languages in the [Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution](#) see higher speaker numbers, whereas languages not included face decline.
    - Many languages spoken by **Adivasi communities**, especially from the Austro-Asiatic and Tibeto-Burman families, face extinction due to demographic shifts.
  - Despite the rise of **print capitalism** and **digital technology**, the growth of English poses a challenge to Indian languages, especially in urban areas.

**Note:** The [Right to Education \(RTE\) Act, 2009](#), and [National Education Policy \(NEP\) 2020](#) both emphasize the importance of mother tongue in education.

- **NEP 2020** recommends using the **home language/mother tongue** as the medium of instruction till Grade 5, preferably till Grade 8, to promote regional languages and ensure effective, inclusive learning through multilingual education.

### **Drishti Mains Question:**

Evaluate the role of migration and displaced populations in shaping the linguistic landscape of India. How can education systems adapt to this growing diversity?

## **UPSC Civil Services Examination, Previous Year Questions (PYQs)**

### **Q. Consider the following statements: (2021)**

1. 21<sup>st</sup> February is declared to be the International Mother Language Day by UNICEF.
2. The demand that Bangla has to be one of the national languages was raised in the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan.

**Which of the above statements is/are correct?**

- (a) 1 only
- (b) 2 only
- (c) Both 1 and 2
- (d) Neither 1 nor 2

**Ans: (b)**

**Exp:**

- The Constituent Assembly of Pakistan, in its session at Karachi on 23rd February, 1948 proposed that the members would have to speak either in Urdu or in English at the Assembly. Dhirendranath Datta, a member from the East Pakistan Congress Party, moved an amendment motion to include Bangla as one of the languages of the Constituent Assembly. In the same year, the Government of the Dominion of Pakistan ordained Urdu as the sole national language, sparking extensive protests among the Bengalispeaking majority of East Bengal.
- The students of the University of Dhaka and other political activists defied the law and organised a protest on 21st February, 1952. After years of conflict, the government relented and granted official status to the Bengali language in 1956. In Bangladesh, 21 February is observed as Language Movement Day. Hence, statement 2 is correct.
- International Mother Language Day is observed on 21st February every year. It was declared by UNESCO and not by UNICEF. It is in tribute to the Language Movement and the ethnolinguistic rights of people around the world. Hence, statement 1 is not correct.
- **Therefore, option (b) is the correct answer.**

**Q. With reference to India, the terms 'Halbi, Ho and Kui' pertain to (2021)**

- (a) dance forms of Northwest India
- (b) musical instruments
- (c) pre-historic cave paintings
- (d) tribal languages

**Ans: (d)**

**Exp:**

- Odisha has a unique place in India due to its vast population of tribals residing in the state. 62 tribal communities live in Odisha which is 22.8% of the total population of Odisha.
- Odisha's tribal language is divided into 3 main language families. They are Austro-Asiatic (Munda), Dravida and Indo-Aryan. Every tribe has its own language and language family. The languages include:
  - Austro-Asiatic: Bhumij, Birhor, Rem (Bonda), Gatah (Didyai), Gutab (Gadaba), Sora(Saora), Gorum (Parenga), Khadia, Juang, Santali, Ho, Mundari, etc.
  - Dravida: Gondi, Kui-Kondh, Kuvi-Kondh, Kisan, Koya, Olari, (Gadaba) Parja, Peng, Kudukh (Oraon) etc.
  - Indo Aryan: Bathudi, Bhuyan, Kurmali, Sounti, Sadri, Kandhan, Aghria, Desia, Jharia, Halbi, Bhatri, Matia, Bhunjia, etc.
  - Out of these languages only 7 have scripts. They are Santali (Olchiki), Saora ( Sorang Sampeng), Ho (Warangchiti), Kui (Kui Script), Oraon (Kukhud Tod), Mundari (Bani Hisir), Bhumij (Bhumij Anl). Santali language has been included in the 8th Schedule of the Indian Constitution.
- **Therefore, option (d) is the correct answer.**

