

Major Language Families/ CC-14

The Indian languages belong to four language families: **Indo-European, Dravidian, Mon-Khmer,** and **Sino-Tibetan.**

Indo-European and Dravidian languages are used by a large majority of India's population. The language families divide roughly into geographic groups. Languages of the Indo-European group are spoken mainly in northern and central regions.

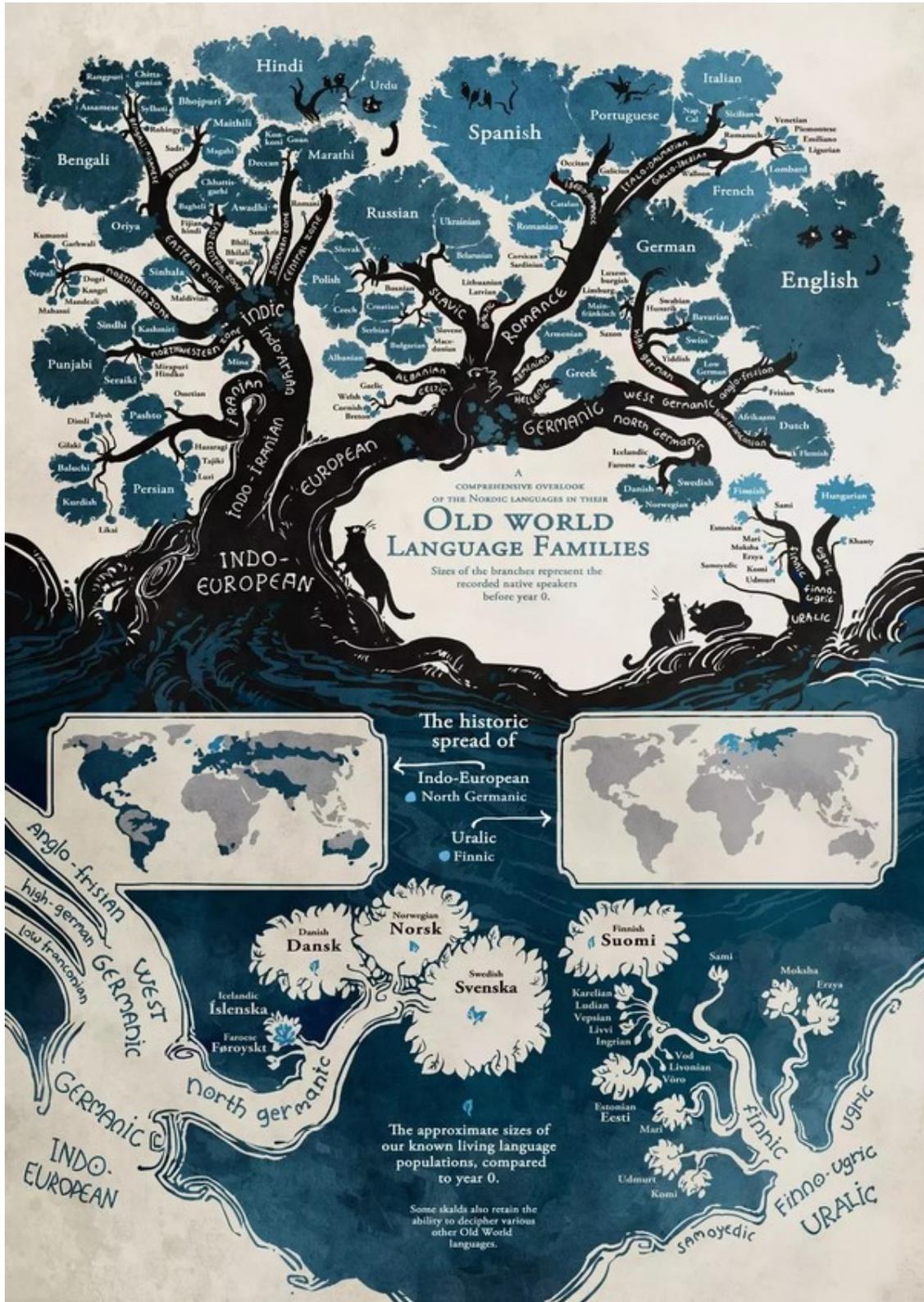
The languages of southern India are mainly of the **Dravidian group.** Some ethnic groups in Assam and other parts of eastern India speak languages of the **Mon-Khmer group.** People in the northern Himalayan region and near the Burmese border speak **Sino-Tibetan languages.**

Speakers of 54 different languages of the Indo-European family make up about three-quarters of India's population. **Twenty Dravidian** languages are spoken by nearly a quarter of the people. Speakers of **20 Mon-Khmer** languages and **98 Sino-Tibetan** languages together make up about 2 percent of the population.

The heritage of the ancient and medieval periods of Indian culture is still a part of India today. But when India became exposed to European culture (and eventually became part of the British Empire) it came heavily under the influence of Western ideas. Some Indian writers reacted to the European presence by reviving the ancient values of Hinduism. Other writers eagerly adopted Western forms of writing such as journalism and the novel.

The modern period of Indian literature began in the 1800's, a period of great social change. All the major languages evolved a thriving literature which they still possess. The most important development was the increased importance of prose. Although prose works had existed in earlier Indian literature, most traditional texts (which were largely religious in content or feeling) had been written in verse. During the modern period, Indian prose achieved maturity as a vehicle for expressing a wide range of ideas.

Two related developments helped the process of change. One was the introduction of **the printing press** by Christian missionaries (scribes had hand-copied texts in earlier times). The other development was **the birth of Indian journalism.** The spread of Western-style education helped produce a new readership for the new literature. Writers expressed ideas of social reform, and laid great emphasis on realism.



WORLD LANGUAGE FAMILIES

The languages of India primarily belong to two major linguistic families, Indo-European (whose branch Indo-Aryan is spoken by about 75 percent of the population) and Dravidian (spoken by about 25 percent). Other languages spoken in India come mainly from the Austro-Asiatic and Tibeto-Burman linguistic families, as well as a few language isolates. Individual mother tongues in India number several hundred, and more than a thousand if major dialects are included. The **SIL**(Summer Institute of Linguistics) **Ethnologue** lists over 400 languages for India; 24 of these languages are spoken by more than a million native speakers, and 114 by more than 10,000. Three millennia of political and social contact have resulted in mutual influence among the four language families in India and South Asia. Two contact languages have played an important role in the history of India: Persian and English.

While Hindi is the official language of the central government in India, with English as a provisional official sub-language, individual state legislatures can adopt any regional language as the official language of that state. The Constitution of India recognizes 23 official languages, spoken in different parts of the country, and two official classical languages, Sanskrit and Tamil.

The Constitution of India now recognizes 23 languages, spoken in different parts of the country. These consist of English plus 22 Indian languages: Assamese, Bengali, Bodo, Dogri, Gujarati, Hindi, Kannada, Kashmiri, Konkani, Maithili, Malayalam, Meitei, Marathi, Nepali, Oriya, Punjabi, Sanskrit, Santhali, Sindhi, Tamil, Telugu and Urdu. Hindi is a official language of the states of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, Uttaranchal, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh, Himachal Pradesh, Haryana and the National Capital Territory of Delhi. Tamil is an official language of Tamil Nadu, Pondicherry and Andaman Nicobar Islands.

English is the co-official language of the Indian Union, and each of the several states mentioned above may also have another co-official language.

Hindi and English

The Indian constitution declares Hindi in **Devanagari** script to be the official language of the union. Unless Parliament decided otherwise, the use of English for official purposes was officially to cease after the constitution came into effect, on January 26, 1965.

The prospect of the changeover led to much alarm in the non Hindi-speaking areas of India, as a result of which Parliament enacted the Official Languages Act, 1963, providing for the continued use of English for official purposes along with Hindi, even after 1965. An attempt was made in late 1964 to expressly provide for an end to the use of English, but it was met with protests from across the country, some of which turned violent. Widespread protests occurred in states such as Tamil Nadu, **Kerala**, West Bengal, **Karnataka**, Pondicherry and **Andhra Pradesh**. As a result of these protests, the proposal was dropped, and the Act itself was amended in 1967 to provide that the use of English would not be ended until a resolution to that effect was passed by the legislature of every state that had not adopted Hindi as its official language, and by each house of the Indian Parliament.

The languages of India may be grouped by major language families. The largest of these families in terms of speakers is the Indo-European family, predominantly represented in its Indo-Aryan branch (accounting for some 700 million speakers), but also including minority languages such as Persian, Portuguese or French, and English spoken as lingua franca. The second largest is the Dravidian family, accounting for some 200 million speakers. Minor linguistic families include the Munda with approximately nine million speakers, and Tibeto-Burman families with approximately six million speakers. There is also a language isolate, the Nihali language.

Nihali has been shown to be related to Kusunda of central Nepal. However, the proposed Indo-Pacific relationship has not been established through the comparative method, and has been dismissed as speculation by most comparative linguists. Nihali and Kusunda are spoken by hunting people living in forests. Both languages have accepted many loan words from other languages, Nihali having loans from Munda (Korku), Dravidian and Indic languages.

Bengali arose from the eastern Middle Indic languages of the Indian subcontinent. Magadhi Prakrit, the earliest recorded spoken language in the region, had evolved into Ardhamagadhi ("Half Magadhi") in the early part of the first millennium C.E. Ardhamagadhi, as with all of the Prakrits of North India, began to give way to what are called Apabhramsa languages just before the turn of the first millennium. The local Apabhramsa language of the eastern subcontinent, Purvi Apabhramsa or Apabhramsa Abahatta, eventually evolved into regional dialects, which in turn formed three groups: the Bihari languages, the Oriya languages, and the Bengali-Assamese languages. Some argue for much earlier points of divergence, going back to as early as 500 C.E., but the language was not static; different varieties coexisted and authors often wrote in multiple dialects.

(Source : ***New World Encyclopedia***)