

Indian Languages and Literature

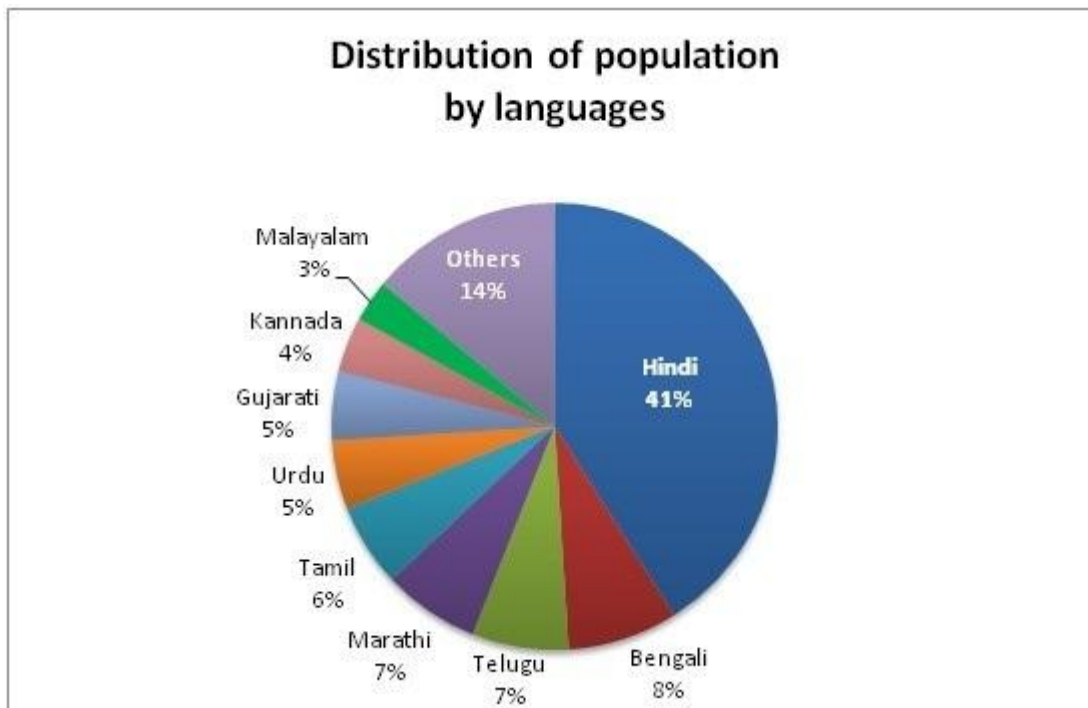
Introduction

Thousands of years ago, the people of the Harappan civilisation knew how to write. Unfortunately their script has not yet been deciphered. Despite this setback, it is safe to state that the literary traditions of India go back to over 3,000 years ago.

India is a huge land with a continuous history spanning several millennia. There is a staggering degree of variety and diversity in the languages and dialects spoken by Indians. This diversity is a result of influx of languages and ideas from all over the continent, mostly through migration from Central, Eastern and Western Asia. There are differences and variations in the languages and dialects as a result of several factors – ethnicity, history, geography and others.

There is a broad social integration among all the speakers of a certain language. In the beginning languages and dialects developed in the different regions of the country in relative isolation. In India, languages are often a mark of identity of a person, and define regional boundaries. Cultural mixing among various races and communities led to the mixing of languages and dialects to a great extent, although they still maintain regional identity.

In free India, the broad geographical distribution pattern of major language groups was used as one of the decisive factors for the formation of states. This gave a new political meaning to the geographical pattern of the linguistic distribution in the country. According to the 1961 census figures, the most comprehensive data on languages collected in India, there were 187 languages spoken by different sections of our society. Of course there are hundreds of other languages and dialects apart from these, each with their own culture and intangible heritage.



Hindi is the spoken language with the largest number of native speakers.

Languages of India

As many as 94 languages are spoken by less than 10,000 persons each, while 23 languages together account for 77 percent of the total population of the country. According to some scholars, the total number of languages and dialects in the country is about 700 (nearly 175 languages and 550 dialects). Out of this considerable number, 22 are recognised as national languages by the Constitution.

These languages are: Assamese, Bengali, Bodo, Dogri, Gujarati, Hindi, Kannada, Kashmiri, Konkani, Maithili, Malayalam, Manipuri, Marathi, Nepali, Odia, Punjabi, Sanskrit, Santhali, Sindhi, Tamil, Telugu and Urdu.

Nearly three-fourths of India's population speaks one or the other forms of the so-called 'Aryan languages'. Dardic and Indo-Aryan are its two main branches. The Dardic group includes Dardi, Shina, Kohistani and Kashmiri. Except Kashmiri which is spoken by more than 20 lakh people, most of these languages aren't very widespread, and are spoken by a small

minority of people. The Indo-Aryan branch is subdivided into the North-Western, Southern, Eastern, East-Central, Central and Northern groups.

Landa, Kachchi and Konkani are included in North-Western group. Marathi and Konkani are included in the southern group. Odiya, Bengali, Assamese and the Bihari dialects - Maithili, Bhojpuri and Magadhi – are included in Eastern group. The East-Central group consists of three main sub-groups: (a) Avadhi, (b) Baghaili and (c) Chattisgarhi. The Central Group includes Western Hindi, Punjabi, Rajasthani and Gujarati.

Rajasthani itself consists of several dialects, the most prominent of them all being Marwari, Mewari and Malawi. Finally, the Northern group consists of one or other variety of Pahari dialects, including Nepali, Central Pahari and Western Pahari.

In terms of number of speakers, Hindi occupies fourth place in the world. It consists of several dialects: Khari Boli is one of them. Urdu is similar to Hindi and is widely spoken in this belt. Other languages of this group are Punjabi, and Gujarati concentrated in the states of Punjab and Gujarat, respectively.

Kachchi and Sindhi are spoken in Gujarat and Rajasthan. Marathi speakers are mainly concentrated in the state of Maharashtra. Odia, Bengali and Assamese are languages of the eastern group and are spoken in eastern India, mainly in Odisha, West Bengal and Assam respectively. Kashmiri, Kohistani, Shina and Dardi are spoken in different parts of Jammu and Kashmir.

While Aryans occupied most of the northern parts of the country, Dravidian kingdoms ruled over Southern India. A relative paucity of mixing of ideas and cultures resulted in the languages, and even the cultures of the areas, developing independently of the other.

Dravidian languages are much older than the Aryan languages. According to an estimate, Dravidians entered India much before the Aryans.

The Dravidian family of languages consists of a number of groups such as (i) South-Dravidian, (ii) Central-Dravidian and (iii) North Dravidian. The major languages such as Tamil, Malayalam, Kannada, as well as the minor languages or dialects such as Tulu, Coorgi and Yerukala are included in the South-Dravidian group. Central Dravidian group mainly consists of Telugu and the relatively lesser-known Gondi. The Northern Dravidian group consist of Kurukh (Oraon) and Malto.

The major language groups like Tamil, Telugu, Kannada and Malayalam account for 96 per cent of the total population of Dravidian speakers.

Sino-Tibetan languages are spoken by a variety of people. Depending upon their region and settlement, they are put into several groups and sub-groups. The three main branches are (i) Tibeto-Himalayan (ii) North-Assam and (iii) Assam-Myanmari (Burmese). The Tibeto-Himalayan branch consists of the following: (a) Bhutia group; and (b) Himalayan group.

The Bhutia group includes Tibetan, Balti, Ladakhi, Lahuli, Sherpa and Sikkim Bhutia. The Himalayan group consists of Chamba, Kanauri and Lepcha. Ladakhi has largest number of speakers followed by Sikkim, Bhutia and the Tibetan. In the Himalayan group the speakers of Kanauri have the highest numerical strength. The North-Assam or Arunachal branch includes: (i) Aka (ii) Dafla (iii) Abor (iv) Miri (v) Mishmi and (vi) Mishing. In this group of six, the Miris have the largest number of speakers.

The Assam-Myanmari (Burmese) branch of the Sino-Tibetan family is divided into the following groups: (i) Bodo or Bero, (ii) Naga (iii) Kachin (iv) Kukichin and (v) Myanmar (Burma) group. There are several speeches in each of these groups. Among them the Naga group displays the highest degree of density there are as many as six dialects having a total strength varying between 1 and 7 lakhs. Manipuri has the largest number of speakers of this category.

Distribution of languages in India

The Khasi language is confined to the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, while Nicobariis spoken on the Nicobar Islands. These languages have no affinity to either Dravidian or Aryan languages, possibly due to their isolation.

The Sino-Tibetan languages and dialects are mostly spoken in areas bordering the Tibetan plateau, which is essentially north and north eastern India. Ladakh, parts of Himachal Pradesh and Sikkim are places with highest population of speakers. Among the Assam Myanmari groups, Naga dialects are spoken in Nagaland, Lushai is concentrated in Mizo hills, Garo in the Garo hills and Metei in Manipur.

Most states south of Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra, are predominantly Dravidian language oriented. Telugu is spoken in Andhra Pradesh; Tamil in Tamil Nadu, Kannada in Karnataka and Malayalam in Kerala. Tribal communities such as the Gonds of Madhya Pradesh and Central India and the Oraons of Chotanagpur plateau also speak languages that may be classified under the Dravidian branch.

People living as far south as the Konkan coast speak Indo-Aryan languages. Hindi is spoken in Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh and the Union Territory of Delhi. Urdu is also widely distributed in this belt.

A major concentration of those people who communicate in Urdu dominantly is found in U.P. Bihar, Delhi, Andhra Pradesh, and Karnataka. Kachchi and Sindhi are mainly concentrated in Western India.

Marathi, the most important Indo-Aryan language of the Southern group, is spoken in Maharashtra. The languages of the Eastern group such as Odia, Bengali and Assamese are spoken in Orissa, West Bengal and Assam respectively. The language of the Central group like Punjabi and Gujarati are confined to Punjab and Gujarat respectively. The speakers of

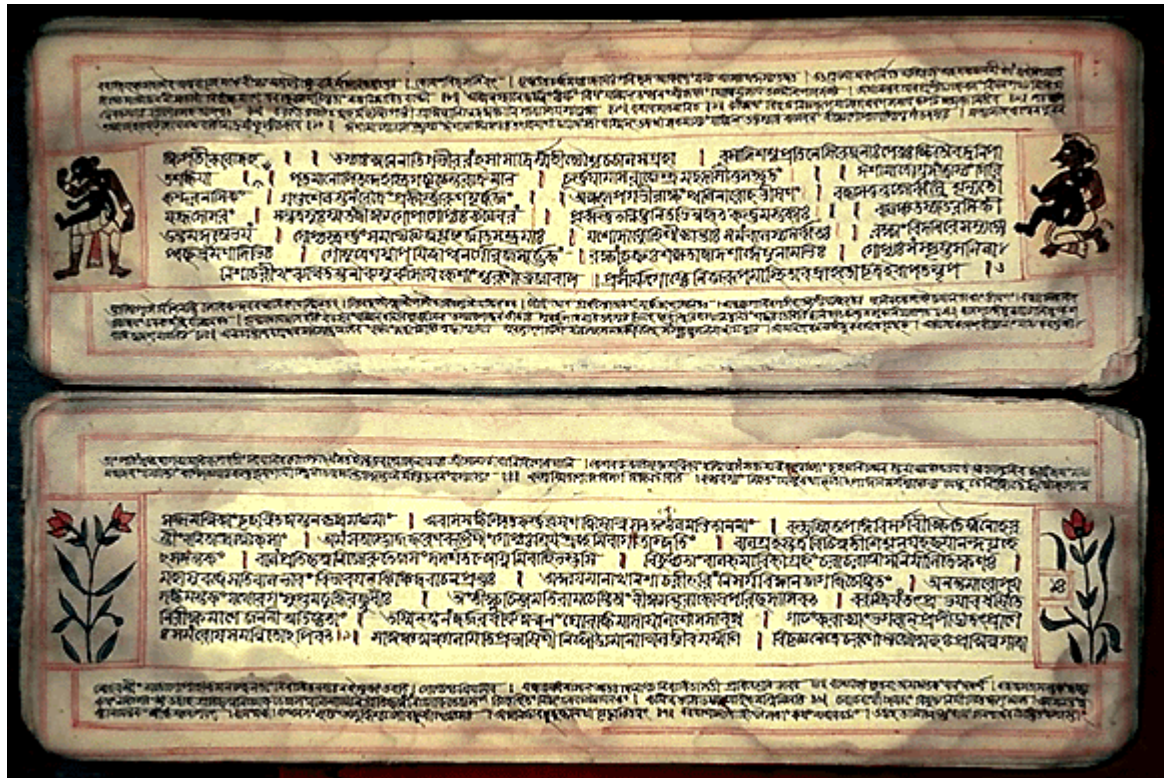
the various forms of Pahari and the Nepali inhabit the Himalayan and sub Himalayan areas of Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand.

State boundaries do not always correspond with linguistic boundaries. The linguistic boundary in itself is not a line but a zone of transition over which one language gradually loses its dominance and gives way to the other. Even because of diverse languages and dialects India is not a country of diversities but of unity.

There is thus an intermingling of languages among the various linguistic groups. People are often bilingual or tri-lingual in several areas. Further, in many states, the major language of one of the adjacent states is the second most important language spoken by the second largest group of people in the state.

However, tribal languages do not fit into this scheme of regions as the tribal groups are concentrated in enclaves in Central, Eastern and North-Eastern parts of the country. The regional mosaic of the tribal language is highly complex and does not lend itself to a simplified scheme of regions.

Ancient Indian Literature



The Vedas were some of the first texts to be ever written in the history of mankind.

The Vedas are the earliest known literature in India. The Vedas were written in Sanskrit and were handed down orally from one generation to the other. To be able to keep such a literary wealth as the Vedas intact when the art of writing was not there and there was a paucity of writing material is unprecedented in world history. The word 'Veda' literally translates to knowledge. In Hindu culture, Vedas are considered as eternal and divine revelations. They treat the whole world as one human family -*VasudevaKutumbakam*. There are four Vedas- *Rigveda*, *Yajurveda*, *Samaveda* and *Atharvaveda*.

Our two great epics are the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. The *Ramayana* narrated by the sage Valmiki is considered to be the original *Ramayana*. It is also called *Adikavya* and Maharishi (great sage) Valmiki is known as *AdiKavi*. The *Ramayana* presents a picture of an

ideal society, led by an ideal king, Lord Rama. The other epic, the Mahabharata, is said to have been written by Veda Vyasa. It was originally written in Sanskrit and contained 8,800 verses and was called “Jaya”, or a collection dealing with victory. These were raised to 24,000 and came to be known as Bharata, named after one of the earliest Vedic tribes.

The final compilation brought the verses to 100,000, which came to be known as the Mahabharata or the Satasahasri Samhita. It contains a narrative relating to conflict between two sets of cousins, the Kauravas and the Pandavas, vying for the kingdom of Hastinapur. The Mahabharata and the Ramayana have several renderings in different Indian languages. The Mahabharata contains the famous *Bhagavad Gita*, or the ‘Song of the divine’, which is said to contain the essence of divine wisdom. While Hinduism is not “a religion of the book”, unlike Christianity or Islam, the Bhagavad Gita is considered to be one of the most sacred Hindu texts.



The Bhagavad Gita has become a symbol of the ideas of Hinduism throughout the world.

The religious books of the Jains and the Buddhists refer to historical people or incidents concerning their religions, rather than folklore. The earliest Buddhist works were written in Pali, which was spoken in Magadha. The Buddhist works can be divided into the canonical and the non-canonical. The canonical literature is best represented by the "Tripitakas", that is, three baskets - VinayaPitaka, SuttaPitaka and AbhidhammaPitaka. VinayaPitaka deals with rules and regulations of daily life. SuttaPitaka contains dialogues and discourses on morality and deals with Dharma while AbhidhammaPitaka deals with philosophy and metaphysics. It includes discourses on various subjects such as ethics, psychology, theories of knowledge and metaphysical problems.

The Hindi resurgence

Hindi evolved during the Apabhramsa stage between the 7th and 8th centuries and the 14th century A.D. It was characterised as Veergatha Kala i.e. the age of heroic poetry or the Adi Kala (early period). It was patronised by the Rajput rulers as it glorified chivalry and poetry. The most famous figures from this period were Kabir and Tulsidas. In modern times, the Khari dialect became more prominent and a variety of literature was produced in Sanskrit.

Similarly, Surdas wrote his *Sur Sagar* in which he talks of Krishna as an infant, a young lad indulging in pranks and a young man engaged in dalliance with the *gopis* or cowherd girls. These poets made a deep impression on the minds of the listeners. If the festivals associated with Rama and Krishna have become so very popular, the credit goes to these poets. Their versions became the source of inspiration not only for other poets but also for painters in the medieval ages. They inspired Mirabai, who sang in the Rajasthani language, and Raskhan, who, despite being a Muslim, sang in praise of Krishna.



Harivanshrai Bachchan is known for his works such as Madhushala and Agneepath

However, it is only with the beginning of nineteenth century that Hindi prose came into its own. Bharatendu Harishchandra was one of the earliest to produce dramas in Hindi which were basically translations of texts written in Sanskrit and other languages. Among other names who enriched Hindi literature greatly are Munshi Premchand, who switched over from Urdu to Hindi.

Jaishankar Prasad, Suryakant Tripathi 'Nirala', Sumitranandan Pant and Mahadevi Varma are considered as the four pillars of the *Chhayavaadi* school of Hindi literature.

Chhayavaad refers to the era of neo-romanticism in Hindi literature, particularly Hindi poetry, from 1922 to 1938 and was marked by an upsurge of romantic and humanist content. *Chhayavaad* was marked by a renewed sense of the self and personal expression, visible in the writings of time. Other important figures of this literary movement were Ramdhari Singh 'Dinkar', Harivansh Rai Bachchan, Makhanlal Chaturvedi and Pandit Narendra Sharma.

Surya Kant Tripathi 'Nirala', achieved recognition because he questioned the orthodoxies in society. Mahadevi Verma was the first woman writer in Hindi to highlight issues related to women. Novels, dramas, short stories, criticism, music and essays, all flowed from the pen

of one of India's greatest polymaths – Rabindranath Tagore. He won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1913 for his *Geetanjali*.

Regional literature

Assamese

Assamese can be traced back to the *Charyapadas* which are Buddhist songs composed about a thousand years ago. The *Borgeet* written by Shankaradev and Madhabdev is known as the soul song of Assam.

Bengali

Bengali can also be traced back to the *Charyapadas* which are Buddhist songs composed about a thousand years ago. In the 19th century modern Bengali literature came into being. Bankim Chandra Chatterji is considered the father of the modern Indian novel.

VandeMataram, the National Song of India, was taken from his historical novel, *Ananda Math*. Michael Madhusudan Dutt was the pioneer who broke out of traditionalism and experimented with Bengali poetry.

Rabindranath Tagore blended Vaishnava lyricism, the vigour of the folk medium and western influences together, and gave new life to Bengali language and literature. Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyaya's works explored life and suffering of women in society. Bengali authors and poets are too numerous to all be mentioned here – but some of the best known ones are Bibhuti Bhushan Bandopadhyaya, Satyajit Ray, Tarashankar Bandhopadhyaya and Ashapura Devi.

Bodo

Though Bodo is an ancient language, it did not have a written literature till the second decade of the 20th century. The language is written today using the Devanagari script, though it has also used the Assamese and Roman script from time to time. It is believed that the language was once written using a now-lost script called Deodhai.

Dogri

A member of the Western Pahari group of languages, it was originally written using the Takri script, but uses the Devanagari script today. The grammar has a strong Sanskrit base but the language has absorbed a large number of Arabic and Persian words.

Gujarati

Gujarati evolved from a dialect of the GurjaraApabhramsa. Early Gujarati literature is available in the form of Bhakti songs of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Narsi Mehta's name is an important one in this region. The people of Gujarat wove these devotional songs in their folk dances and their religious forms often find expressions in their celebrations. During the 15th century Gujarati literature was deeply influenced by the Bhakti movement, whose foremost poet was the saint Narsinh Mehta.

Modern Gujarati prose was given prominence by K.M.Munshi, Umashankar Joshi and Jyotindra Dave among others.

Kannada

The earliest Kannada texts date back to the 9th century. One of the earliest extant texts is Kavirajamarga. Pampa is called the father of Kannada poetry. Basaveswara introduced the *vachanasahitya* in writing in the 12th century. Kannada literature flourished under the Vijayanagar Kings. The first modern Kannada novel is Kempu Narayana's *Mudramanjusha* (1823). Prominent Kannada writers include MastiVenkateshlyengar, ShivaramKaranth, D.R. Bendre, Girish Karnad and U.R.Ananthamurthy.

Kashmiri

Patanjali, the author of the *Mahabhashya* – a commentary on Panini's grammar- originated from this region. Around the 10th century Kashmiri separated from its Sanskrit parentage. After Islamic conquest, Persian and Arabic influences grew.

Konkani

As a language it is close to Marathi and Hindi, and uses Devanagari as its script. There is a significant amount of Christian literature in Konkani, thanks to its Goan heritage.

Maithili

Traditionally written in the Maithili (or Tirhuta, Mithilakshar) script and Kaithi script, today it uses the Devanagari script. The earliest work in Maithili is *Varnaratnakara* which dates back to almost 700 years ago. In fact it is the earliest specimen of prose available in any indigenous North Indian language.

Malayalam

As a literary language Malayalam was influenced by Tamil, after which the influence waned. In the 15th century *Krishnagatha* by C.Namboodiri emerged as one of the most important works of Malayalam till then. In the 18th century KunchanNambiar took literature to the masses with his *thullals* – which are popular narrative poems full of satire and criticism.

Kundalatha is considered to be the first Malayalam novel. V.M.Basheer's works portrayed the Keralite Muslim community. T.S.Pillai wrote the masterpiece *Chemmeen*. G. SankaraKurup was the first to be awarded the Jnanpith Award.

Manipuri

Also known as Meetei literature, which dates back thousands of years. Unfortunately the PuyaMeithaba or burning of ancient Manipuri scriptures which occurred in 1729- during the reign of MeidinguPamheiba devastated Manipuri scriptures and colonial history.

Early Manipuri literature consisted of hymns, history and folktales.

One of the oldest Manipuri works is *Numit Kappa* – written in verse form.

Marathi

The earliest Marathi poetry and prose is by Saint Jnaneshwar (Gyaneshwar) who lived in the thirteenth century. He wrote a long commentary on the Bhagavad Gita. He was the one who started the kirtan tradition in Maharashtra. He was followed by Namdev, Gora, Sena and Janabai. All these sang and popularised the Marathi language. Their songs are sung even today by the Varkari pilgrims on their way to Pandharpur. Almost two centuries later, SantEknath (1533-99) came to the fore. SantEknath wrote commentaries on the Ramayana and the BhagawatPurana. His songs are very popular all over Maharashtra. Then came SantTukaram, who is considered the greatest Bhakti poet of them all. Samarth Ramdas wrote *Dasbodhand ManacheShlok*.



Samartha Ramdas was the author of the text Dasbodha.

Several writers revolutionised the Marathi language in the 19th century. This included Vishnu Shastri Chiplunkar, Gopal Agarkar, V.D. Savarkar and Bal Gangadhar Tilak. Later, after independence writers like Vijay Tendulkar have kept the flame of Marathi literature burning brightly.

Nepali

Nepali has grown from Khas Parkrit. Bhanunhakta Acharya is considered to be the first poet in Nepali.

Odia

Traces of Odia have been found in inscriptions dating to the 7th century. 5 poets emerged towards the 16th century- Balaram Das, Jagannath Das, Achyutananda Das, Ananta Das and Jasobanta Das – collectively known as the '*Panchasakhas*'. Under the Bhakti movement Chaitanya's influence coloured Odia literature deeply. Fakir Mohan Senapati took Odia literature to the forefront. Post-independence, Sachin Chandra Routray won the Jnanpith Award.

Punjabi

The earliest traces of Punjabi is found in fragments of writings of the 11th century Nath yogis Gorakshanath and Charpatnah. Punjabi literary tradition is said to begin with Fariduddin Ganjshakar, in the 12th century.

The development of modern Punjabi with the Gurmukhi script emerged in the 15th century. The *Adi Granth*, is an early example of Punjabi poetry, steeped in religion and mysticism. Punjabi Sufi poetry developed under Shah Hussain, Sultan Bahu, Ali Haider and Bulleh Shah.

The *Qissa of Heer-Ranjha* by Waris Shah, *Sohni-Mahiwal* by Fazal Shah, *SassiPannun* by Hashim Shah and *QissaPuranBhagat* by Qadaryay found favour. Beautiful poems written by both known and unknown poets have come down to us. These continue to be sung by local singers since two or three hundred years.

Bhai Vir Singh is considered to be the father of modern Punjabi literature. Mohan Singh and Amrita Pritam brought a progressive note into poetry.

Santhali

Spoken by people in India, Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan; it is part of the Austro-asiatic languages. Written in the Roman script during British times, it is now written in Devanagari. However the need for a Santhali script was felt, and Pt. Raghunath Murmu, known as Guru Gomke, invented the OlChiki script for writing Santhali.

Sindhi

The earliest poetry in Sindhi dates to the 14th century. Sindhi is today the principal language of Sind province in Pakistan, the large Indian Sindhi community and the Sindhi diaspora across the world.

Tamil

The oldest of the Dravidian languages, Tamil uniquely is a classical language like Sanskrit as well as a modern Indian language. Dating the Tamil language is a problem, but it can safely be stated that it is at least 2,000 years old.

One of the earliest phases of Tamil literature is the *Sangam* period – composed largely in Madurai. Thiruvalluvar's *Thirukurral*, written in a masterful style, has drawn from the *Dharmashastra*, the *Arthashastra* and the *Kamasutra*.

The epic *Silappadikaram* by IlangoAdigal is a well-known Tamil work. In modern times SubramanyaBharathi introduced a new poetic style in Tamil. Kalki Krishnamurthy started the journal *Kalki* and wrote the epic *PonniyanSelvan*.

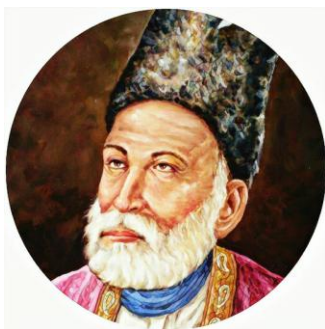
Telugu

Although recorded as early as the 7th century, it probably came into its own in the 11th century. Thyagaraja of Tanjore composed devotional songs in Telugu – which today form the largest part of the repertoire of Carnatic Music. Kandukuri Veeresalingam brought about a renaissance in Telugu literature.

Urdu

Arabic and Persian were introduced in India with the coming of the Turks and the Mongols. Urdu as a language was born out of the interaction between Hindi and Persian. After the conquest of Delhi (1192), the Turkish people settled in this region. Urdu was born out of the interaction of these settlers and soldiers in the barracks with the common people. Originally it was a dialect but slowly it acquired all the features of a formal language when its authors started using the Persian script. It was given a further impetus by its use in the Bahamani states of Ahmadnagar, Golkonda, Bijapur and Berar, where it was called dakshini or Daccani (southern). As time passed, it became popular in Delhi.

Urdu was given pride of place by a large number of poets who have left inimitable poetry for posterity. The earliest Urdu poet is considered to be Khusrau (1253-1325). He started writing as a poet in the reign of Sultan Balban and was a follower of Nizam-ud-din Auliya. He is said to have composed ninety-nine works on separate themes and numerous verses of poetry. Among the important works composed by him are *Laila Majnun* and *Ayina-I-Sikandari* dedicated to Alau-din-Khalji. Among other well-known poets are Ghalib, Zauq, and Iqbal. "*Sarejahaan se achcha, Hindostanhamara*" was written by Iqbal, and is a mark of patriotism. It is sung and played at many national celebrations in India.



One of the pioneers of Urdu literature in India, Ghalib lives on through his work.

Among the best prose writers were people like Pandit Ratan Nath Sarshar, who wrote the famous *Fasanaah-i-Azad*. In the early days, Munshi Prem Chand, who is supposed to be a doyen of Hindi literature, wrote in Urdu. Urdu has given us a new form of poem called a *nazm*, a unique kind of lyrical poetry, of which *geet*, *doha*, *qawwali* and *tarana* are just some forms.

Others: Anglo-Indian writing

English was once a foreign language but today hundreds of millions of people use the language in India. Indian literature in English dates back to the 1830s. Among early exponents were the poets Henry Vivian Derozio and Michael Madhusudan Dutt. Over the last 200 years, Aurobindo Ghose, Sarojini Naidu and Jawaharlal Nehru wrote masterpieces in the language.

Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan, Manohar Moolgaonkar, Anita Desai, Nayantara Sehgal, Khushwant Singh, Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth and Amitav Ghosh all popularised Indian writing in English globally.

Arundhati Roy won the 1997 Man Booker Prize for her work *The God of Small Things*, and Kiran Desai, for her novel *The Inheritance of Loss*, repeated the feat in 2006.

Others: Rajasthani

Rajasthani, a dialect of Hindi, has had its own unique trajectory. The bards (itinerant singers) moved from place to place, providing entertainment and keeping the stories of heroes alive. It was from these ballads that Colonel Todd collected the heroic stories of Rajasthan and put them in the *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan*. But the devotional songs of Mira Bai have a place of pride in the history of language as well as devotional music. Mira Bai's love for Lord Krishna is sometimes so intense that it transcends this mundane world to the sublime.

Summary

Indian literature has had a rich history, and the influx of different ideas from different parts of the country gives different angles to literature depending on which part of the country

you are in. India undoubtedly has one of the most colourful and varied histories when it comes to literature.