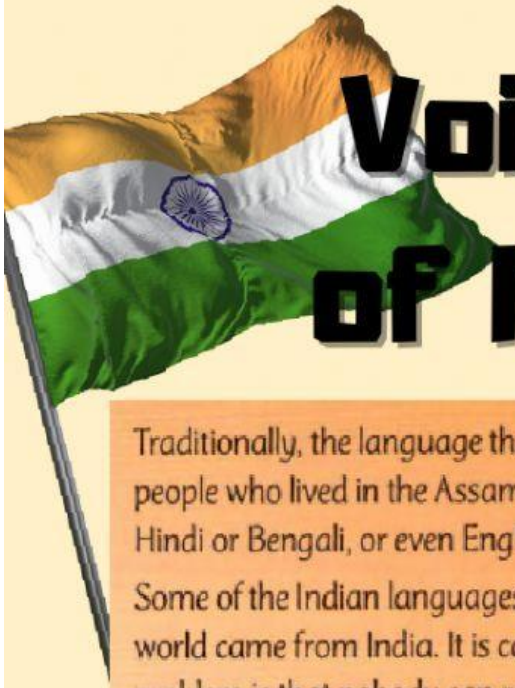


Voices of India

India has an incredible number of different languages. There are 22 major languages and over 1,600 regional dialects or varieties of those languages. Hindi is the official language of India and has more than 250 million speakers, but many people don't speak the official language at all.

Traditionally, the language that people learnt and spoke depended on where they lived. For example, people who lived in the Assam region of India spoke Assamese, though now people there may speak Hindi or Bengali, or even English!

Some of the Indian languages are extremely old. One of the earliest known written scripts in the world came from India. It is called Harapan and it has pictures like Egyptian hieroglyphs. The problem is that nobody can read or understand Harapan today.

Sanskrit is also an ancient language. Some of the written stories in Sanskrit are more than 5,000 years old. But Sanskrit is almost a dead language as few people actually speak it today - there are only around 200 thousand people who can speak Sanskrit well.

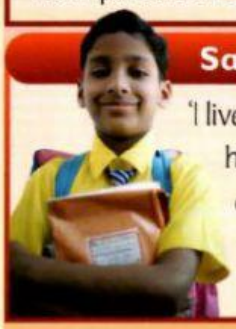
These days, English is very widely spoken, especially in government and education, and it is sometimes called the working language of India. Although people have many different mother tongues, English is often the second language which is acquired once formal education begins.

But English is not the dominant language in every aspect of Indian life. In homes across the country, hundreds of very old dialects are being passed on from generation to generation. Outside the home, films are being produced, and newspapers and books are being written in all the major languages, and over 50 languages are taught in schools.

Haresh, 11, Kashmir

'I'm from Kashmir. I speak Urdu because it's the official language here – most of my classes are taught in Urdu. I also speak Kashmiri because my parents speak it at home to me, and I speak a little English at school. I think learning languages is important because it's important to communicate with people.'

Samir, 12, Delhi



'I live in a big city called Delhi. It is really multilingual here. I speak Punjabi at home because my older relatives don't understand any other language. Some of my friends speak different languages at home. I'm learning English at school, but I also learn lots of English by watching English cartoons on TV, so I think it's fun to learn other languages.'

Mala, 11, Rajasthan

'I live in Rajasthan and Hindi is my first language. I'm learning English at school. My parents speak a dialect called Malvi. I speak this a little too, but I can't write anything in Malvi. I prefer speaking and writing in Hindi. I really like watching Hindi films! I'm glad I can speak different languages.'

I. Match the words in bold from the text to the definitions.

1 aspect (noun) one part of a situation.
2 _____ (noun) types of writing.
3 _____ (verb) learnt or got.
4 _____ (adj) coming from a certain part of the country.
5 _____ (noun) people in your family.
6 _____ (adverb) across a large area.
7 _____ (noun) a language not spoken by anyone anymore.
8 _____ (verb) share and exchange information or ideas with others.
9 _____ (noun) pictures or symbols used in some ancient writing systems.
10 _____ (verb) varied according to a certain situation.
11 _____ (noun) a language used to communicate in formal situations.
12 _____ (noun) grandparents, parents or children, for example.

II. Match the questions and answers.

1. How many major languages are there in India?
2. How many dialects are there in India?
3. How many people in India speak Hindi?
4. How many people can speak Harapan?
5. How many people can speak Sanskrit?
6. How many languages can Mala write in?
7. How many languages does Haresh speak?
8. How many languages are taught in Indian schools?

a. zero
b. two hundred thousand
c. three
d. twenty-two
e. fifty
f. one thousand, six hundred
g. two
h. two hundred and fifty million