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International Mother Language Day 2026 — Multilingualism, NEP, and India's Language Diversity Challenge

21 February 2026

SUBJECTS COVERED**HISTORY & CULTURE****SOCIAL ISSUES****POLITY****CURATED & WRITTEN BY****Bharat Choudhary**

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WHY IN NEWS

International Mother Language Day is observed every year on **February 21** — commemorating the 1952 Bengali Language Movement. The **2026 theme**, “Fostering multilingualism for inclusion in education and society,” takes on added significance as India implements **NEP 2020’s mother tongue medium instruction** policy and works to preserve its 6,000+ language ecosystem.

ORIGIN: THE BENGALI LANGUAGE MOVEMENT (EKUSHEY)

February 21, 1952 is one of the most significant dates in South Asian history. In **Dhaka (then East Pakistan)**, students from the University of Dhaka gathered at Dhaka Medical College to protest the Pakistani government’s decision to impose **Urdu** as the sole official language of Pakistan — even though **Bengali** was the mother tongue of **54% of Pakistan’s population** at Partition.

Pakistani police opened fire on the protesters. **Abul Barkat, Rafiquddin Ahmed, Abul Jabbar, and Shafiqur Rahman** were killed — the first martyrs of a language movement in modern history.

The movement — called **Ekushey (Twenty-First)** in Bengali — had profound consequences:

- 1956:** Bengali was recognised as a co-official language of Pakistan (alongside Urdu) after sustained agitation
- 1971:** The Bengali Language Movement’s legacy was central to the **Liberation War of 1971** and the founding of **Bangladesh**
- 1999:** UNESCO proclaimed February 21 as **International Mother Language Day**, at the initiative of Bangladesh, to honour the martyrs and promote linguistic diversity globally
- 2000:** First observation of IMLD worldwide

WHY MOTHER LANGUAGES MATTER

UNESCO estimates that **43% of the world’s ~6,700 languages are endangered** — facing decline as younger generations shift to dominant national/global languages. The consequences:

For individuals: Cognitive development research consistently shows children learn fastest and most deeply in their mother tongue. Concepts taught in a familiar language build robust foundational knowledge; translation-based learning creates cognitive load.

For communities: A language carries unique knowledge systems, ecological knowledge, social practices, oral histories, and epistemologies. When a language dies, irreplaceable human heritage disappears.

For nations: Diverse languages represent cognitive biodiversity. India’s languages encode knowledge about local ecosystems, traditional medicine, agricultural practices, and social organisation that no single dominant language can replicate.

INDIA’S LANGUAGE LANDSCAPE

India is one of the world’s most linguistically diverse nations:

Metric	Data
Languages/dialects (total)	~6,000+
Languages with 10,000+ speakers	~780
Languages with 1 million+ speakers	~22
Eighth Schedule languages	22
Endangered languages	~197 (per UNESCO Atlas)
Languages with script	~100+

The Eighth Schedule (Article 344 and 351) lists 22 scheduled languages of India. The original 1950 Constitution had 14; additions have been made through amendments. The 22 scheduled languages are: Assamese, Bengali, Bodo, Dogri, Gujarati, Hindi, Kannada, Kashmiri, Konkani, Maithili, Malayalam, Manipuri (Meitei), Marathi, Nepali, Odia, Punjabi, Sanskrit, Santali, Sindhi, Tamil, Telugu, Urdu.

Unofficial request for inclusion (languages seeking Eighth Schedule status): Bhojpuri, Rajasthani, Tulu, Kodava, Gondi, and others — supported by significant speaker populations but pending political decision.

NEP 2020 AND MOTHER TONGUE EDUCATION

National Education Policy 2020 makes mother tongue education a central principle:

Key provisions:

Medium of instruction in mother tongue/home language/local language up to **Class 5** (preferably Class 8 and beyond)

Three Language Formula strengthened — but with no imposition of any language on any State (assuaging fears of Hindi imposition in southern India)

Classical languages: Tamil, Sanskrit, Telugu, Kannada, Malayalam, Odia recognised as Classical Languages (meeting criteria: rich ancient literature, original tradition, distinct from modern forms)

Indian Sign Language standardised and recognised as a subject

Teacher training in multilingual pedagogy — critical for implementation

Implementation challenges:

Shortage of trained teachers in many regional languages, especially tribal and minority languages

Lack of quality textbooks, digital content, and assessments in hundreds of mother tongues

Administrative pressure toward “mainstream” languages for employment and higher education

Migration patterns and urban classrooms create linguistic heterogeneity that single-language policies cannot address

CONSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK

Article 29: Right of minorities to conserve language, script, and culture.

Article 30: Minorities’ right to establish and administer educational institutions in their language/script.

Article 343-351: Official Language provisions — Hindi in Devanagari as Official Language of the Union; English as associate official language (retained past the original 15-year period by Constitutional (17th Amendment) Act 1964); protections for regional languages.

Article 350-A: Instruction in mother tongue at primary stage — directs states to provide facilities for education in mother tongue.

Article 350-B: Special Officer for Linguistic Minorities — appointed by the President; reports to Parliament.

IMLD 2026 THEME: FOSTERING MULTILINGUALISM FOR INCLUSION

The 2026 theme responds to a global crisis: education systems in most countries still exclude children whose mother tongue differs from the language of instruction. UNESCO data shows:

Children taught in a language not their mother tongue are **more likely to drop out**

40% of global students lack access to education in their home language

Education inequality correlates with linguistic exclusion — disadvantaging tribal, indigenous, and minority communities

For India, this connects to the **ST dropout crisis**: tribal children (especially in forest areas) often attend schools where teachers speak a different language. High ST dropout rates (particularly at secondary level) are partly linguistic in origin.

UPSC RELEVANCE

*IMLD — February 21; UNESCO 1999 proclamation; first observed 2000; Bengali Language Movement 1952; Ekushey; Dhaka; Bangladesh founding 1971; 2026 theme; Eighth Schedule (22 languages); Article 350-A; NEP 2020 (mother tongue till Class 5); International Decade of Indigenous Languages (2022-2032); Classical Languages of India (6); Article 343, 350-B. **Mains GS-1:** Multiculturalism; linguistic diversity; India's language politics; language and identity; NEP 2020's language policy. **GS-2:** Constitutional provisions — Articles 29, 30, 343-351; rights of linguistic minorities; Special Officer for Linguistic Minorities. **GS-3:** Mother tongue education and human development outcomes; tribal education challenges; dropout rates. **Interview:** "Should India adopt a uniform national language policy, or does linguistic diversity itself constitute a form of national strength? How should NEP 2020's mother tongue provisions be balanced with economic pressures that favour dominant languages?"*

★ FACTS CORNER — KNOWLEDGE PEDIA
INTERNATIONAL MOTHER LANGUAGE DAY:

Date: **February 21** every year

Proclaimed: **UNESCO**, November 1999 | First observed: **2000**

UN Resolution: **56/262** (2002)

2026 Theme: “**Fostering multilingualism for inclusion in education and society**”

Origin: Bengali Language Movement (Ekushey), **February 21, 1952**, Dhaka

Martyrs: Abul Barkat, Rafiquddin Ahmed, Abul Jabbar, Shafiqur Rahman

Related: International Decade of Indigenous Languages (**2022-2032**)

INDIA’S LANGUAGE DATA:

Total languages/dialects: ~**6,000+**

Eighth Schedule languages: **22**

Endangered (UNESCO Atlas): ~**197** of India’s languages

40% of global students lack mother tongue instruction access (UNESCO)

CONSTITUTIONAL PROVISIONS — LANGUAGE:

Article 343: Hindi in Devanagari = Official Language of Union

Article 350-A: Mother tongue instruction at primary stage

Article 350-B: Special Officer for Linguistic Minorities (reports to President)

Article 29: Cultural and educational rights of minorities

Article 30: Minority institutions in their own language/script

NEP 2020 — LANGUAGE:

Medium of instruction: Mother tongue up to **Class 5** (preferably to Class 8)

Three Language Formula: Strengthened but no language imposition

Classical Languages: **Tamil, Sanskrit, Telugu, Kannada, Malayalam, Odia** (6 total)

Indian Sign Language: Recognised and standardised as a subject

EIGHTH SCHEDULE — 22 LANGUAGES: ASSAMESE, BENGALI, BODO, DOGRI, GUJARATI, HINDI, KANNADA, KASHMIRI, KONKANI, MAITHILI, MALAYALAM, MANIPURI, MARATHI, NEPALI, ODIA, PUNJABI, SANSKRIT, SANTALI, SINDHI, TAMIL, TELUGU, URDU

OTHER RELEVANT FACTS:

Bangladesh: Language Martyrs Day (Shaheed Dibas) = Feb 21

Pakistan: Recognised Bengali as co-official language in **1956** (after sustained protests)

Liberation War of 1971: Bangladesh founded; India recognised Bangladesh on **December 6, 1971**

Languages seeking Eighth Schedule status (demand): Bhojpuri, Rajasthani, Tulu, Kodava, Gondi

Sources: GKToday, Drishti IAS, UNESCO

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