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Meghalaya Recognises Khasi and Garo as Official Languages: The Eighth Schedule Question Returns

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WHY IN NEWS:

The **Meghalaya state cabinet** granted **official administrative recognition** to the indigenous languages **Khasi and Garo** on April 16, 2026. The decision allows these languages to be used in state government communication, education, and judicial proceedings (subject to High Court translation arrangements). While both languages are widely spoken — **Khasi by ~14 lakh speakers, Garo by ~10 lakh** — neither is currently in the **Eighth Schedule** of the Constitution. The state-level recognition is widely viewed as a step toward eventual Eighth Schedule inclusion, a long-standing demand from the Northeast.

THE CONSTITUTIONAL ARCHITECTURE: THE EIGHTH SCHEDULE

What Is the Eighth Schedule?

The **Eighth Schedule** of the Constitution lists languages that are recognised as **official languages of India** for various administrative and constitutional purposes. As of 2026, it lists **22 languages**:

ORIGINAL (1950)	ADDED BY 21ST AMENDMENT 1967	ADDED BY 71ST AMENDMENT 1992	ADDED BY 92ND AMENDMENT 2003
Assamese	Sindhi	Konkani	Bodo
Bengali		Manipuri	Dogri
Gujarati		Nepali	Maithili
Hindi			Santali
Kannada			
Kashmiri			
Malayalam			
Marathi			
Odia			
Punjabi			
Sanskrit			
Tamil			
Telugu			
Urdu			

What Eighth Schedule Recognition Confers

- ❶ **Official recognition** — State has duty to develop the language under Article 351.
- ❷ **UPSC examination** — candidates can choose Eighth Schedule language as medium of examination for Civil Services Mains (currently 22 options + English).
- ❸ **Translation rights** — official translations of central laws, judgments.
- ❹ **Cultural promotion** — Sahitya Akademi awards, state-level cultural funding.
- ❺ **Judicial use** — High Courts may, with Presidential approval (Article 348), permit Eighth Schedule languages in proceedings.
- ❻ **National language commission** representation.

The Article 343 vs Eighth Schedule Distinction

Article 343 designates **Hindi (Devanagari script)** as the **Official Language of the Union** — distinct from the Eighth Schedule. **English continues** as associate official language under the Official Languages Act, 1963 (amended 1967). The Eighth Schedule's 22 languages are scheduled languages — recognised for cultural

and certain administrative purposes — but only Hindi has Article 343 status.

THE KHASI AND GARO LINGUISTIC SIGNIFICANCE

Khasi

- **Speakers:** ~14 lakh (Census 2011, likely ~15-16 lakh in 2026).
- **Linguistic family: Austroasiatic** (specifically Mon-Khmer branch) — distinguishing it from most Northeast languages, which are Tibeto-Burman.
- **Distribution:** Khasi Hills (Meghalaya), parts of Assam, Bangladesh.
- **Script:** Latin script (Roman) since 19th-century missionary standardisation; some traditional scripts also in use.
- **Cultural significance:** Living Austroasiatic language; UNESCO has flagged its preservation importance.

Garo

- **Speakers:** ~10 lakh (Census 2011, likely ~11-12 lakh in 2026).
- **Linguistic family: Tibeto-Burman** — connected to Bodo, Boro-Garo subgroup.
- **Distribution:** Garo Hills (Meghalaya), parts of Assam, Bangladesh.
- **Script:** Roman script standardised in early 20th century.
- **Cultural significance:** Major Tibeto-Burman language; rich oral literature tradition.

Why These Languages Matter

The Khasi and Garo communities are:

- **Predominantly Christian** — long missionary educational traditions.
- **Matrilineal** — Khasi society is one of the world's largest matrilineal societies (along with Minangkabau in Indonesia).
- **Distinct cultural identities** — separate from the Hindi-Hindu cultural mainstream that dominates national policy.

The languages carry these distinctive cultural-anthropological identities. Eighth Schedule inclusion would constitutionally affirm this distinct national contribution.

THE HISTORY OF EIGHTH SCHEDULE DEMANDS

Languages Currently Demanding Inclusion

There is a long list of languages seeking Eighth Schedule status, including:

LANGUAGE	SPEAKERS (APPROX)	STATE
Bhojpuri	5+ crore	UP, Bihar, Jharkhand
Rajasthani	4-5 crore	Rajasthan
Khasi	14 lakh	Meghalaya
Garo	10 lakh	Meghalaya
Mizo (Lushai)	8 lakh	Mizoram
Bhili/Bhilodi	1+ crore	Multi-state
Tulu	18 lakh	Karnataka, Kerala
Lepcha	small	Sikkim
Magahi	1+ crore	Bihar
Mundari	8+ lakh	Jharkhand, Odisha
Khortha	varies	Jharkhand
Nagamese	varies	Nagaland
Kokborok	9 lakh	Tripura
Garhwali	25+ lakh	Uttarakhand
Kumaoni	20+ lakh	Uttarakhand

The **Pahwa Committee (1996)** and the **Sitakant Mahapatra Committee (2003)** examined criteria for Eighth Schedule inclusion but did not produce a definitive framework. The lack of explicit constitutional criteria leaves inclusion to political-cultural judgement.

The Northeastern Imperative

Northeast India hosts hundreds of languages — many endangered. The Eighth Schedule has limited Northeast representation:

- Assamese (since 1950)

- Manipuri (1992)
- Bodo (2003)
- Nepali (1992 — also Sikkim)

Many other Northeast languages — Khasi, Garo, Mizo, Naga languages, Kokborok, Mising — remain unrecognised despite cultural significance.

WHAT MEGHALAYA'S RECOGNITION ACHIEVES

Immediate Effects

- ① **Administrative use:** Khasi and Garo can be used in state government communications.
- ② **Educational integration:** Strengthening medium-of-instruction options in state schools.
- ③ **Judicial translation:** Translation services in state-level courts and tribunals (HC use requires Article 348 Presidential approval).
- ④ **Cultural funding:** State-level support for literature, theatre, broadcasting.

Symbolic and Strategic Effects

- ① **Northeastern identity affirmation** — recognising indigenous identity in administrative practice.
- ② **Federal momentum** — building case for central Eighth Schedule inclusion.
- ③ **Language preservation** — state-level support against language attrition.
- ④ **Inter-community equity** — Khasi and Garo on equal footing with English (lingua franca) in Meghalaya.

THE FEDERAL IMPLICATIONS

Article 345 and State Languages

Article 345 allows a state legislature to adopt one or more languages used in the state, or Hindi, as the language(s) for official purposes within that state. Meghalaya's recognition operates under this constitutional space — without yet seeking Eighth Schedule status.

Article 350A and Mother Tongue Education

Article 350A — directive to states to provide mother-tongue education at primary level for linguistic minorities. Meghalaya's recognition strengthens implementation of this directive.

Article 350B — Special Officer for Linguistic Minorities

The Commissioner for Linguistic Minorities (Article 350B) reports annually on language minority protection. State-level recognition of Khasi and Garo aligns with this oversight architecture.

THE EIGHTH SCHEDULE PATHWAY

Constitutional Process

Adding a language to the Eighth Schedule requires a **Constitutional Amendment** under Article 368 — typically passed with **special majority**, not requiring state ratification (since it does not affect federal-structure provisions in Article 368(2)).

Recent amendments adding languages were:

- **21st Amendment (1967)** — Sindhi.
- **71st Amendment (1992)** — Konkani, Manipuri, Nepali.
- **92nd Amendment (2003)** — Bodo, Dogri, Maithili, Santali (took total to 22).

The **next addition** would require a Bill — likely a 132nd Amendment Bill (or higher, depending on intervening amendments).

Political Pathways

Multiple states have lobbied for various languages. The Centre's hesitation typically cites:

- ① **Floodgates concern** — recognising one language opens demands from many others.
- ② **Administrative cost** — UPSC examination, official translation, cultural Akademi creation.
- ③ **Federal political balance** — recognising specific linguistic identities can affect inter-community dynamics.

THE COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Linguistic Diversity Index

India ranks among the world's most linguistically diverse nations:

- **Census 2011**: 121 languages with 10,000+ speakers; 1,369 mother tongues.
- **Ethnologue (2024)**: 460+ languages spoken.
- Many endangered — UNESCO Atlas lists ~200 Indian languages as endangered.

Other Multi-Lingual Federations

- **Switzerland:** 4 official languages (German, French, Italian, Romansh).
- **South Africa:** 11 official languages constitutionally.
- **Belgium:** 3 official languages (Dutch, French, German) with regional autonomy.
- **Canada:** 2 official languages federally; multiple aboriginal languages with provincial recognition.

India's Eighth Schedule architecture is unique — selective constitutional recognition rather than universal protection.

WAY FORWARD

Short-Term

- ❶ **Implementation framework** for Khasi and Garo administrative use in Meghalaya.
- ❷ **Translation infrastructure** for state laws and judicial documents.
- ❸ **Teacher training** for mother-tongue instruction.
- ❹ **Public broadcasting** in both languages (All India Radio, Doordarshan expansion).

Medium-Term

- ❶ **Eighth Schedule inclusion** of Khasi and Garo through constitutional amendment.
- ❷ **Inter-state Northeast linguistic coordination** for shared challenges (Mizo, Naga, Tripuri languages).
- ❸ **Sahitya Akademi parity** — establishing literary recognition framework.
- ❹ **Digital infrastructure** — Unicode standardisation, machine translation tools.

Long-Term

- ❶ **Comprehensive Northeast linguistic policy** addressing 100+ Northeastern languages.
- ❷ **Pahwa Committee criteria** — revisit and codify Eighth Schedule inclusion criteria.
- ❸ **Endangered language preservation** programme — UNESCO collaboration.
- ❹ **Constitutional recognition reform** — possibly an “associate scheduled” category for languages on the path to full inclusion.

UPSC RELEVANCE

PAPER	ANGLE
GS-2 Polity	Eighth Schedule; Article 343 (Hindi); Article 345 (state languages); Article 348 (HC language); Article 350A (mother tongue education); Article 350B (Linguistic Minorities Commissioner)
GS-2 Polity	Constitutional amendments (21st 1967, 71st 1992, 92nd 2003); Article 368 procedure
GS-1 Society	Linguistic diversity; Northeast cultural identity; matrilineal Khasi society
GS-1 History & Culture	Linguistic families (Austroasiatic Khasi vs Tibeto-Burman Garo); missionary linguistic standardisation
GS-2 Governance	Pahwa Committee 1996; Sitakant Mahapatra Committee 2003; Centre-state language coordination
GS-3 Economy	Costs of language recognition; education spending; cultural infrastructure
Mains Keywords	Eighth Schedule, 22 scheduled languages, Khasi, Garo, Article 343, Article 345, Article 348, Article 350A, Article 350B, 21st Amendment 1967, 71st Amendment 1992, 92nd Amendment 2003, Pahwa Committee, Sitakant Mahapatra Committee, Austroasiatic, Tibeto-Burman, matrilineal society, Census 2011 linguistic data

FACTS CORNER

ITEM	DETAIL
Date of Meghalaya cabinet decision	April 16, 2026
Languages recognised	Khasi and Garo
Khasi speakers	~14 lakh (Census 2011)
Garo speakers	~10 lakh (Census 2011)
Khasi linguistic family	Austroasiatic (Mon-Khmer)
Garo linguistic family	Tibeto-Burman (Boro-Garo subgroup)
Eighth Schedule total languages	22
Original Eighth Schedule (1950)	14
Latest addition	92nd Amendment 2003 (Bodo, Dogri, Maithili, Santali)
Northeast in Eighth Schedule	Assamese, Manipuri, Bodo, Nepali
Article on Hindi as Union official language	Article 343
Constitutional amendment route	Article 368 (special majority; no state ratification needed)
Last constitutional amendment for languages	92nd Amendment Act, 2003

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