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## Punjabi among top three immigrant languages in Canada

Hindi sees one of the sharpest rises over the past five years, with Gujarati and Tamil also figuring in the list of the top 22 immigrant languages in the county.

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Anirudh Bhattacharyya (http://www.hindustantimes.com/columns/anirudh-bhattacharyya)  
Hindustan Times, Toronto





According to the 2016 Canadian census, 568,375 people in the country speak Punjabi.(Reuters File)

Punjabi is among the top three immigrant languages spoken in Canada, while Hindi has been among the fastest growing immigrant languages over the past five years, data from the country's census has shown.

Canada defines immigrant languages refers to languages whose presence in the country is originally due to immigration, besides its two official languages — English and French.

“Linguistic diversity is on the rise in Canada. Close to 7.6 million Canadians reported speaking a language other than English or French at home in 2016, an increase of almost one million (14.5%) people over 2011,” a release from government agency StatCan stated, based on the 2016 census.

Among those that consider an immigrant language as their mother tongue and speak it at home, Punjabi ranked just below Mandarin and Cantonese. In the 2011 Census, Punjabi was the second most-spoken immigrant language since the two Chinese languages were taken as one unit for that assessment.

The number of Punjabi-speakers has increased by just over 18%, and the total is at 568,375 people. Hindi is among the languages that has “experienced the largest increases”, with speakers numbering nearly 175,000.

Among other Indian languages, the Gujarati-speaking population has gone up by nearly 21%. Tamil is another Indian language in the list of the top 22 immigrant tongues, but has seen a smaller increase — about 10%.

That indicates a greater diversity within the Indian-origin population in Canada than is often assumed. And it could impact policy, if not politics, in the years ahead.

Speaking to the Hindustan Times, Bonny Norton, Professor and Distinguished University Scholar in the Department of Language and Literacy Education at the

University of British Columbia, described the rise in the Hindi-speaking population as “particularly notable”.



University of British Columbia Professor Bonny Norton (Courtesy UBC)

“It does seem to be that case, particularly Hindi, because it’s jumped. That is the most dramatic change, actually. That seems to be of the most interesting findings of the census,” she said.

In terms of how it could impact policy in the future, she said that would be a “gradual process”. And it would begin in schools: “One of things we do try to do as a principle in our schools is to value the mother tongue of the children, to promote it so that they can grow up bilingual. So they don’t necessarily lose the mother tongue as they acquire English or French. If they see for example, increasing numbers of Hindi speakers, we would need to make sure to have enough materials to support those children.”

The data released confined itself to immigrant languages that had at least 100,000 speakers. No figures were available for other Indian languages with a noticeable

presence in Canada, including Bengali, Telugu and Konkani.

Punjabi is the main immigrant mother tongue spoken in British Columbia, while featuring in the top three in major urban regions of the country, including the Greater Toronto Area, Metro Vancouver, Edmonton and Calgary.

While the use of English in the country has increased, there has been a decline among those speaking French, including in the Francophone province of Quebec.

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