This document gives background information on the writing system for the Hindi language.

Hindi uses the Devanagari alphabet. It is a script, written left to right.   The writing system contains consonants, vowels (both independent and dependent), diacritics, and ligatures – meaning a combination of letters that takes a different shape than a simple combination of the individual shapes.   The consonants have an inherent vowel unless marked with another vowel or the virama character, or written as a half-letter. Virama or half-letter means that there is no following sound; they are equivalent.

Examples:

1. simple combination of letters

Devanagari   Transliteration

नान   "naan" (bread)

Built with letters N, Long A, N

न + ा + न

न

ना

नान

2. use of half-letter or virama, and diacritic vowel

Devanagari   Transliteration

नमस्ते   "namaste" (hello, greeting) – without virama would be "namas**a**te"

Built with letters N, M, S, virama, T, and diacritic vowel E

न + म + स + ् + त + े

न

नम

नमस

नमस्   here we enter the virama character

नमस्त   here the font changes the S-virama to a half-letter S, as we add the T

नमस्ते   here we add the diacritic vowel E

3. use of vowels and half-letter

Devanagari　　　　　Transliteration

हिन्दी　　　　　"Hindi"

Built with letters H, Short I, N, virama, D, Long I

ह + हि + न + ्् + द + ही

ह

हि　　　　　here we see how the Short I is placed in front of the H as is the rule

हिन

हिन्　　　　　here we enter the virama character

हिन्द　　　　　here the font changes the N-virama to a half-letter N, as we add the D

हिन्दी　　　　　the Long I follows the D

Note that in describing the Hindi letters using English we are approximating the sound they make. For this reason transliterations from Hindi to English can sometimes vary, with different English spellings to represent the same sound (i.e. Devanagari vs. Devanahgaree).

There are many ligatures in Hindi, but Unicode font does not cover many of them. They are simply written within the constraints of the glyphs available. For example, "NN" would be shown as:

न्न rather than the handwritten न्न

One last note is that Hindi has its own numbers (१२३४५६७८९०), but typically people use the Western digits (1234567890) instead.

All these examples were built using the Unicode font that can be installed from MS Windows. Other fonts may behave differently. For example, I have used a font called Kiran in which all letters are initially shown as a half letter and the user must enter the long A character to convert them into whole letters.

For more information on Hindi and Devanagari, I highly recommend www.omniglot.com. This is where I typically begin my research for any language.
http://www.omniglot.com/writing/hindi.htm
http://www.omniglot.com/writing/devanagari.htm