

GUIDE TO PRONUNCIATION

The Sanskrit alphabet is methodical and scientific, its elements classified first into vowels and consonants, and then within each section, according to the manner in which the sound is formed. The gutturals are formed by the constriction of the throat at the back of the tongue, the palatals by pressing the tongue flat against the palate, the linguals by turning up the tip of the tongue to touch the hard palate, the dentals by touching the upper teeth with the tongue, and the labials by pursing the lips.

The vowels, *ā, ī, ī, u, ū, e, ai, o* and *au*, are pronounced approximately as in German or Italian, but the short *a* has the dull sound of the English *shut*. An *a* or *ā* followed by a *y* yields the *ai* sound as in *aisle*.

Of the first two consonants, the *visarga*, or *ḥ*, occurring only at the end of words or syllables, is a rough breathing, replacing an original *s* or *r*. It is a distinctive emission of breath, often followed by a faint continuation of the preceding vowel. The *anusvāra ṅ* is in part a mere abbreviation, representing a nasal sound before a stopped consonant, as in the words *saṅdhi* and *Saṅjaya*. Before semi-vowels, sibilants or *h*, it has the effect of nasalizing the preceding vowel and in this context is pronounced as the English *ng* in *sang*. The *anusvāra ṁ*, at the end of words, has the sound *m*, as in *am*.

The distinction between the aspirate and unaspirate consonants is sometimes difficult to distinguish. The letter *k* is pronounced without any noticeable emission of breath, as in the English word *kite*, and the *kh*, written in the original script as one letter, is pronounced with a strong emission, as in the blending of the *k* and *h* in *bookhouse*. Thus one should avoid pronouncing *th* and *ph* as in the initial sounds of the English *thing* and *phase*; they rather approximate to the sounds in *pothook* and *shepherd*. The letter *ch* is pronounced approximately as the second consonantal sound in the English *church*, and the *ch* as the first sound in the same word, i.e., with a stronger emission of breath. The letter *j* is pronounced as in the English, and not as in German or French. A

clear distinction is made between the lingual and the dental consonants, though it is not very evident to the untrained ear. The English *t* and *d* are nearer to the lingual *ṭ* and *ḍ* than to the dental *t* and *d* in Sanskrit.

At present there is no distinction in pronunciation between the *śh* and *sh*, both resembling the English *show*. Originally the *śh* was pronounced, like the other lingual consonants, with the tip of the tongue touching the top of the hard palate.

In Sanskrit the syllables are divided at the vowel, with two separate vowels never occurring together. The vowel is the last letter of the syllable unless it is either followed by an *anusvāra* or a final consonant to the word. In either case the *anusvāra* or final consonant is included with the syllable. If the word starts with a vowel, the syllable contains only the vowel.

In Epic Sanskrit the accent on a word is more a matter of stress than tonic. The stress is placed on the last prosodically long syllable of a word, that is, a syllable containing either a long vowel (*Hi·mā'la·ya*) or a short vowel followed by two consonants (*Sha·ku'nta·lā*) other than the final syllable, which never has the accent (*sa'bhā*). In a word with no long syllables the accent is on the first syllable (*a'va·ya·va*). The stress is not as marked as in English.

The metres of Sanskrit poetry are quantitative, like those of classical Europe. The metres are based on the order of long and short syllables, and not, as in English, on stress. A syllable is counted as long if it contains a long vowel (*ā, ī, ū, rī, e, ai, o* or *au*) or a short vowel followed by two consonants. The most common stanza form of the *Bhagavad Gītā* is the *shloka* composed of four 'quarters' (*pāda*) of eight syllables, with a full caesura or break between the second and third quarters. The *Bhagavad Gītā*, the Song of the Divine Lord, is mostly set down in this *anushtubh* metre. It rises at times, especially in the eleventh *adhyāya*, to the *trishtubh* metre of the Vedas, consisting of four *pādas* of eleven syllables.



THE SANSKRIT ALPHABET AND ITS PRONUNCIATION

VOWELS

	Transliterated Letter	Sound	Example
Simple vowels	1. a	uh	ago
	2. ā	ä	father
	3. i	ĩ	bit
	4. ī	ee	police
	5. u	ũ	full
	6. ū	ōō	plume
	7. ri	rĩ	rib
	8. rī	ree	tree
	9. ṛ	lĩ	bottle
	10. ṝ	—	—
Diphthongs	11. e	ā	they
	12. ai	ĩ	aisle
	13. o	ō	hope
	14. au	ow	gaucho

CONSONANTS

<i>Visarga</i>	15. ḥ	aspiration	half
<i>Anusvāra</i>	16. ñ, ṁ	ng, m	nasal colouring to the preceding vowel

Stopped consonants

Guttural	17.	k	k	kite
	18.	kh	k+huh	bookhouse
	19.	g	g	go
	20.	gh	g+huh	log-hut
	21.	ñ	ng	sing
Palatal	22.	ch	ch	chain
	23.	ch	chh	catch
	24.	j	j	joy
	25.	jh	j+huh	hedghog
	26.	ñ	neeuh	canyon
Lingual	27.	t	t	to
	28.	th	t+huh	pothook
	29.	d	d	do
	30.	dh	d+huh	godhood
	31.	n	n	not
Dental	32.	t	t	to
	33.	th	t+huh	pothook
	34.	d	d	do
	35.	dh	d+huh	godhood
	36.	n	n	not
Labial	37.	p	p	path
	38.	ph	p+huh	shepherd
	39.	b	b	boy
	40.	bh	b+huh	abhor
	41.	m	m	mother

Semi-vowels	42.	y	y	yes
	43.	r	r	run
	44.	l	l	love
	45.	v	v	avert

Sibilants	46.	ʃh	sh	show
	47.	sh	sh	show
	48.	s	s	sun

Aspiration	49.	h	h	hot
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