

Play Audio

Part 1

Pronunciation Guide

Alphabet and Romanization:

The Sanskrit language is written in various Indian scripts, such as **Devanāgarī**. In order to represent the sounds of Sanskrit in the Roman alphabet, accurately and unambiguously, scholars have agreed on a system of *romanization* now used around the world. This system is used here to explain the pronunciation of Sanskrit words. Both standard romanization and the most common variant spellings are given.

Classical Sanskrit uses at least 49 letters: 14 vowels, 33 consonants, and 2 special letters. Four additional letters are sometimes used. Since the 26 letters of the Roman alphabet, by themselves, are not enough to express all the sounds of Sanskrit, supplements are needed. Where possible, one Roman letter represents one Sanskrit sound. Otherwise one Sanskrit sound is represented by a combination of two Roman letters (as with the vowels *ai* and *au*, and the 10 *aspirated* consonants), or by a Roman letter with a diacritic mark.

Six diacritics are used in Sanskrit romanization:

- a line above the letter (ā)
- a line below the letter (ḷ)
- a dot above the letter (ñ)
- a dot below the letter (ḍ)
- a tilde or curl above the letter (ñ)
- an acute accent above the letter (ś)

The Roman letters, letter combinations, and letter-diacritic combinations used in Sanskrit romanization are given in English alphabetical order in Table 1.

— TABLE 1 — Characters in English Alphabetical Order —

(Variants and additional letters are in brackets)

a ā ai au b bh c [ç = ś] *ch d ḍ dh ḍh e*
g gh h ḥ i ī j jh [jñ] *k kh* [kṣ] *l ḷ l̄* [l̄ lh]
m ṁ [or ṁ] *n ñ* [or ñ] *ñ ṇ o p ph r ṛ ṝ*
s ś ṣ t ṭ th ṭh u ū v [or w] [*x* = kṣ] *y*

Sanskrit romanization does not require: f q w x z

Vowels:

The Sanskrit vowels are, in Sanskrit alphabetical order: *a ā i ī u ū ṛ ṝ ḷ ḹ e ai o au*. Of these *a i u ṛ ḷ* are *short*, the others are *long*. A line over one of a pair of vowels distinguishes long from short. Sanskrit has vowel forms of *r* and *l*, written with a dot below the letter.

Pronounce the vowels as follows:

a (short) is like the *a* in *sofa*, as in **manas** (mind).

Sanskrit *a* is never like the *a* in *at*.

ā (long) is like the *a* in *father*, as in **māyā** (illusion).

i (short) is like the *i* in *pin*, as in **idam** (this).

ī (long) is like the *i* in *pique*, as in **jīva** (life).

u (short) is like the *u* in *put*, as in **guṇa** (quality).

ū (long) is like the *u* in *rune*, as in **rūpa** (form).

4 / Sanskrit Pronunciation

The **r** vowel is fairly common and can be *short* or *long*.

r (short) is like the *re* in *fibre*, as in **pitṛ** (father). In India today the **r** vowel is often pronounced *ri* — as in the name **Kṛṣṇa** or *Krishna*. The **r** vowel is also sometimes written as **ṛi**.

ṛ (long) is like the short **r** vowel but longer, as in **pitṛnām** (of the fathers).

ḷ (short) is like the *le* in *able*, as in the root **klp**. The **ḷ** vowel is sometimes written, and even pronounced, as **ḷr** or **lri**.

The **ḷ** vowel is quite rare, appearing mainly in artificial terms invented by grammarians. In actual Sanskrit words, the short **ḷ** vowel occurs only in words derived from one root (**klp**, the root of the word **kalpa**), while the long **ḹ** vowel does not occur at all.

The following four vowels are always *long* in Sanskrit.

e is like the *ei* in *rein*, as in **deva** (god).

Sanskrit **e** is never short like the *e* in *yet*.

ai is like the *ai* in *aisle*, as in **vaiśya** (merchant).

Sanskrit **ai** is never like the *ai* in *pain*.

o is like the *o* in *opal*, as in **loka** (world).

Sanskrit **o** is never short like the *o* in *pot*.

au is like the *ou* in *out*, as in **Gautama Buddha**.

Sanskrit **au** is never like the *au* in *autumn*.

Consonants:

Sanskrit has 33 consonants in eight groups, as given in Table 2 in Sanskrit order with the grammatical name for each group.

TABLE 2 — Consonants in Sanskrit Alphabetical Order

k	kh	g	gh	ṅ	— <i>guttural</i> consonants
c	ch	j	jh	ñ	— <i>palatal</i> consonants
ṭ	ṭh	ḍ	ḍh	ṇ	— <i>retroflex</i> consonants
t	th	d	dh	n	— <i>dental</i> consonants
p	ph	b	bh	m	— <i>labial</i> consonants
y	r	l	v		— <i>semivowels</i>
ś	ṣ	s			— <i>sibilants</i>
h					— the <i>aspirate</i>

These Sanskrit consonants are listed in English alphabetical order in Table 3.

TABLE 3 — Consonants in English Alphabetical Order

b	bh	c	ch	d	ḍ	dh	ḍh	g	gh	h	j	jh	k	kh	l
m	n	ñ	ṇ	p	ph	r	s	ś	ṣ	t	ṭ	th	ṭh	v	y

Pronounce the following consonants as in English:

- b** as in **buddha** (awakened)
- d** as in **deva** (god)
- j** as in **jīva** (life)
- k** as in **karman** (action)
- l** as in **loka** (world)
- m** as in **manas** (mind)
- n** as in **nivṛtti** (involution)
- p** as in **pitr** (father)
- r** as in **rūpa** (form)
- s** as in **sat** (reality)
- t** as in **tat** (that)

Other consonants are pronounced as follows:

- c** is like the *ch* in *church*; never like *k* as in *car*, like *s* as in *cent*, or like *sh* as in *chevron*. For example: **cakra** (wheel), **cit** (consciousness), and **vāc** (speech).
- g** is always a hard *g* as in *god*, never a soft *g* as in *gym*. For example, **guṇa** (quality) and **yuga** (age).
- h** is normally pronounced as English *h*, as in **hatha-yoga** (physical yoga) and **vāhana** (vehicle). In the combination **hm** the **h** was originally pronounced before the **m**, with a sound somewhat like the *ch* in Scottish *loch* or German *ich*. Today **hm** is usually pronounced as **mh**. Examples include **brahman** (the impersonal absolute) and **brahmā** (the individualized deity).
- ñ** (also written **ṅ**) is a guttural nasal, like the *ng* in *singing*, as in **liṅga-śarīra** (subtle body).
- ṅ** is a palatal nasal, like the *ny* in *canyon*.
- v** is usually like the *v* in *voice*, as in **veda**. After a consonant, **v** may be pronounced, and is sometimes written, as **w**. For example, **svabhāva** or **swabhāva** (inherent nature).
- y** is a consonant, as in **yuga** (age) or **vaiśya** (merchant), not a vowel, as in *gypsy*.

Special pronunciation rules apply to the following sets of consonants:

bh ch dh gh jh kh ph th are *aspirated* letters, corresponding to the *unaspirated* letters **b c d g j k p t**. The *aspirates* are single consonants pronounced with a heavy breath — something like *big-horn* or *wart-hog*,

if divided as *bi-ghorn* and *war-thog*. Be careful not to insert a vowel before the **h**. Examples include **bhūta** (ghost), **chāyā** (shade), **dharma** (law), **ghoṣa** (sound). Note that Sanskrit **c** and **ch** are sometimes written as **ch** and **chh**. Sanskrit **ph** is never pronounced as *f*, but as aspirated **p**. The word for fruit, **phala**, is not pronounced *fala*. Similarly, **th** is never pronounced like the English *th* in *thin* or *that*, but as aspirated **t**, as in **tathāgata**, a title of the Buddha.

t th ḍ ḍh ṇ, the *retroflex* letters, are pronounced like the *dentals t th d dh n* — except that for retroflex letters the tip of the tongue is bent back to touch the roof of the mouth, while for dentals the tongue touches the teeth.

ś ṣ may both be pronounced as English *sh*. Technically, for palatal **ś** the back of the tongue touches the soft palate, while for retroflex **ṣ** the tip of the tongue touches the roof of the mouth. Retroflex **ṣ** is sometimes written **sh**, and, especially in older books, palatal **ś** is sometimes written **ç**. Examples include **śūdra** (servant), **puruṣa** (person), **śiṣṭa** (residue).

Special Letters:

Sanskrit also has two special letters, named **visarga** and **anusvāra**, which cannot occur at the beginning of words or before vowels.

Visarga, written **ḥ**, represents a slight aspiration or *h* sound after a vowel, either at the end of a word or before a consonant. For example: **duḥkha** (suffering) or **namaḥ** (homage).

Anusvāra is written **m̐** or **m̄**. A simple rule is to pronounce it as *m* at the end of a word or before **p ph b bh** or another **m**, and otherwise as **n**. Strictly speaking, **anusvāra** stands for a nasal sound pronounced in one of three ways:

1. at the end of a word, as **m**;
2. before semivowels **y r l v**, sibilants **ś ṣ s**, and the aspirate **h**, as a nasalized vowel (as in French *bon*);
3. before other consonants, as the nasal consonant of the same group; thus **ahaṅkāra** (egoism) may be written **ahaṁkāra**, and **sannyāsin** (renouncer) may be written **saṁnyāsin**.

Additional Letters:

Indian scripts have additional letters for writing the following sounds, which present special problems of pronunciation.

The consonant cluster **kṣ** occurs in many words, for example: **kṣatriya** (warrior). Be careful not to insert a vowel between **k** and **ṣ**. This cluster is sometimes written as *ksh* or even as *x* — for example, the name of the goddess **Lakṣmī** is sometimes written *Lakshmi* or *Laxmi*.

The consonant cluster **jñ**, found in many words derived from the root **jñā** (know), can be pronounced as *nny*, or *dny*, or *gy* — but not *j-n*. Thus, the word for wisdom (**prajñā**) is pronounced *pran-nyā*, *prad-nyā*, or *pra-gyā* — but not *praj-nyā* or *praj-nā*.

Vedic Sanskrit has a letter not found in Classical Sanskrit, a retroflex **ḷ**, a consonant **ḷ** made by touching the tip of the tongue to the roof of the mouth. This is romanized as **ḷ** and also has an aspirated form **ḷh**.

Accentuation:

Vedic Sanskrit has a *tone accent* (consisting of rising and falling pitch) which is sometimes indicated in romanization by an acute mark over a vowel. In Classical Sanskrit, as illustrated on the recording, the tone accent is replaced by a *stress accent*, which falls on certain syllables according to the following rules.

Syllables are either *heavy* or *light*. Heavy syllables contain either a long vowel, or a short vowel followed by two or more consonants. *Light* syllables contain a short vowel, either at the end of a word or followed by a single consonant. Remember that *aspirated* letters, such as **bh**, are single consonants. Generally, the stress falls on the heavy syllable closest to the end of a word but not the last syllable.

Examples: *tu-rī-ya* and *su-ṣup-ti*; *man-van-ta-ra* and *pra-jā-pa-ti*; but *u-pa-ni-ṣad* (which has no heavy syllable).