A Brief Introduction To

Sanskrit

Pronunciation

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Introduction

Sanskrit is an ancient language that is the means for expressing the teachings of the Vedas. The word Sanskrit is an Anglicized version of the word Saṁskṛtam (when written in IAST). The word Saṁskṛtam means 'highly refined', and indeed, Sanskrit is a beautifully refined language.

Sanskrit may be written using any system that has the capacity to express its numerous phonemes. Sanskrit was originally an oral tradition with no accompanying script. An ancient script that was adapted to express Sanskrit was called Brāhmī. Brāhmī evolved into a form which we now commonly associate with Sanskrit called Devanāgarī. This booklet focuses on two written forms of Sanskrit; Devanāgarī and IAST (International Alphabet of Sanskrit Transliteration). IAST uses the Roman/Latin alphabet with additional marks called diacritic marks to express all the 'non-Latin' phonemes in the Sanskrit language.

The reasons to study Sanskrit, as a student of Vedānta, are numerous. The sacred texts for all things Vedāntic are the Vedas, which are expressed using the Sanskrit language. Within the Vedas live the Upaniṣads; the core Vedāntic scriptures. Sanskrit is also the language for almost all supporting, non-Vedic texts, including the highly revered Bhagavad Gītā. Even a rudimentary knowledge of Sanskrit will give the aspiring student a greater insight into the knowledge 'hidden' within the Upaniṣads.

This booklet is a very basic introduction to some of the rules and technical terms needed to begin a dedicated study of Sanskrit, as well as a general overview of the Devanāgarī alphabet and IAST. It is strongly recommended that once the aspiring student feels comfortable with the contents of this booklet, she approach a teacher and ask for live teaching; this being the best (and some paṇḍits consider the only) way to study this remarkable language.

Guide to Sanskrit Pronunciation (Expressed in the Devanāgarī and Latin Alphabets)

Sanskrit is a highly refined, phonetic language. Therefore, accuracy in articulation and pronunciation is vitally important. This guide uses IAST (International Alphabet of Sanskrit Transliteration) to help the user understand how to properly pronounce Sanskrit. There are many phonemes in Sanskrit that are not found in any 'Western' languages, including English. Therefore, it is strongly recommended that the prospective student of Sanskrit learn how to correctly produce these sounds under the guidance of a qualified teacher. Note that this pronunciation guide is based on Standard American English.

अ	**a**	Short, pure vowel as in 'b<u>u</u>t'; constricted, with the mouth mostly closed.
आ	**ā**	Long (twice the duration of the short version), pure vowel, as in 'f<u>a</u>ther'; open, with the jaw dropped down.
इ	**i**	Short, pure vowel as in '<u>i</u>t'. The mouth widens.
ई	**ī**	Long (twice the length of the short version), pure vowel as in 'm<u>ee</u>t'. The mouth is wider.
उ	**u**	Short, pure vowel as in 'b<u>oo</u>!' The lips are rounded.
ऊ	**ū**	Long (twice as long as the short version), pure vowel as in 'p<u>oo</u>l'. More rounding of the lips.

ऋ	ṛ	No English equivalent. Like the Italian flipped 'r'. Note that this is a vowel.
ॠ	ṝ	No English equivalent. Like the Italian rolled 'rr'. Note that this is a vowel.
ऌ	ḷ	As in 'like'. Note that this is a vowel.
ॡ	ḹ	No English equivalent. Twice as long as the short version. Note that this is a vowel.
ए	e	Diphthong-like vowel; the point of articulation moves from the throat to the hard palate; narrow mouth.
ऐ	ai	Diphthong-like vowel where the point of articulation moves from the throat to hard palate; wide mouth.
ओ	o	Diphthong-like vowel where the point of articulation moves from the throat to the lips; rounded to more rounded lips.
औ	au	Diphthong-like vowel where the point of articulation moves from the throat to the lips; wide to rounded lips.
क	ka	As in 'king'; unaspirated.
ख	kha	No English equivalent; heavily aspirated version of 'ka'.

ग	ga	As in 'go'; unaspirated.
घ	gha	No English equivalent; heavily aspirated version of 'ga'
ङ	ṅa	As in 'sing'; a liquid/nasal consonant.
च	ca	No English equivalent; like 'chunk'; the tongue pressed flat against the hard palate; slightly aspirated.
छ	cha	No English equivalent; heavily aspirated version of 'ca'.
ज	ja	No English equivalent; like 'jar'; the tongue pressed flat against the hard palate; slightly aspirated.
झ	jha	No English equivalent; heavily aspirated version of 'ja'.
ञ	ña	No English equivalent; the tongue is pressed flat against the hard palate while saying 'n'; a liquid/nasal consonant.
ट	ṭa	No English equivalent; like 'top' except that the point of articulation is the tip of the tongue touching the dome of hard palate; unaspirated.
ठ	ṭha	No English equivalent; heavily aspirated version of 'ṭa'; the tip of the tongue touching the dome of hard palate.
ड	ḍa	No English equivalent; like 'dog' except that the point

of articulation is the tip of the tongue touching the dome of the hard palate; unaspirated.

ढ **ḍha**   No English equivalent; heavily aspirated version of 'ḍa'; the tip of the tongue touching the dome of hard palate.

ण **ṇa**   No English equivalent; like 'no' except that the point of articulation is the tip of the tongue touching the dome of the hard palate; a liquid/nasal consonant.

त **ta**   Similar to 'take' except that the tongue is forward, touching the backs of the top teeth; unaspirated.

थ **tha**   No English equivalent; heavily aspirated version of 'ta'; the tongue touching the backs of the top teeth.

द **da**   Similar to 'dog' except that the tongue is forward, touching the backs of the top teeth; unaspirated.

ध **dha**   No English equivalent; heavily aspirated version of 'da'; the tongue touching the backs of the top teeth.

न **na**   Similar to 'not' except that the tongue is forward, touching the backs of the top teeth; a liquid/nasal consonant.

प **pa**   Like 'pan'; unaspirated.

फ **pha**   No English equivalent; heavily aspirated version of 'pa'.

ब **ba**   Like 'bin'; unaspirated.

भ **bha**   No English equivalent; heavily aspirated version of 'ba'.

म **ma**   Like 'miss'; a liquid/nasal consonant.

य **ya**   Semi-vowel/approximant; like 'yes'.

र **ra**   Semi-vowel/approximant; no English equivalent. Like the Italian rolled 'r'. Note that this is a consonant.

ल **la**   Semi-vowel/approximant; like 'like'. Note that this is a consonant.

व **va**   Semi-vowel/approximant; no English equivalent. More like a cross between a 'v' as in 'victory' and 'w' as in 'wellness'. The point of articulation starts at the lips and pulls back to the teeth.

श **śa**   No English equivalent. A sibilant; like 'shine' except that the tongue is very close to mouth position 2.

ष **ṣa**   No English equivalent. A sibilant; like 'shine' except that the tongue is very close to mouth position 3.

स **sa**   Like 'sincere'; A sibilant; mouth position 4.

ह **ha**   A guttural; like 'heavy'; at mouth position 1.

Effort/Force Required

Points of articulation	**Contacted**				**Slightly Contacted**		**Slightly Open**	**Open**
	Hard Non-Aspirate	*Hard* Aspirate	*Soft* Non-Aspirate	*Soft* Aspirate	*Soft* Non-Aspirate		*Hard* Aspirate	*Soft*
	1st of the class	2nd of the class	3rd of the class	4th of the class	5th/nasals	Semi-vowels	Sibilants	Vowels
Back of throat **Guttural** (mouth position 1)	क ka	ख kha	ग ga	घ gha	ङ ṅa		ह ha	अ*/ आ a / ā
Hard Palette **Palatal** (mouth position 2)	च ca	छ cha	ज ja	झ jha	ञ ña	य ya	श śa	इ / ई i / ī
Dome of hard palette **Cerebral** (mouth position 3)	ट ṭa	ठ ṭha	ड ḍa	ढ ḍha	ण ṇa	र ra	ष ṣa	ऋ / ॠ ṛ / ṝ
Behind the teeth **Dental** (mouth position 4)	त ta	थ tha	द da	ध dha	न na	ल la	स sa	ऌ / ॡ ḷ / ḹ
Lips **Labial** (mouth position 5)	प pa	फ pha	ब ba	भ bha	म ma	व** va		उ / ऊ u / ū

Diphthongs

Back of the throat → Hard Palate (gutturo → palatal): ए/ e ऐ/ai
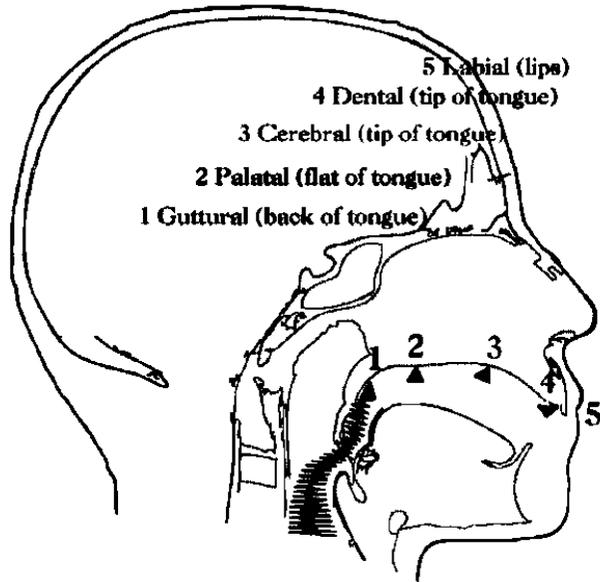
Back of the throat → Lips (gutturo → labial): ओ/o औ/au

*Effort of अ/a is constricted.

**Lips → Teeth (labio → dental): व/va

Mouth Positions

Mouth Position	Technical Term	Point of Articulation
1/First	Guttural	The root of the tongue makes contact with the back of the throat.
2/Second	Palatal	The tongue is flat (horizontal), pressed against the hard palate.
3/Third	Cerebral (also known as lingual and retroflex)	The tip of the tongue reaches up (vertically), making contact with dome of the hard palate.
4/Fourth	Dental	The front part of the tongue makes contact with the backs of the top teeth.
5/Fifth	Labial	The lips.

5 Labial (lips)
4 Dental (tip of tongue)
3 Cerebral (tip of tongue)
2 Palatal (flat of tongue)
1 Guttural (back of tongue)

Special Phonemes

Anusvāra

˙/ṁ The anusvāra, in the Devanāgarī script, will take the form of a dot above the horizontal line (indicating that the anusvāra will be modified by the consonant that follows it). In IAST, the form will be an 'm' with a dot above it (see above).

In context, the anusvāra (ṁ) will assume the form of one of the five liquid/nasal consonants, depending upon the mouth position of the consonant that follows it. For example; श्रुतं मे; śrutaṁ me. Because the anusvāra (ṁ) is followed by an 'm', it will take the fifth mouth position and be expressed as 'm'; 'śruta**m m**e'.

Here's another example; अमृतं गमय; amṛtaṁ gamaya. Here, the anusvāra (ṁ) is followed by a 'g' phoneme. Because the anusvāra (ṁ) is followed by a 'g', it will take the first mouth position and be expressed as 'ṅ'; 'amṛta**ṅ g**amaya'.

Here's an exception to the rule, just to make things interesting. The word is संस्कृतम् ; sa**ṁs**kṛtam. Note that the anusvāra (ṁ) is in the middle of the word and is followed by an 's'. The rule is that an anusvāra (ṁ), followed by any sibilant (ś, ṣ or s), will take the fifth mouth position and be expressed as 'm'; 'sa**ms**kṛtam'.

Here's one more and then we'll move on; संधि; sa**ṁdh**i. Again, the anusvāra (ṁ) is in the middle of the word. Because the anusvāra (ṁ) is followed by a 'dh', it will take the fourth mouth position and will be expressed as 'n'; 'sa**ndh**i'.

Visarga

:/ḥ The visarga in the Devanāgarī script looks like a colon; in IAST

it is represented by an 'h' with a dot below it (see page 9). The visarga is an aspirated, guttural consonant that echoes the preceding vowel. For example, पूर्णमदः; pūrṇamad**aḥ**. The vowel preceding the visarga (ḥ) in pūrṇamadaḥ is 'a'. The visarga (ḥ) will affect the 'a' vowel by creating an echo of it, intermediated by an aspirated guttural 'h' (the 'h' phoneme happening between the initial 'a' and the echoed 'a'). Fully expressed in IAST, it would read like this; pūrṇamad**aha**.

Here's another example; शान्तिः; śānt**iḥ**. The vowel preceding the visarga (ḥ) in śāntiḥ is 'i'. The visarga (ḥ) will affect the 'i' vowel by creating an echo of it, intermediated by an aspirated, guttural 'h' (the 'h' phoneme happening between the initial 'i' and the echoed 'i'). Fully expressed in IAST, it would read like this; śānt**ihi**.

Here's an example of a visarga following a long vowel; प्रहासीः; prahās**īḥ**. The vowel preceding the visarga (ḥ) in prahāsīḥ is 'ī'. The visarga (ḥ) will affect the long 'ī' vowel by creating an echo of it intermediated by an aspirated, guttural 'h' phoneme (the 'h' phoneme happening between the initial 'ī' and the echoed 'ī'). Fully expressed in IAST, it will read like this; prahās**iihi**. Note that the long 'ī' is expressed here as 'ii', and that the echo is a short 'i' phoneme.

Conclusion

This booklet in no way exhausts even the barest minimum of what an introduction to Sanskrit class would cover. It is simply meant to show the prospective student of Vedānta the basic sounds and some of the rules governing this remarkable language, in the hope that by doing so, the student will be inspired to learn more. It is strongly recommended that the aspiring student attend classes and arrange private tutoring to refine their pronunciation of Sanskrit in preparation for learning how to chant Vedic Sanskrit.

श्री स्वामी वागीशानन्द सरस्वती
Śrī Svāmī Vāgīśānanda Sarasvatī

Śrī Svāmī Vāgīśānanda Sarasvatī is a senior disciple of Pūjya Śrī Svāmī Dayānanda Sarasvatī, and has been studying and teaching Vedānta since 1975.

Svāmī jī was in his teens when he became fascinated with mystical poetry and non-dualistic philosophies. In 1975, at the age of 19, he left his home in the United States and traveled to India to study in a traditional gurūkulam. After graduating from a three-year residential course in Vedānta and Sanskrit, he attended four subsequent three-year courses in the United States and in India.

Using the traditional methodology called sampradāya, Svāmī Vāgīśānanda 'unlocks' the scriptures of Vedānta, thereby removing the veil of ignorance; the cause of all human suffering. He is a traditional saṃnyāsi (a renunciant who is committed to a life of knowledge and has taken a vow of non-injury). A master of the South Indian Kṛṣṇa Yajur Veda style of chanting, Svāmī jī travels the world teaching Sanskrit, Vedic chanting and Vedānta.

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