

Sanskrit Pronunciation Guide
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The Sanskrit alphabet, called *varṇa-mālā*, consists of 46 letters. The most common script used to write Sanskrit is the lettering system known as *deva-nāgarī*. With some variation this same system is used for modern Hindi. Sanskrit is also commonly transliterated using the lettering systems of many other Indian languages including Bengali, Gujarati, Tamil, Telegu, Kannada, and so on. Similarly, Sanskrit can also be transliterated using the Roman alphabet. This is illustrated in the transliteration guide. Notice that some of the Roman letters have been augmented with various dots, dashes and slashes. These are diacritical marks and they are used to precisely represent the various sounds of Sanskrit. The unique feature of Sanskrit is that the sounds are pronounced precisely as they are written. The Sanskrit language is, therefore, easy to pronounce once the sounds of the individual letters have been learned.

The arrangement of the Sanskrit *varṇa-mālā* is systematic. The sounds are categorized according to the place within the mouth where they are produced. Five basic places are identified: the throat, the soft palate, the hard palate, the teeth and finally the lips. On the transliteration guide these sounds are respectively known as gutturals, palatals, cerebrals, dentals, and labials. In Sanskrit these five divisions are known as *vargas* and all sounds are associated with one, or in a few cases, two of these *vargas*. In the transliteration guide the vowels, semivowels and sibilants are grouped into their own categories, but in fact they belong to one or more of the *vargas*.

Before we demonstrate the pronunciation of each Sanskrit sound it will be useful to briefly discuss the system of diacritics. The vowels

appear in two forms, long and short. There is a short a and a long a, a short i and a long i, etc. The short and long vowels are distinguished from each other by placing a dash over the long sound. The long sound is held for twice the length of the short sound. Thus there is *a* and *ā*, *i* and *ī*, *u* and *ū*, etc. The final vowels: *e*, *ai*, *o* and *au* are pronounced as long sounds even though they do not have the diacritical dash mark. They are therefore not pronounced as e, ai, o and au.

A dot, which is placed under certain letters, is another important diacritical mark. This mark indicates the cerebral sound, which is made by pointing the tip of the tongue towards the top of the head as the sound is produced. The cerebral consonants are therefore pronounced: *ṭa*, *ṭha* *ḍa*, *ḍha* and *ṇa*.

In Sanskrit there are three sibilants. They are distinguished from each other by diacritical marks. The slash placed over the first letter s, indicates the palatal s pronounced as sha. The dot placed under the second s indicates the cerebral s and is pronounced with the tongue placed towards the top of the head: *ṣa*. The final s is the dental s. It has no diacritical mark and is simply pronounced sa.

A dot, which is placed above the guttural n pronounced as *ṅa*. Another is the tilde placed over the palatal n pronounced as *ñ*. The final important diacritical mark is the dot placed under the letter h. These are known as *visarga* and indicates an echo of the preceding vowel. For example, the name Rāma spelled r, ā, m, a, if written with the *visarga* is pronounced *rāmah*. The letter *a* before the *ḥ* is echoed. Similarly, the word *muni*, spelled m, u, n, i, if written with the *visarga* is pronounced *muniḥ*. The letter *i* before the *ḥ* is echoed. The *visarga* echo is generally only sounded at the end of a stanza and not in mid verse.

Occasionally you will see a dot placed above the letter m. This sound is known as *anusvāra*, but for general purposes it can be ignored and simply pronounced as the m sound.

The final aid to pronunciation is the use of the aspirate sound employed with most of the consonants. Notice the sequence of consonants in any *varga*. Among the gutturals, for example, there is k-h-a and g-h-a. The insertion of the h is the indication of an aspirate sound and must be pronounced as *kha* and *gha*. Similarly, amongst the palatals there is c-h-a and j-h-a that are pronounced *cha* and *jha*. The aspirate sound is similarly employed with the consonants within the other *vargas*.