

## Key to Accurate Sanskrit pronunciation

### THE ALPHABET: VARṆAMĀLA

The Sāṃskṛt alphabet consists of different groups of sounds that have been categorized with a great deal of precision. The script used for Sāṃskṛt is called *Devanāgarī*, and it is a syllabic form of writing. Consonants form the core of the script, while vowels are added after consonants with add-on ligatures. The only exception is the short *a*, which does not have an add-on ligature and is inherent in the consonant.<sup>1</sup> Vowels are written as independent characters if they start a word. The following list introduces the basic categories:

- Vowels (*svārāḥ*)- 13
- Consonants (*vyāñjanāḥ*)- 36, divided into:
  - Stops and nasals-25
  - Semi vowels- 4
  - Sibilants - 3
  - Aspirate- 1
  - Add-on Signs- 2

The full alphabet in *Devanāgarī* script with English transliteration is given below. It should be read from left to right.

### Sāṃskṛt Alphabet<sup>2</sup>

#### Vowels (when not combined with consonants)

अ a    आ ā    इ i    ई ī    उ u    ऊ ū  
ऋ ṛ    ॠ ṝ    लृ!  
ए e    ऐ ai    ओ o    औ au    ँ ṁ    ः ḥ

#### Consonants (with inherent vowel *a*)

	-Voice -Asp	-Voice +Asp	+Voice -Asp	+Voice +Asp	+Voice -Asp
Gutturals:	क ka	ख kha	ग ga	घ gha	ङ ṅa
Palatals:	च ca	छ cha	ज ja	झ jha	ञ ña
Cerebrals:	ट ṭa	ठ ṭha	ड ḍa	ढ ḍha	ण ṇa
Dentals:	त ta	थ tha	द da	ध dha	न na
Labials:	प pa	फ pha	ब ba	भ bha	म ma

<sup>2</sup> Deshpande xvi

**Semivowels (+Voice, -Asp)**

य ya    र ra    ल la    व va

**Sibilants:**

-Voice    -Voice    -Voice

श śa    ष ṣa    स sa

**Aspirate (+Voice)**

ह ha

When vowels are combined with consonants, they are represented by ligatures that are added after the consonant. Vowels are only written as individual characters when they begin a word.

When the vowels are added to the consonant क्, they are written like this:

क ka    का kā    कि ki    की kī    कु ku    कू kū

कृ kr̥    कृ kṛ    क्लृ kl̥

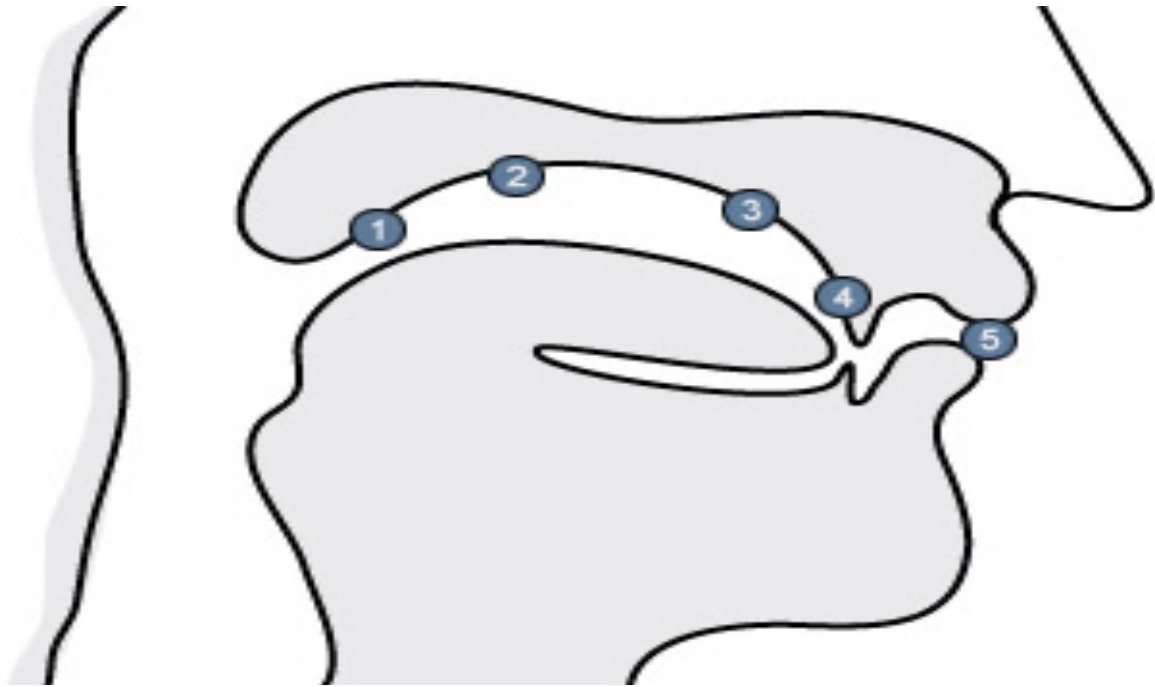
के ke    कै kai    को ko    कौ kau

कं kaṁ    कः kaḥ

As the alphabet is pronounced from beginning to end, the place of articulation of the letters gradually moves from the back of the mouth to the front of the mouth. Vowels are open sounds that originate from the throat. Gutturals, also known as velars, are consonants articulated with the back part of the tongue against the back part of the soft palate. Palatals are articulated with the body of the tongue raised against the hard palate. Cerebrals, or retroflex consonants, are articulated by curling the tip of the tongue backwards and placing it on the hard palate. Dentals are pronounced by placing the tip of the tongue on the back side of the upper teeth. Labial consonants are articulated with the lips. Voice and aspiration indicate two different things. Voice indicates that the letter is pronounced with more sound and aspiration indicates that it should have a breathy quality to it.

## PRONUNCIATION

a – like <u>but</u>	ṭa – like <u>true</u>
ā – like <u>father</u> (twice as long as short a)	ṭha – like <u>anthill</u>
i – like <u>bit</u>	ḍa – <u>drum</u>
ī – like <u>beet</u> (twice as long as short i)	ḍha – like <u>red haired</u>
u – like <u>book</u>	ṇa – like <u>none</u>
ū – like <u>loose</u> (twice as long as short u)	ta – like <u>tooth</u>
ṛ - like <u>ring</u>	tha – like <u>tooth</u> (with aspiration)
ṝ - like <u>reed</u>	da – like <u>the</u>
ḷ - like <u>small reed</u>	dha – like <u>the</u> (with aspiration)
e- like <u>may</u>	na – like <u>not</u>
ai – like <u>my</u>	pa – like <u>peter</u>
o – like <u>go</u>	pha – like <u>top hat</u>
au – like <u>how</u>	ba – like <u>bat</u>
aṁ - like <u>hum</u>	bha – like <u>abhor</u>
aḥ - like <u>Baja</u> (California)	ma – like <u>mother</u>
ka- like <u>paprika</u>	ya – like <u>yard</u>
kha – like <u>bunk house</u>	ra – like <u>run</u>
ga – like <u>good</u>	la – like <u>love</u>
gha – like <u>rag heap</u>	va – like <u>variety</u>
ṅa – like <u>long</u>	śa – like <u>shut</u>
ca - like <u>charming</u>	ṣa – like <u>shnapps</u>
cha – like <u>much heavier</u>	sa – like <u>sit</u>
ja – like <u>john</u>	ha – <u>honey</u>
jha – like <u>hedgehog</u>	
ña – like <u>singe</u>	



**Tongue Placement**

1. Guttural
2. Palatal
3. Cerebral
4. Dental
5. Labial