

# Lesson 1

## The Sanskrit Sound System

Any study of sanskrit should begin with a study of the sound system (phonetics). For an excellent lesson on the sound system of sanskrit, please refer to:

- <http://learnsanskrit.org/sounds/vowels/simple>

This resource includes audio clips to give the correct sound for each of the sanskrit letters beginning with the simple vowels and following through to the consonants by way of the 'next' links. Getting the basic sounds correct takes a little practice.

Once you are familiar with the basic sounds things become more interesting as we move on to constructing some very simple sentences. Occasionally we will be able to refer to sanskrit texts such as the Bhagavad Gita in which the beauty of sanskrit verse is utilised. Also, as we progress you will be introduced to the basic use of nouns, verbs and various items of grammar.

अ आ इ ई उ ऊ ए ऐ ओ औ

First and foremost, let's begin with the sanskrit sound system. In the following table the main letters of the 'devanagari' script are represented. Devanagari is the most commonly used script for writing sanskrit.

The vowels ऋ and ॠ are deliberately excluded for now. These are rarely used.

Each consonant is followed by an inherent 'a' vowel. That's an 'a' as in 'mama'.

| Simple Vowels and Dipthongs |    |   |    |   |   |
|-----------------------------|----|---|----|---|---|
| अ                           | आ  | इ | ई  | उ | ऊ |
| a                           | ā  | i | ī  | u | ū |
| ए                           | ऐ  | ओ | औ  |   |   |
| é                           | ai | o | au |   |   |

| Consonants and Semi-vowels |      |    |     |    |    |
|----------------------------|------|----|-----|----|----|
| क                          | ख    | ग  | घ   | ङ  |    |
| ka                         | kha  | ga | gha | ṅa |    |
| च                          | छ    | ज  | झ   | ञ  |    |
| cha                        | chha | ja | jha | ña |    |
| ट                          | ठ    | ड  | ढ   | ण  |    |
| ṭa                         | ṭha  | ḍa | ḍha | ṇa |    |
| त                          | थ    | द  | ध   | न  |    |
| ta                         | tha  | da | dha | na |    |
| प                          | फ    | ब  | भ   | म  |    |
| pa                         | pha  | ba | bha | ma |    |
| य                          | र    | ल  | व   |    | ह  |
| ya                         | ra   | la | va  |    | ha |
| श                          | ष    | स  |     | .  | :  |
| śa                         | ṣa   | sa |     | m  | ah |

If one is from a non Indian speaking background, it is advisable to practice the sounds of the sanskrit 'alphabet' repeatedly until they become correct. Once the main sounds and letters are mastered, we can then deal with basic sounds that combine a consonant with another vowel (other than the inherent 'a' sound which we have already seen in the previous table).

The following following table represents most of the main sounds whereby consonants are combined with vowels.

| Consonant and Vowel Combined |     |    |     |    |     |     |
|------------------------------|-----|----|-----|----|-----|-----|
| का                           | कि  | की | कु  | कू | कृ  | क्ल |
| kā                           | ki  | kī | ku  | kū | kṛa | kla |
| के                           | कै  | को | कौ  |    |     |     |
| ké                           | kai | ko | kau |    |     |     |

|     |     |    |     |
|-----|-----|----|-----|
| कं  | कः  | क् | र्क |
| kaṁ | kaḥ | k  | rka |

The same process can be applied to the other consonants, for example गा गि गै  
and गं गः गर्ग

The ् is called virama which cuts off the trailing vowel as in 'tam' तम् 'him'

The anusvāra ण् is used as a final 'm' as in 'ahimsāh' अहिंसाः 'non-injury'

Visarga ः represents a final 'h' as in 'taih' तैः 'by them'

Some conjunct consonants take on unique forms, the most common of which are in the following table (let's not get overwhelmed by too many at this stage).

| Special Conjunct Consonants |     |      |     |     |     |     |     |
|-----------------------------|-----|------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| क्ष                         | ज्ञ | च्छ  | ज्ज | प्र | क्र | द्र | त्र |
| kṣa                         | jña | ccha | jja | pra | kra | dra | tra |
| द्य                         | झ   | ह्य  | ह्म | श्र | श्व | श्च | श्ल |
| dya                         | dma | hya  | hma | śra | śva | śca | śla |
| द्ध                         | क्त | त्त  | हृ  |     |     |     |     |
| ddha                        | kta | tta  | hra |     |     |     |     |

For a more comprehensive list please refer to:

<http://www.learnsanskrit.org/references/devanagari/letters>

Thirty years ago I could not imagine such wonderful resources would become available for learning and preserving this ancient, profound and beautiful language. There are many other websites I would like to refer to, but for the beginner it is best to stick with one such resource, such as **learnsanskrit.org**, and follow it through to the end.