

THE SANSKRIT ALPHABET

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The following sounds of the Sanskrit language are placed in the order of the Sanskrit alphabet. The order follows a systematic arrangement based on classes of sounds: vowels first, then consonants. Of the vowels, the order is first short, then long vowels arranged according to the place of articulation: from the back of the tongue and soft palate (velum) to the front or hard palate (*a-!*) and from simple vowels to diphthongs (*e-au*). The Consonants begin with the stops (*k-m*) subdivided into voiceless sounds and voiced sounds, unaspirated and aspirated (followed by 'h') and arranged according to their articulation from the back (velar) to the front (labial) of the mouth. Next follow the semivowels (*y-v*) and sibilants (the 's' sounds). The 'h' is the glottal sound, considered a voiced sound and not voiceless as would be expected. Hindu phoneticians also identify the sound as velar, but some authorities consider it a sound that takes on the position of the following vowel.

Following the Romanized symbol are the *devanāgarī* symbols and the equivalent sounds in English.

Vowels

a अ a schwa as in about, sofaa

ā आ as in father

i इ as in bit

ī	ई	as in <i>beat</i>
u	उ	as in <i>lute</i> (a short "u" sound)
ū	ऊ	as in <i>mood</i> (a long "u" sound)
r̄	ऋ	/əri/ or /əru/ (according to dialect): <i>ṛta</i> [Compares to nothing in English]
r̄̄	ॠ	/əri:/ or /əru:/ In other words, this sound will resemble a tap /r/ but in order to articulate it is necessary to place a vowel (here a shwa or /ə/ before it and depending upon dialect, an /I/ or /i/ and /U/ or /u/ after.
l̄	लृ	somewhat akin to /əl/ or syllabic 'l' ("llllll" or ॥)
e	ए	as in <i>ate</i>
ai	ऐ	as in <i>aisle</i>

o ओ as in *ode*

au औ as in *ouch*

Consonants

k क as in *skip* (little aspiration)

kh ख as in *kick* (an aspirated 'k')

g ग as in *give*

gh घ as in *dog-house* (aspirated "gh" is not in English)

ṅ ङ as in *sing* or *Nguyen*

c च as in *church* (but with little aspiration)

ch छ as in *church* (with more aspiration than 'c')

j ज as in *judge*

jh झ as in *judge* (with more aspiration than 'j')

- ñ** ञ as in *canyon* (but articulated simultaneously: ‘cañon’)
- ṭ** Ṭ not in English (a voiceless retroflex-palatal plosive): a ‘t’ sound as in *stop* but with the tip of the tongue curled toward the hard palate.
- ṭh** Ṭḥ not in English (an aspirated retroflex-palatal plosive): like *top* but with the tip of the tongue curled toward the hard palate.
- d** ड not in English (a voiced retroflex-palatal plosive): like *dog* but with the tip of the tongue curled toward the hard palate.
- dh** Ḍ not in English (a voiced retroflex-palatal plosive that is aspirated): like *guard-house* but with the tip of the tongue curled toward the hard palate.
- ṇ** ण not in English (a nasal retroflex-palatal): like *not* but with the tip of the tongue curled toward the hard palate.

An example of the retroflex appears in the pronunciation of “London” by Indo-Āryan speakers: *Lond*on (that is, a tendency to substitute retroflex sounds for the dental or alveolar sounds of English).

t	त	as in ‘stop’ (not aspirated)
th	थ	as in ‘Tom’ (or <i>Thomas</i>). Note: the ‘th’ is not interdental (ex. ‘ether’, ‘with’)
d	द	as in <i>dog</i>
dh	ध	as in guard- <i>h</i> ouse (aspirated ‘d’)
n	न	as in <i>nasal</i>
p	प	as <i>spot</i>
ph	फ	as in <i>pot</i> (aspirated) or hap- <i>h</i> azard
b	ब	as in <i>boy</i>
bh	भ	as in <i>abhor</i>

m	म	as in <i>moon</i>
y	य	as in <i>young</i>
r	र	not so much an English 'r' (as in <i>red</i>) but close to a tap /r/. It is described as a retroflex sound and thus is in the same category as the retroflex sounds mentioned above.
l	ल	as in <i>like</i>
v	व	may be pronounced as a 'w' or 'v'. If a consonant precedes it, it is more likely to be pronounced as a 'w': <i>svāmin-</i> or <i>svastika-</i> .
ś	श	as in <i>shrink</i>
ṣ	ष	not in English. It is an 'sh' sound but retroflexed: the tip of the tongue is curled to the hard palate
s	स	as in <i>sound</i>
h	ह	as in <i>hard, hide, or heel</i>

Other Sounds

ह : the *visarga* ‘discharge’ or ‘emission’ (or the older term *visarjanīya* ‘that which is to be emitted’) is a substitute sound for ‘s’ or ‘r’. It appears at the end of a word or syllable and has a voiceless breathing sound (with the following vowel taking on the same quality as the preceding vowel).

In theory, some may pronounce the *visarga* as a voiceless velar fricative /x/ (the ‘ch’ in Bach or loch) before the velar sounds /k, kh, g, gh, ṅ/ or the /ϕ/, which is a bilabial sound naturally preceding bilabials /p, ph, b, bh, m/. The first is called *jihvāmūlīya*; the second is known as the *upadhmānīya*.

म् : The *anusvāra* ‘aftersound’ is a syllabic nasal sound, that is, a continuous sound with no stoppage of the airflow. According to early Hindu phoneticians, the nasal sound may be a nasalized vowel, nasal semivowel, or nasal stop. Thus, the vowel preceding the *anusvāra* takes on a nasalized quality much like

the French *bon* /bõ/. In one text, the ‘n’ or ‘m’ before ‘l’ becomes nasalized ‘l’. If the vowel is nasalized, it is called *anunāsika* and written as ॠ. This is the case in the syllable *om̐* ॐ.

। ऌ

A letter used in the *R̥gveda* and some other Vedic texts.

It is a retroflex ‘l’ that substitutes for the ‘ḍ’; if the ‘ḍ’ is aspirated, then it is written as ‘lh’ or ऌह.