## Introduction

The academically recognized system to render Sanskrit words and phrases using the Roman alphabet is called the International Alphabet for Sanskrit Transliteration. This system, which is more comprehensive than phonetic spelling, uses marks called diacritics to indicate how each letter is pronounced. And each letter *is* pronounced, including twin-paired letters such as the two '*t*'s in the word '*sattva*' (*suht-tvuh*).

Each letter is pronounced only one way. For example, if you want an '*s*' sound you use an '*s*', if you want a '*k*' sound you use a '*k*'. The letter '*c*' is used to indicate a '*ch*' sound, as in '*chocolate*' (as opposed to '*Chanukah*'). With transliterated Sanskrit, you will never run into a pronunciation conundrum like '*psychosis*' (heaven help adults who have to learn English as a second language).

Vowels come in short and long forms, as indicated by the absence or presence of a bar across the top of the vowel. Sometimes the diacritics indicate that a letter that would normally be a consonant in the Roman alphabet is a vowel in transliterated Sanskrit and occasionally two letters of the Roman alphabet are used to indicate a single vowel in Sanskrit.

The aural structure of spoken Sanskrit
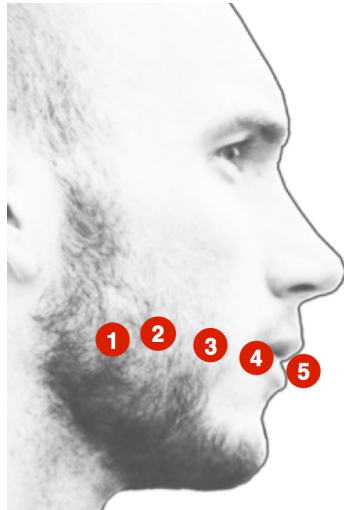
From back to front

1. GUTTURAL
2. PALATAL
3. CEREBRAL
4. DENTAL
5. LABIAL

Vowels

simple

अ आ इ ई उ ऊ
a ā i ī u ū

complex

ए ऐ ओ औ
e ai o au

misc.

ऋ ॠ ऌ अं अः
ṛ ṝ ḷ aṁ aḥ

Consonants

gutturals

क ख ग घ ङ
ka kha ga gha ṅa

palatals

च छ ज झ ञ
ca cha ja jha ña

cerebrals

ट ठ ड ढ ण
ṭa ṭha ḍa ḍha ṇa

dentals

त थ द ध न
ta tha da dha na

labials

प फ ब भ म
pa pha ba bha ma

Semi-vowels

य र ल व
ya ra la va

Sibilants

श ष स
śa ṣa sa

Aspirate

ह
ha

Vowels are pronounced as follows:

a as in wh*a*t

ā as in entour*a*ge

i as in b*i*n

ī as in sw*ee*t

u as in f*oo*t

ū as in l*oo*p

e as in gr*ey*

ai as in sk*y* (say 'sky' slowly to catch the open 'ah' sound that precedes the 'ee' sound).

o as in h*o*ly

au as in c*ow*

ṛ as in b*ri*m with the tip of the tongue bouncing off of the middle of the roof of the mouth rather than your top teeth bouncing off of your bottom lip

ṝ as in *ree*d – again, with the tip of the tongue bouncing off of the middle of the roof of the mouth instead of the top teeth bouncing off of the lower lip (rarely used.)

ḷ as in *lruh* (A made-up word up but that's how it's pronounced. More rarely used.)

There are also four semi-vowels and two sort-of vowels. The four semi-vowels are:

ya as in "*y*a could'a fooled me."

ra as in *run* with the flat portion of the tongue bouncing off of the roof of the mouth just behind the teeth to create a single trill

la as in *l*ament

va as in *v*olume

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The two sort-of vowels are *ṁ* and *ḥ*. The *ṁ* is a simultaneous closure of the lips in front and the nasal passages in the back of as if you were wrapping your mouth around a small walnut. Say '***bong***' and then close your lips to get the right sound.

The *ḥ* is an aspiration and then an echo of the preceding vowel but only when the '*ḥ*' appears at the end of a word that appears at the end of a line. For example, the word '*śāntiḥ*' is pronounced as '***shahnti-hih***' and the word '***namaḥ***' is pronounced as '***nama-hah***' when they appear at the end of a sequence of words. In the case of a long vowel preceding the *ḥ*, the echo is a short version of the same vowel. When '*ḥ*' appears in the middle of a word or at the end of a word in the middle of a phrase the echo is negligible so you would just add a little air to the sound.

An *h* without the dot under it is a simple aspiration, as in '*ha ha ha'*.

Consonants are sounded using the length of your mouth from back to front rather than primarily around the teeth and lips as is common for English. The consonants listed below proceed as follows:

- The back of your tongue up against the back of your mouth

- Your tongue flattened up against the back roof of your mouth

- The underside of the tip of your tongue pressed to the middle roof of your mouth

- The tip of your tongue against your teeth

- Your lips pressed together

Note that consonants are described using two letters rather than one. Also, more than one variation of a letter may appear, with different diacritical marks to indicate differences in pronunciation. The first set of consonants are:

ka as in *Ca*sablan*ca*

ca as in *ch*ocolate

ṭa as in P*t*olemy (you think I'm just being clever but try the next one and see the difference)

ta as in *t*ingle

pa as in *pa*paya

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A variant of these consonants puts a '**_h_**' after them. Since you pronounce every letter, this indicates that you will add some air to the sound as you exit that consonant. Once again, going from the back of your mouth to the front:

> **_kha_** as in Genghis _Kh_an

> **_cha_** as in _ch_ai

> **_ṭha_** as in _tah_ini with the underside of the tip of your tongue pressed to the middle roof of your mouth

> **tha** as in _tah_ini with the tip of your tongue against your teeth (note: the word _hatha_ is pronounced _hot-tah_, not using the English _th_ sound as in _th_ing.)

> **_pha_** as in _pu_ff

The next set of consonants is a softened, rounder version of their predecessors:

> **ga** as in _g_amelan

> **_ja_** as in _j_ob

> **ḍa** as in _d_uh with the underside of the tip of your tongue pressed to the middle roof of your mouth

> **_da_** as in _d_uh with the tip of your tongue against your teeth

> **_ba_** as in _b_utterfly

And again, from back to front,

> **_gha_** as in the name of the country _Gha_na

> **_jha_** as in _jo_cular

> **_ḍha_** as in _do_ck with the underside of the tip of your tongue pressed to the middle roof of your mouth

> **_ḍha_** as in _do_ck with the tip of your tongue against your teeth

> **_bha_** as in _Bo_p

The last set, again, from back to front:

> *ṅa* as in go*ng*

> *ña* as in the Spanish word se*ñ*or

> *ṇa* as in hu*ng*ry

> *na* as in *n*evermore

> *ma* as in *mu*ng bean

The last three sounds are called sibilants:

> *ś* as in *sh* / low-pitched White Noise

> *ṣ* as in *sh* / high-pitched White Noise

> *s* as in *s*ame as a regular *s s*ound)

Some last idiosyncrasies: first, the combination *jñ,* as in the word *jñāna* (theoretical knowledge) is pronounced using a hard *g* sound, as in *g*oy, rather than a soft *j* sound, as in *j*oy, nudged up against the 'nyuh' sound of the *ñ*. The result is that *jñāna* is pronounced *ngyaahnuh*.

And finally, many people of Indian descent will drop the vowels, most commonly *a*-s, that appear at the end of a word, rendering them silent. This is not particularly significant, just the affect of Hindi or Bengali as a native language influencing the pronunciation of Sanskrit. I have heard different Sanskrit scholars from different parts of India pronounce the same word with different inflections according to their respective regional influences.