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Chanting & Pronunciation Guidelines

Sanskrit letters, visarga, anusvāra and consonant combinations

Exceptionally clear and unambiguous guidelines have been provided by our ancient Rishis regarding the pronunciation of Sanskrit letters, words and combinations of words. If these guidelines are followed, one can pronounce Sanskrit words, and chant the Gita too, fairly identically, independent of the influence of one's mother tongue. The following guidelines summarize the pronunciation rules of Sanskrit letters and words in sentences or verses. Please note that these points are not just limited to any chapter of the Gita, or even the Gita in general.

The following tables list the place within the mouth from where the sound is articulated, the duration of a vowel, and the effort taken to sound a consonant.

Duration	**Place of articulation**								
	Guttural	Palatal	Labial	Cerebral	Dental	Guttural & Palatal		Guttural & Labial	
Short	a अ	i इ	u उ	ṛ ऋ	ḷ ऌ				
Long	ā आ	ī ई	ū ऊ	ṝ ॠ		e ए	ai ऐ	o ओ	au औ

Vowels — duration and place of articulation

Pronunciation guide - Place of Articulation and Effort

Place of Articulation	**Effort**							
	Touched					Slightly Touched		Slightly open
	Alpa-praaNa	Mahaa-praaNa	Alpa-praaNa	Mahaa-praaNa	Alpa-praaNa	Alpa-praaNa		Mahaa-praaNa
Guttural	ka क	kha ख	ga ग	gha घ	ṅa ङ			ha ह
Palatal	ca च	cha छ	ja ज	jha झ	ña ञ	ya य		śa श
Cerebral	ṭa ट	ṭha ठ	ḍa ड	ḍha ढ	ṇa ण	ra र		ṣa ष
Dental	ta त	tha थ	da द	dha ध	na न	la ल	va व	sa स
Labial	pa प	pha फ	ba ब	bha भ	ma म			

Consonants — place of articulation and effort

DEFINITION OF TERMS

Aspirate
Pronounced with a puff or breath.

alpaprāṇaḥ / alpapraaNa
A non-aspirated sound. For example, ka, ca, ṭa, ta, pa, ya are non-aspirated sounds.

mahāprāṇaḥ / mahaapraNa
An aspirated sound. For example, kha, cha, ṭha, tha, pha, ha, ṣ are aspirated sounds.

Guttural
Pertaining to or characterized by a sound articulated in the back of the mouth, as the velar fricative kha.

Palatal
Sound made by placing the blade of the tongue against or near the hard palate (e.g. y in yes).

Cerebral
Articulated with the tip of the tongue curled upward and back against or near the juncture of the hard and soft palates. Also known as a retroflex sound.

Dental
Articulated with the tip of the tongue touching the back of the upper front teeth, or immediately above.

Labial
Uttered with the participation of one or both lips.

Nasal
Nasalized sound, or articulated through the nasal cavity.

VISARGAḤ

Visargaḥ represents a distinct hard aspiration and is marked by two perpendicular dots — ':' in Devanagari script, and the letter h combined with a dot below — ḥ in English transliteration. It is very unique to the Sanskrit language. It always follows a vowel and is never used independently. It is sometimes referred to as a support vowel.

Visargaḥ at the end of a word or sentence is pronounced with the sound of 'h' followed by the sound of the previous vowel. It shall have a reverberating sound, similar to the echo of the preceding vowel. Here are some examples:

> **rāmaḥ** shall be pronounced as *raamaha* in English
>
> **agniḥ** shall be pronounced as *agnihi* in English
>
> **vāyuḥ** shall be pronounced as *vaayuhu* in English
>
> **guroḥ** shall be pronounced as *guroho* in English
>
> **rāmaiḥ** shall be pronounced as *raamaihi* in English. Note that only the sound of i is echoed.
>
> **lakṣmīḥ** shall be pronounced as *lakshmeehi* in English.

If visarga is followed by another letter, then sandhi or conjunction rules apply. There are detailed rules about visarga sandhi, its optional pronunciations and variations. The rules that commonly impact pronunciation or chanting are listed below:

1. If visargaḥ at the end of a word is followed by ś, ṣ, or s, then visarga may be replaced with ś, ṣ, or s, respectively.
2. If visargaḥ at the end of a word is followed by k, or kh, then visargaḥ may be replaced with a jihvāmūlīyaḥ, X.
3. If visargaḥ at the end of a word is followed by p, or ph, then visargaḥ may be replaced with an upadhmānīyaḥ, X.
   Note: Chanting shall flow easier with these replacements, instead of trying to pronounce the visargaḥ completely

in the middle of a verse, and hence is the preferred way to chant.

4. If visargaḥ at the end of a word is followed by kṣ, then visargaḥ must be completely pronounced.

jihvāmūlīyaḥ is heard as a scratching guttural sound, as in the Sanskrit word *duḥkham*, like the German 'ach' (alas), or the Tamil aayutha ezhuttu. Please read the following note to understand the effort required to pronounce these two sounds, jihvāmūlīyaḥ and upadhmānīyaḥ, which are sometimes referred to as ardha-visargaḥ or half-visargaḥ.

> *Excerpt from "A Practical Grammar of the Sanskrit Language" by Sir Monier Williams*
>
> An Ardha-visarga, half-visarga, or modification of the symbol Visarga, in the form of two semicircles X is sometimes employed before k, kh, and p, ph. Before the two former letters this symbol is properly called jihvāmūlīyaḥ, and the organ of its enunciation said to be the root of the tongue.
>
> Before p and ph its proper name is upadhmānīyaḥ, 'to be breathed upon,' and its organ of utterance is then the lips. The jihvāmūlīyaḥ and upadhmānīyaḥ are therefore to be regarded as the sibilants of the guttural and labial classes respectively.
>
> The sign X, denoting Ardha-visarga, is now rarely seen in printed Sanskrit texts.

ANUSVĀRAḤ

anusvāraḥ is described as a pure nasal sound. It always follows a vowel and is never used independently. It is sometimes referred to as a support vowel. It is represented by a dot above the vowel in Devanagari script, and the letter m combined with a dot above: ṁ, in English transliteration.

anusvāraḥ when preceded with the vowel 'a' shall sound like 'um' in the English word 'sum'.

When anusvāraḥ occurs at the end of a word, and is chanted without a pause before the succeeding word, it may be optionally replaced with the nasal version of the consonant that follows it. Depending on the following consonant, its articulation changes, as explained below:

- anusvāraḥ followed by ka, kha, ga, gha, may be pronounced as ṅ, that sounds like ng
- anusvāraḥ followed by ca, cha, ja, jha may be pronounced as ñ, that sounds like nj
- anusvāraḥ followed by ṭa, ṭha, ḍa, ḍha may be pronounced as ṇ
- anusvāraḥ followed by ta, tha, da, dha may be pronounced as n
- anusvāraḥ followed by pa, pha, ba, bha, ma, may be pronounced as m
- In the case of ya, la, va, a nasalized y, l, v may be pronounced

SIBILANTS: ŚA, ṢA, AND SA

Helpful tip from www.learnsanskrit.org

To better approximate śa, try saying "pet-shop". Make sure you leave your tongue in the "t" position as you say "sh" that follows.

To better approximate ṣa, try saying "Hershey". Make sure you leave your tongue in the "r" position as you "sh" that follows.

NA, ṆA

The tongue should curl and touch the central bony ridge of the upper palate for the cerebral ṇa. The dental na should be articulated with the tip of the tongue touching near the teeth-ridge, also known as the alveolar region.

COMBINATION OF CONSONANTS

jña — This is a combination of the consonants j and ñ, as in the word, *jñanam*

kṣa — This is a combination of the consonants k and ṣ, as in the word, *kṣetram*

tsn — This is a combination of three consonants, t, s, and n, as in the word, *kṛtsnam*

hma — This is a combination of two consonants h, m as in the word, *brahmā*

AVAGRAHA

Avagraha is denoted by the symbol ऽ in Devanagari script, and an apostrophe, ', in English transliteration. Avagraha has no impact on pronunciation, if the word in which it occurs is not split. Avagraha is intended to help in breaking the word correctly.

TRANSLITERATION AND PRONUNCIATION

Character	Sounds like	Character	Sounds like
अ	a o as in *s*o*n*	ड़	ḍ d as in dog
आ	ā as in M*ā*ster	ढ़	ḍh dh as in go*dh*ood
इ	i as in *if*	ण्	ṇ n as in u*n*der
ई	ī ee as in f*ee*l	त्	t
उ	u u as in f*u*ll	थ्	th th as in thumb
ऊ	ū oo as in b*oo*t	द्	d th as in *th*en
ऋ	ṛ ri as in *ri*m	ध्	dh theh as in brea*the h*ere
ए	e as in ev*a*de	न्	n
ऐ	ai y as in my	प्	p
ओ	o	फ्	ph ph as in loo*p h*ole
औ	au ow as in n*ow*	ब्	b
क्	k	भ्	bh as in a*bh*or
ख्	Kh ckh as in block*h*ead	म्	m
ग्	g (hard)	य्	y
घ्	gh as in log-*h*ut	र्	r
ङ्	ṅ ng	ल्	l
च्	c ch as in *ch*uckle	व्	v as in a*v*ert
छ्	ch chh as in catc*h h*im	श्	ś sh as in *sh*ut
ज्	j	ष्	ṣ sh as in *s*ugar
झ्	jh dgeh as in he*dgeh*og	स्	s
ञ्	ñ n as in ba*ny*an	ह्	h
ट्	ṭ t as in tank	ं	ṁ
ठ्	ṭh th as in an*t-h*ill	ः	ḥ (half h)

Devanagari characters and the sounds they represent

FURTHER READING

Gita Chanting Guide — from Chinmaya Mission Tri-State Center Geeta Chanting Guide, Version 5
chinmayaottawa.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/GitaChantingGuide_Generic_Ver5.pdf

Transliteration and Pronunciation — guidelines for Sanskrit to English transliteration
chinmayaottawa.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Guidelines-to-Pronunciation-Sanskrit-to-English-transliteration.pdf

Pronunciation tables — the two charts above are reproduced from the source page.
chinmayaottawa.com/chanting-and-pronunciation-guidelines/