Alphabet and Romanization:

The Sanskrit language is written in various Indian scripts, such as Devanāgarī. In order to represent the sounds of Sanskrit in the Roman alphabet, accurately and unambiguously, scholars have agreed on a system of romanization now used around the world. This system is used here to explain the pronunciation of Sanskrit words. Both standard romanization and the most common variant spellings are given.

Classical Sanskrit uses at least 49 letters: 14 vowels, 33 consonants, and 2 special letters. Four additional letters are sometimes used. Since the 26 letters of the Roman alphabet, by themselves, are not enough to express all the sounds of Sanskrit, supplements are needed. Where possible, one Roman letter represents one Sanskrit sound. Otherwise one Sanskrit sound is represented by a combination of two Roman letters (as with the vowels ai and au, and the 10 aspirated consonants), or by a Roman letter with a diacritic mark.

Six diacritics are used in Sanskrit romanization:

- a line above the letter (ā)
- a line below the letter (ḷ)
- a dot above the letter (ṅ)
- a dot below the letter (ḍ)
- a tilde or curl above the letter (ñ)
- an acute accent above the letter (ś)
The Roman letters, letter combinations, and letter-diacritic combinations used in Sanskrit romanization are given in English alphabetical order in Table 1.

**TABLE 1 —— Characters in English Alphabetical Order ——**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characters in English Alphabetical Order</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a ā ai au b bh c [ç = ś] cha d ḍ dh ḍh e</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>g gh h ḷ i ī j jh [jñ] k kh [kṣ] l ḷ ī l̄ ḷ l̄h</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>m m [or m] n ṅ [or ṅ] ū n o p ph r ṛ r ō</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>s ś ṭ t ṭh th th u ū v [or w] [x = kṣ] y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sanskrit romanization does not require: f q w x z</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Vowels:**

The Sanskrit vowels are, in Sanskrit alphabetical order:

*a a i ī u ū r ō l̄ e ai o au.* Of these *a i u ū r ō* are short, the others are long. A line over one of a pair of vowels distinguishes long from short. Sanskrit has vowel forms of *r* and *l*, written with a dot below the letter.

Pronounce the vowels as follows:

- **a** (short) is like the *a* in *sofa*, as in *manas* (mind).
  - Sanskrit *a* is never like the *a* in *at*.

- **ā** (long) is like the *a* in *father*, as in *māyā* (illusion).

- **i** (short) is like the *i* in *pin*, as in *idam* (this).

- **ī** (long) is like the *i* in *pike*, as in *jīva* (life).

- **u** (short) is like the *u* in *put*, as in *guna* (quality).

- **ū** (long) is like the *u* in *rune*, as in *rūpa* (form).
The r vowel is fairly common and can be short or long. 

\( \text{ṛ} \) (short) is like the re in fibre, as in \textit{pitr} (father). In India today the \textit{ṛ} vowel is often pronounced \textit{ri} — as in the name \textit{Krṣṇa} or Krishna. The \textit{ṛ} vowel is also sometimes written as \textit{ri}.

\( \text{ṝ} \) (long) is like the short \textit{ṛ} vowel but longer, as in \textit{pitṝnām} (of the fathers).

\( \text{l} \) (short) is like the \textit{le} in able, as in the root \textit{klp}. The \textit{l} vowel is sometimes written, and even pronounced, as \textit{lṛ} or \textit{lri}. The \textit{l} vowel is quite rare, appearing mainly in artificial terms invented by grammarians. In actual Sanskrit words, the short \textit{l} vowel occurs only in words derived from one root (\textit{klp}, the root of the word \textit{kalpa}), while the long \textit{ḷ} vowel does not occur at all.

The following four vowels are always long in Sanskrit.

\textit{e} is like the \textit{ei} in rein, as in \textit{deva} (god).

Sanskrit \textit{e} is never short like the \textit{e} in \textit{yet}.

\textit{ai} is like the \textit{ai} in aisle, as in \textit{vaiśya} (merchant).

Sanskrit \textit{ai} is never like the \textit{ai} in \textit{pain}.

\textit{o} is like the \textit{o} in opal, as in \textit{lōka} (world).

Sanskrit \textit{o} is never short like the \textit{o} in \textit{pot}.

\textit{au} is like the \textit{ou} in out, as in \textbf{Gautama Buddha}.

Sanskrit \textit{au} is never like the \textit{au} in autumn.

\textbf{Consonants:}

Sanskrit has 33 consonants in eight groups, as given in Table 2 in Sanskrit order with the grammatical name for each group.
These Sanskrit consonants are listed in English alphabetical order in Table 3.

### TABLE 2 —— Consonants in Sanskrit Alphabetic Order ——

| k  | kh | g  | gh | ṃ  | — guttural consonants |
| c  | ch | j  | jh | ṃ  | — palatal consonants |
| ṭ  | ṭh | ḍ | ḍh | ṃ  | — retroflex consonants |
| t  | th | ḍ | ḍh | ṃ  | — dental consonants |
| p  | ph | b  | bh | m  | — labial consonants |
| y  | r  | l  | v  | — semivowels |
| ś  | s  | — sibilants |
| h  | — the aspirate |

Pronounce the following consonants as in English:

- **b** as in *buddha* (awakened)
- **d** as in *deva* (god)
- **j** as in *jīva* (life)
- **k** as in *karman* (action)
- **l** as in *loka* (world)
- **m** as in *manas* (mind)
- **n** as in *nivṛtti* (involution)
- **p** as in *pitr* (father)
- **r** as in *rūpa* (form)
- **s** as in *sat* (reality)
- **t** as in *tat* (that)
Other consonants are pronounced as follows:

c is like the ch in church; never like k as in car, like s as in cent, or like sh as in chevron. For example: cakra (wheel), cit (consciousness), and vāc (speech).

g is always a hard g as in god, never a soft g as in gym. For example, guna (quality) and yuga (age).

h is normally pronounced as English h, as in hatha-yoga (physical yoga) and vāhana (vehicle). In the combination hm the h was originally pronounced before the m, with a sound somewhat like the ch in Scottish loch or German ich. Today hm is usually pronounced as mh. Examples include brahman (the impersonal absolute) and brahmā (the individualized deity).

ṅ (also written n̄) is a guttural nasal, like the ng in singing, as in liṅga-śarīra (subtle body).

ñ is a palatal nasal, like the ny in canyon.

v is usually like the v in voice, as in veda. After a consonant, v may be pronounced, and is sometimes written, as w. For example, svabhāva or swabhāva (inherent nature).

y is a consonant, as in yuga (age) or vaisya (merchant), not a vowel, as in gypsy.

Special pronunciation rules apply to the following sets of consonants:

bh ch dh gh jh kh ph th are aspirated letters, corresponding to the unaspirated letters b c d g j k p t. The aspirates are single consonants pronounced with a heavy breath — something like big-horn or wart-hog.
if divided as bi-ghorn and war-thog. Be careful not to insert a vowel before the $h$. Examples include bhūta (ghost), chāyā (shade), dharma (law), ghoṣa (sound). Note that Sanskrit $c$ and $ch$ are sometimes written as $ch$ and $chh$. Sanskrit $ph$ is never pronounced as $f$, but as aspirated $p$. The word for fruit, phala, is not pronounced fala. Similarly, $th$ is never pronounced like the English $th$ in thin or that, but as aspirated $t$, as in tathāgata, a title of the Buddha.

\textit{t ṭh ṭh ḍ ḍh ṇ}, the \textit{retroflex} letters, are pronounced like the \textit{dentals t th d dh n} — except that for retroflex letters the tip of the tongue is bent back to touch the roof of the mouth, while for dentals the tongue touches the teeth.

\textit{ś ṣ} may both be pronounced as English $sh$. Technically, for palatal \textit{ś} the back of the tongue touches the soft palate, while for retroflex \textit{ṣ} the tip of the tongue touches the roof of the mouth. Retroflex \textit{ṣ} is sometimes written $sh$, and, especially in older books, palatal \textit{ś} is sometimes written $ç$. Examples include śūdra (servant), puruṣa (person), śiṣṭa (residue).

**Special Letters:**

Sanskrit also has two special letters, named \textit{visarga} and \textit{anusvāra}, which cannot occur at the beginning of words or before vowels.

\textit{Visarga}, written $ḥ$, represents a slight aspiration or $h$ sound after a vowel, either at the end of a word or before a consonant. For example: duḥkha (suffering) or namah (homage).
Anusvāra is written \( m \) or \( m \). A simple rule is to pronounce it as \( m \) at the end of a word or before \( p \, ph \, b \, bh \) or another \( m \), and otherwise as \( n \). Strictly speaking, anusvāra stands for a nasal sound pronounced in one of three ways:

1. at the end of a word, as \( m \);
2. before semivowels \( y \, r \, l \, v \), sibilants \( ś \, ē \, s \), and the aspirate \( h \), as a nasalized vowel (as in French \( bon \));
3. before other consonants, as the nasal consonant of the same group; thus \( ahaṅkāra \) (egoism) may be written \( ahamkāra \), and \( saṃnyāsin \) (renouncer) may be written \( saṃnyāsin \).

Additional Letters:

Indian scripts have additional letters for writing the following sounds, which present special problems of pronunciation.

The consonant cluster \( kṣ \) occurs in many words, for example: \( kṣatriya \) (warrior). Be careful not to insert a vowel between \( k \) and \( ṣ \). This cluster is sometimes written as \( kṣh \) or even as \( x \) — for example, the name of the goddess \( Lakṣmī \) is sometimes written \( Lakshmi \) or \( Laxmi \).

The consonant cluster \( jñ \), found in many words derived from the root \( jñā \) (know), can be pronounced as \( nny \), or \( dny \), or \( gy \) — but not \( j-n \). Thus, the word for wisdom (\( prajñā \)) is pronounced \( pran-nyā \), \( prad-nyā \), or \( pra-gyā \) — but not \( praj-nyā \) or \( praj-nā \).

Vedic Sanskrit has a letter not found in Classical Sanskrit, a retroflex \( l \), a consonant \( l \) made by touching the tip of the tongue to the roof of the mouth. This is romanized as \( l \) and also has an aspirated form \( lh \).
Accentuation:

Vedic Sanskrit has a tone accent (consisting of rising and falling pitch) which is sometimes indicated in romanization by an acute mark over a vowel. In Classical Sanskrit, as illustrated on the recording, the tone accent is replaced by a stress accent, which falls on certain syllables according to the following rules.

Syllables are either heavy or light. Heavy syllables contain either a long vowel, or a short vowel followed by two or more consonants. Light syllables contain a short vowel, either at the end of a word or followed by a single consonant. Remember that aspirated letters, such as bh, are single consonants. Generally, the stress falls on the heavy syllable closest to the end of a word but not the last syllable.

Examples: tu-rī-ya and su-ṣup-ti; man-vaṇ-ta-ra and pra-jā-pa-ti; but u-pa-ni-ṣad (which has no heavy syllable).