

Chanting guidelines for sanskrit text

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

The following tables list the place within the mouth from where the sound is articulated, specifies 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 ॠ	ḷ ॡ			
Long	ā आ	ī ई	ū ऊ	ī ॠ		e ए	ai ऐ	o ओ au औ

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			

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 / mahapraaNa

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 **jihvāmūliyaḥ**, 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 preferred during chanting.

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

jihvāmūliyaḥ is heard as a scratching guttural sound, as in the Sanskrit word duḥkham, like the German ‘ach’ (alas), or the Tamil aayuta ezhuttu.

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Please read the following note regarding jīhvāmūlīyaḥ and upadhmānīyaḥ, which are sometimes referred to as ardha-visargaḥ or half-visargaḥ.

Excerpt from the book “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 consonants: k and kh, visargaḥ is pronounced as **jīhvāmūlīyaḥ**, and the organ of enunciation is said to be the root of the tongue. Before the two consonants: p and ph, visargaḥ is pronounced as **upadhmānīyaḥ**, 'to be breathed upon,' and the organ of enunciation is the lips.

The sign X, denoting jīhvāmūlīyaḥ and upadhmānīyaḥ, is now rarely seen in printed Sanskrit texts, and is replaced with a visargaḥ.

anusvāraḥ

anusvāraḥ is described as a pure nasal sound. It always follows a vowel and is never used independently, and hence also referred to as a support vowel. Secondly, an anusvāraḥ comes into effect only when followed by a consonant. 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. It is a nasal sound that sounds like the twang of a vibrating string in a stringed instrument, like veenā or guitar.

An anusvāraḥ may be optionally replaced with the nasal version of the consonant that follows it, when chanted in close proximity. Depending on the consonant that follows, 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 ṡ, ṣ, ṣ may be pronounced.

Sibilants: śa, ṣa, and sa

A fricative consonant sound, in which air is pushed past the tongue to make a hissing sound.

śa is a palatal sibilant, and ṣa is a cerebral sibilant, that do not have a direct equivalent in English.

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 say “sh” that follows.

na, ṇa

The tongue should curl and firmly 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**

tsna – 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**

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avagrahaḥ

An avagrahaḥ is denoted by the symbol “s” in devanagari script, and an apostrophe: “ ‘ ” in English transliteration. This symbol clarifies how to split joined words correctly. It does not impact the pronunciation of the joined words, in any way.

For example in the joined phrase: namaste’stu, the role of the avagrahaḥ is to indicate that when this phrase is split at the avagrahaḥ, it should be resolved as: namaste and astu.

Revision History

Revision #	Change Description	Author	Date
1	Original Draft	Krishnan Nambiar	Dec 16, 2012
2	Updated Guidelines specific to Chapter 13	Krishnan Nambiar	Dec 18, 2012
3	Updated Chanting Guidelines Section, pronunciation table.	Anjana Suresh	Dec 30, 2012
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