

# Learning Sanskrit Pronunciation

*Getting Past the Dogma and Chauvinism*

By Bill Francis Barry

The importance of correct pronunciation of Sanskrit mantras and hymns is emphasized by nearly all teachers and traditions of Vedic lineage, often backed up by references to scriptural authority. Unfortunately, there is frequent disagreement on what represents “correct” pronunciation! Sanskrit scholars often disagree. The gurus and teachers of well-respected lineages often disagree. Some teachers even promote their form of pronunciation with conceit and condescension towards alternative teachings. Thus students of Sanskrit face conflicting variations of Sanskrit pronunciation among Vedic lineages as well as respected Sanskrit scholars.

This article examines many factors involved in conflicting positions on what is called “correct” Sanskrit pronunciation. A goal of this article is to provide a more informed context within which students of Sanskrit mantra or Vedic studies can evaluate instruction in Sanskrit pronunciation.

## ‘Classic’ Sanskrit

Some spiritual lineages claim that they have preserved and teach *the true and authentic ‘classic’* form of Sanskrit. But the ‘classic’ form of one lineage can differ from another, and the criteria by which spiritual lineages define ‘classic’ Sanskrit often has no relation to the definitions of linguistic historians.

The earliest forms of Sanskrit, referred to as ‘Vedic Sanskrit’ existed only as an oral language for thousands of years. Early variation in Sanskrit pronunciation is evident within the five distinct forms of Vedic Sanskrit as noted by scholar Michael Witzel.<sup>1</sup> The transition from the period of Vedic Sanskrit to Classic Sanskrit, frequently dated around the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE is believed to coincide the ancient grammarian Panini’s highly regarded attempt to standardize variations in the Sanskrit of his era.<sup>2</sup> “Scholars often distinguish Vedic Sanskrit and Classical or ‘Paninian’ Sanskrit as separate ‘dialects’”.<sup>3</sup> Additional pronunciation divergence is seen by those scholars who conclude that there were four principal dialects of classical Sanskrit.<sup>4</sup> It would seem that variations in pronunciation of Sanskrit have a long history!

## The Phrase “Sanskrit as Taught in the Original Devanagari” is Meaningless

I continue to see instances of widely respected teachers of Sanskrit advertising that they teach Sanskrit ‘in the original Devanagari’, or that their Devanagari instruction involves the “original Sanskrit script”. These catchy marketing phrases are, at best, misinformation. The ‘original’ human expression of Sanskrit was an oral tradition. Sanskrit has no native written form. The earliest written form of Sanskrit is thought to be the 46 character alphabet of the Brahmi script, with some evidence stating that this was as early as about 500 BCE.<sup>5</sup>, although other scholars place this as late as the 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE<sup>6</sup>.

After thousands of years as an oral language, for approximately the first 2500 years of Sanskrit’s written history, its written form was in whatever script was popular in each region.<sup>7</sup> The use of Devanagari, as one of the many scripts used for written Sanskrit, began around the 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> century CE.<sup>8</sup> By about the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Devanagari script became the most common written script form of Sanskrit.<sup>9</sup>

One other point of historical context; it is interesting to note that the use of Devanagari was mostly avoided during the centuries when Sanskrit scriptures and hymns were scribed onto bundles of palm

leaves, because the frequent horizontal lines characteristic of Devanagari would cut through the palm leaves.<sup>10</sup>

One of the strengths of Devanagari is its ability to provide a distinct written representation of all the phonemes or sounds in the Sanskrit alphabet. This explains the widespread adoption of Devanagari as the written form of Sanskrit, as well as Hindi, and many other regional languages. However, while acknowledging Devanagari's strengths, I find that the dogmatic attitude which insists that the only way to learn Sanskrit is by learning Devanagari seems to be a dismissal of the thousands of years of history of Sanskrit's oral teaching and practice. Learning Sanskrit pronunciation, with an emphasis on oral resources (recordings or with a teacher) and working to infuse the Sanskrit mantras or hymns into one's memory, has a credibility proven by history to justify it as a valid alternative to the overemphasis on either transliterations or Devanagari script. If a Devanagari proponent dismisses this as an inferior learning method, they are denying the long history of Sanskrit's oral tradition.

### **Regional Pronunciation Issues.**

Learning the pronunciation of Sanskrit mantras or hymns can also be complicated by variations in regional pronunciation.<sup>11</sup> Proponents of Devanagari correctly point out the errors that can occur within Romanized transliterations of Sanskrit. What is less recognized is that Devanagari script versions can also contain errors. For example Hindi pronunciations, are sometimes written into portions of the Devanagari script form of a Sanskrit mantra or hymn. This problem impacts Romanized transliterations as well as Devanagari representations of Sanskrit. One way to reduce this concern is by being selective about what source is used for transliteration or Devanagari versions.

During the long history of Sanskrit's oral tradition through its expansion to various written scripts, attempts to preserve the 'correct' pronunciation of Sanskrit were influenced or disrupted by divergent forces ranging from revered sages to geographical, cultural or political influences as well as the historical influx of invading forces, mostly in the northern parts of India. There is a belief that because southern India was less impacted by these foreign influences, that the dialects of Sanskrit in the south are closer to the 'classic' or ancient form of Sanskrit. However this belief is called into question by the following, observation: *"There are 22 major languages of India, with 247 dialects officially recognized. The pronunciation of Sanskrit is different in every region"* as explained by the Shree Ma / Devi Mandir lineage.<sup>12</sup> All of these concerns impacting the quality of Sanskrit increase the need for students of Sanskrit mantra to persevere, with caution, in their evaluation of those who claim to be authorities on correct pronunciation of Sanskrit.

One thing common to some spiritual or academic authorities is the recognition that what constitutes correct Sanskrit pronunciation varies according to regional, cultural, and historical factors. However, this recognition is usually not mentioned by those who criticize as inferior or wrong, styles of Sanskrit instruction which differ from their own.

### **Sanskrit Mantra Chanting and the Teachings of Specific Tongue Positions**

Some respected teachers state that the correct pronunciation of Sanskrit is only possible when vocalization includes precise tongue positions required for some Sanskrit phonemes, and that without these precise tongue positions there is a reduction in the effectiveness of the vocalized Sanskrit to stimulate internal energy channels. Thus, according to this teaching, Sanskrit mantras or hymns chanted without these precise tongue positions are said to carry less spiritual potency! However, this belief, which is sometimes promoted with condescending chauvinism, does not seem to be reconcilable with the teachings of respected gurus such as Swami Vivekananda, Swami Sivananda of Rishikesh or Sadguru Sant Keshavadas who all taught that a form of fully silent repetition of mantra (aka mental manasika japa) involving no movement of lips or tongue, is many times more spiritually powerful than all other forms of chanting Sanskrit mantra!<sup>13,14</sup>

Keeping in mind that the teaching of these three widely respected gurus is based upon what many would agree are their abilities of advanced perceptions of the internal energy flows stimulated during the chanting of Sanskrit mantra. The teaching of the requirement of precise tongue placement as necessary to maximize the spiritual power of vocal mantra chanting is also questioned as a misunderstanding of the power of audible physical mantra sounds versus silent mantra repetition by the respected Tibetan Buddhist scholar, Lama Angarika Govinda, who cautions that we should not confuse a mantra's physical sound vibrations with its spiritual sound vibrations.<sup>15</sup>

### **A Teaching Story on Pronunciation**

In many Vedic lineages there are teaching stories that share the following common elements. *A visiting guru arrives by ship to spread their teachings in a village. In the course of their visit, the guru observes one or more students who have been incorrectly chanting the sacred mantras or hymns, although with sincere and sustained daily devotion. The guru instructs the students in the proper pronunciation for which the students are greatly appreciative. Later, as the guru's ship is sailing away, the students realize they are uncertain about part of the new pronunciation they have just been taught. So these students, filled with sincere humility, are next seen running across the surface of the waters, chasing the guru's ship! The guru, after seeing this amazing sight, hear the students ask for clarification on the 'correct' pronunciation of their daily mantras. The guru, with newly gained insight, instructs the students to return to chanting as they had been, since they have demonstrated aspects of very advanced mastery in their daily Sanskrit-based practices!*

The common message of the many variations of this story is a message of *the importance of establishing a sincere intention* to one's daily practice of Sanskrit mantras or hymns. Mystics and authentic Gurus with advanced perceptual abilities teach that the repetition of Sanskrit mantras can invoke tremendous energies of benefit to our lives and our spiritual growth. Consciously setting one's intention, by privately affirming your stated goals of the mantra practice, focuses those energies for much greater effectiveness of the Sanskrit mantra discipline. Scriptures of most traditions teach that devotion or bhakti is a powerful form of setting one's intention for mantra practice.

### **Conclusions**

There exist a wide range of factors contributing to variations in pronunciation. These factors include historical and regional variations common to many languages. However, this does not mean that there are no rules to be respected when learning Sanskrit.

The following quotation is from the book *Pronunciation and the Chandi Samputs* by Swami Satyananda Saraswati and Shree Maa of the Devi Mandir.

*"Herein lies the crux of the issue: the xenophobia of a heritage that presupposes that if all the teachers, pundits, learned men, all the respected people of a locality are pronouncing in a certain way, it must be the right way. Without having travelled to distant temples in far off lands, without having traversed the length and breadth of India... people assume that the scholars of their immediate community are the finest authorities, and that all others have got it wrong. This is the major fallacy which we must understand and overcome... Certainly we are not suggesting that anyone should speak or recite in any way that they feel motivated or inspired... there must be some consistency to the pronunciation in order to communicate meaning. However if we are singing from our hearts for the purpose of sincere prayer, and if we know what we are saying and why we are saying it, and others who hear our prayers can also understand their meanings, and they also become*

*inspired to pray themselves, then we are doing it correctly.  
Intention, motivation, sincerity, attention, bhava and  
understanding all go together to make a proper pronunciation.*”<sup>16</sup>

The concerns in this article are intended to emphasize the importance of the careful selection of trusted authorities on the pronunciation of Sanskrit. Whether one’s path is to follow the teachings of a scholar or a guru’s lineage, the careful discernment in the selection of trust-worthy instruction is essential. It is also emphasized that oral instruction (in person or via recordings) is essential in addition to using either transliterated or Devanagari written forms of Sanskrit. Students of Sanskrit are encouraged to make an informed decision in selecting the scholar or respected lineage they want to study under, and then do their best to learn and practice Sanskrit according to their chosen teacher.

## End Notes

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1. Michael Witzel, Tracing the Vedic dialects in Dialectes dans les litteratures Indo-Aryennes ed. Caillat, Paris, 1989, 97–265. As reported on [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vedic\\_Sanskrit](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vedic_Sanskrit)

2. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sanskrit>

3. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sanskrit>

4. Tiwari, Bholanath (1955), Bhasha Vijnan, ISBN 0-7007-1382-4, as noted in <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sanskrit>

5. “...The palæographical evidence of the Açoka inscriptions, in any case, clearly shows that writing was no recent invention in the third century B.C., for most of the letters have several, often very divergent forms, sometimes as many as nine or ten. A considerable length of time was, moreover, needed to elaborate from the twenty-two borrowed Semitic symbols to the full Brāhmī alphabet of forty-six letters. This complete alphabet, which was evidently worked out by learned Brahmans on phonetic principles, must have existed by 500 B.C., according to the strong arguments adduced by Professor Bühler. This is the alphabet which is recognized in Pāṇini's great Sanskrit grammar of about the fourth century B.C., ...” as stated on [http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/A\\_History\\_of\\_Sanskrit\\_Literature/Chapter\\_1](http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/A_History_of_Sanskrit_Literature/Chapter_1)

6. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sanskrit#CITEREFTiwari1955>

7. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sanskrit>

8. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sanskrit>

9. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sanskrit>

10. During 2010, I visited the Sri Sri Shankaracharya Chandrasekarendra University near Kanchi India, where it was explained to our group (led by Satyabhama – Margalo Ashley-Farrand) that the scriptures recorded on bundles of palm leaves, were scribed in many scripts, but one limitation was that scripts with frequent horizontal lines, such as Devanagari, where rarely used since the horizontal lines of Devanagari would create cuts in the palm leaves, so the scripts used to record these scriptures were limited to alphabets with rounded letters! Additionally, the shelf-life of these palm leaves was only a couple of hundred years, meaning that sets of palm leave scriptures were periodically recopied. This point was explained to us by university professors at the Sri Sri Shankaracharya Chandrasekarendra University where work is being done to create digital images of all the palm leaf writings that can be acquired.

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11. In this note I offer several examples of regional pronunciation variations of mantras or terms.

**The Taraka Mantra**, is popular in many parts of India in at least two variations. “Om Sri Rama Jaya Rama Jaya Jaya Rama” is a popular Sanskrit version, while, in the North, a version with a Hindi influence on its pronunciation is “Om Sri Ram Jai Ram Jai Jai Ram”. Mantra practitioners of each variation report excellent results from the version they practice, a fact that is supported by those with direct perceptions of the energies invoked by these mantras.

**The great Siddha Mantra: Om Namah Shivaya:** During a workshop in the 1970’s I sat among students of Paramahansa Muktananda while he taught this mantra chanted with “Shivaya” pronounced as (phonetically) SHEE-VAH-YAH. In Northern India this term is often pronounced (with a Hindi influence) as SHEE-VAAY. And I once heard (from a respected professor with a Harvard PhD and years of living in South India) that this term is pronounced, by Kashmirian Shivites, as SHI-VAY-YAH with a short “i” sound as in the word gift, and that the Deity’s name is pronounced with the same short “i” sound as SHIV-A not SHEE-VA.

**Bija Mantras for the Muladhara, Swaddhistana, and Manipura Chakras**

There are traditions that teach that the bija (seed sound) mantras of these three chakras are to be pronounced (phonetically as) LAM, VAM, RAM (each with a short “a” sound) while other traditions teach that the pronunciation is LANG, VANG, RANG (also with a short “a” sound).

**Other North - South Variations in terms include:**

Mahabharat instead of Mahabharata; Bhagwad not Bhagavad; Ganesh not Ganesha.

12. “[http://www.shreemaa.org/drupal/?q=chanting\\_0](http://www.shreemaa.org/drupal/?q=chanting_0)

13. When Sanskrit mantras are chanted as japa meditation, there are four methods to choose from. 1.) vachika (aka vaikhari japa) which is vocal, 2.) upamshu japa (whispering japa) where you chant moving lips & tongue but no one nearby can hear, 3.) manasika japa (fully internal, mental repetition of the mantra) and 4.) a variation on manasika japa where the mantra is coordinated with the breath). Upamshu (whispering) japa is more powerful than vachika (vocal) japa; while the purely mental form of Sanskrit japa meditation is taught by many respected lineages as the most powerful form of japa. With reference to the book “*Japa Yoga, A Comprehensive treatise on Mantra-Sastra*” by Swami Sivananda, page 95 and also with reference to the book “*Sadguru Dattatreya*” by Sadguru Sant Keshavadas, page 123

14. Swami Vivekananda stated, “*The inaudible repetition of the Mantra... is called the ‘mental repetition’ and is the highest.*” The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, 9 vols. (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1–8, 1989; 9, 1997, 1.190.

15. Lama Angarika Govinda, in his 1956 book, “Foundations of Tibetan Mysticism.”, page 27

16. *Pronunciation and the Chandi Samputs* by Swami Satyananda Saraswati and Shree Maa of the Devi Mandir, (2004) page 46