

An Introduction to Sanskrit

by: M. R. Dwarakanath

Preface: The following is a general interest article on Sanskrit and is not intended to be the 1st lesson on the subject. The actual lessons will start with the next issue of this journal. The lessons will assume the reader to be familiar with the Nagari script and not much more about Sanskrit. Each lesson will be divided into a number of topics like Conversational Sanskrit, Popular Slokas, Vocabulary, Grammar and other material. The key to gaining a working knowledge of Sanskrit is patience; keep reviewing the old material with each new lesson and soon the rewards will become apparent. To be able to make sense out of written Sanskrit is to be able to break a word cluster into its constituent words, a process called pdzed, and to recognize the parts of speech. To this end minimal grammar will be introduced. However, the grammar will pay big dividends! Finally, the author acknowledges he is no sanskritist but merely a lay enthusiast, playing the role of a facilitator. He requests your indulgence for the many gaffs and errors to be found in these lessons and welcomes your drawing his attention to them.

प्रार्थना **Invocation**

नृतावसाने नटराजराजः ननाद ढक्कां नवपञ्चवारम् ।
उद्धर्तु कामस्सनकादि सिद्धान् एतद्विमर्शे शिवसूत्रजालम् ॥

Nruttaavasaane Natarajaraajaha nanaada dhakkaam
navapancavaaram

Uddhartu kaamassanakaadi siddhaan etadvimarse Sivasootrajaalam

At the conclusion (अवसाने) of the cosmic dance (नृत्त) the lord of dance (नृत्त) sounded (ननाद) his double drum (ढक्का) nine (नव) and five (पञ्च) times (वारम्) with the aim of (काम) up-lifting (उद्धर्तु) accomplished souls (सिद्धान्) like Sanaka et. al. (सनकादि). It is that (एतत्) web (जालम्) of Lord Siva's aphorisms (शिवसूत्र) I wish to examine (विमर्शे).

संस्कृत भाषा Sanskrit Language: Sanskrit (संस्कृत) means properly (सम्यक्) crafted (कृतम्) or a refined (grammatically) language. It is regarded as the language of the Gods. Indeed it is believed that the phonology of all speech was created when Lord Nataraja sounded his double drum as in the above invocation.

पाणिनि Panini was a grammarian par excellence. Although many

grammarians preceded Panini, they are all but forgotten because of Panini's stature much as Shakespeare and Newton eclipsed their predecessors. Panini was considered to be a dull lad, and he ran away from home and practiced severe penance. Lord Siva, pleased by Panini's austerities appeared before him and sounded the drum nine and five or fourteen times. Panini became instantly learned by the grace of the Lord. The sound of Siva's drums transformed Panini into a gifted scholar and this sound contains all the alphabets of Sanskrit and are called Siva Sutras.

शिवसूत्राणि Sivasootrani

१	अ	इ	उ	ण					
२	ऋ	ॠ	क						
३	ए	ओ	ङ						
४	ऐ	औ	च्						
५	ह	य	व	र	ट				
६	ल	ण							
७	ञ	म	ड	ण	न	म्			
८	इ	भ	ञ्						
९	ढ	ध	ष						
१०	ज	ञ	ग	ड	द	श्			
११	ख	फ	छ	ठ	थ	च	ट	त	व्
१२	क	प	य्						
१३	श	ष	स	र्					
१४	ह	ल्							

शिवसूत्राणि Sivasootrani:

When the Siva Sutras are recited with appropriate diction, they do indeed sound like a drum roll. These Siva Sutras play an extremely important role in the study of Sanskrit grammar. The sounds are arranged in a unique pattern and the sounds that are close together in the Siva Sutras are also close to one another phonologically. Panini creates from the Siva Sutras a shorthand notation for alphabet clusters in the following manner:

1. Ignore the final member of each line of the sutras.
2. A group of phonologically related sounds are then

abbreviated by the 1st and last members of the group forming a one syllable shorthand notation.

3. The last member can be (usually is) the last member of any line.

Examples:

अक् includes: अ, इ, उ, ऋ, ॠ - these are the simple vowels. Although these are short vowels (**ह्रस्व स्वराः**) taking one unit of prosodical time, the long vowels (**दीर्घ स्वराः**) are implicitly included. Only there is no long ॠ . The long vowels take two units of time to enunciate. Similarly, **अच्** represents all vowels including diphthongs or conjunct vowels. The diphthongs are ए, ऐ, औ and **औ**. **हल्** represents the consonants, **खर्** includes the harsh (**कर्कश**) or un-voiced consonants, **शर्** the fricatives (**ऊष्मान्**), etc.

The Siva Sutras show the grand phonology of the language, yet provide a utilitarian tool to concisely name groups of similar sounds. As we will be returning frequently to Siva Sutras in the study of Sanskrit, it would be well worth the effort to memorize them.

वर्णमाला - The Alphabets:

वर्णमाला literally means a garland of letters or characters. The standard organization of the alphabets include : 9 simple vowels, 4 diphthongs, **अनुस्वार**, **विसर्ग** and 33 consonants for a total of 48 characters. This arrangement is well known to readers. Here we arrange the same characters in a slightly different pattern to both display the scientific and mathematical beauty as well for the utility this arrangement affords.

1		2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
कण्ठ्य	Kantha	अ	आ	क्	ख्	ग्	घ्	ङ्		[ह]
तालव्य	Taalavya	इ	ई	च्	छ्	ज्	झ्	ञ्	व्	श्
मूर्धन्य	Moordhanya	ऋ	ॠ	ट्	ठ्	ड्	ढ्	ण्	र	ष
दन्त्य	Dantya	ॠ	-	त्	थ्	द	ध	न्	ल्	स्
ओष्ठ्य	Osthya	उ	ऊ	प्	फ्	ब	भ	म्	व	

1. The 1st column lists the points of articulation of sound in the vocal apparatus. There are 5 such points : **कण्ठ्य** or guttural (throat), **तालव्य** or palatal / velar (sound produced with tongue in

contact with the soft palate), **मूर्धन्य** or cerebral (tongue in contact with the roof of the mouth), **दन्त्य** or dental (tongue in contact with the back of the teeth), and finally **ओष्ठ्य** or labial (the lips coming together).

2. The 2nd column lists the **ह्रस्व स्वराः** or short vowels.
3. The 3rd column lists the **दीर्घ स्वराः** or long vowels.
4. Column 4 lists the **अल्पप्राण कर्कश व्यञ्जनानि** or unaspirated, unvoiced consonants. Aspiration involves an explosive gush of air released when the sound is produced. Voicing involves the vibration of vocal chords. Neither occurs for this group of sounds.
5. Column 5 lists the **महाप्राण कर्कश** or the aspirated, unvoiced consonants.
6. Column 6 lists the **अल्पप्राण मृदु** or the unaspirated, voiced consonants.
7. Column 7 lists the **महाप्राण मृदु** or the aspirated, voiced consonants.
8. Columns 8, 9 and 10 list respectively the **अनुनासिकाः** or the nasals, the **अन्तस्थाः** or the semi-vowels and the **ऊष्मान्** or the fricatives.

The mathematical and scientific beauty alluded to earlier may be seen by the logical organization of sounds into a nearly complete matrix by function of the vocal apparatus. This table will greatly facilitate understanding the various sandhi rules and may be worth memorizing the table in this form.

स्वराः Vowels

ह्रस्व, दीर्घ, गुण, वृद्धि : Hrsva, Deergha, Guna and Vrdhi: Although we have seen 13 vowel sounds, they are based on 5 basic vowel sounds. The rest are composite vowels. For now we will introduce the concept of Guna and Vrdhi as a process of strengthening the vowels. How precisely this is done will be seen in a later lesson.

ह्रस्व	अ	इ	उ	ऋ	ॠ
दीर्घ	आ	ई	ऊ	ॠ	-
गुण	अ	ए	ओ	अर्	अल्
वृद्धि	आ	ऐ	औ	आर्	आल्

By examining the following pairs of words: (अग्नि, आग्नेय), (शिव, शैव), (गुरु, गौरव), (कृत्तिका, कार्तिकेय), we can see how the initial vowel of the 1st member of a pair takes वृद्धि, to form the second member - a derivative word!

Suggested Books:

- Devavaani Pravesika - Robert Goldman and Sally Sutherland, University of California, Berkeley
- First / Second Book of Sanskrit - R. G. Bhandarker - Karnatak Publishing House, Bombay

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