

गां तंत्रसूत्राणाम् आद्यभाषाऽस्ति
यणं म... तमेव च
च विश्वविख्यातं संस्कृतस्य महा
च...

संस्कृतोच्चारणम्

SAN̄SKR̄TOCCĀRAᅇNAM



A COMPREHENSIVE GUIDE TO
SANSKRIT PRONUNCIATION

LOKANĀTHA SVĀMĪ

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Introduction (*Bhumikā*)

The members of our International Society for Kṛṣṇa Consciousness (ISKCON) are habituated to mispronouncing many Sanskrit words and mantras. ISKCON leaders now recognize this problem and feel the need for a detailed Sanskrit pronunciation guide.

The books of our founder-*ācārya*, Śrīla Prabhupāda, contain exact transliterations of Sanskrit words, but evidently a tradition of mispronunciation has developed, passed down in a “*paramparā* of errata.” If we try to correct this problem by introducing some standards, the mistakes will diminish.

There is a game played in kindergarten called Chinese Whispers. A child whispers something into another child’s ear, and then the second child whispers it in the next child’s ear and that one whispers it in a fourth child’s ear until finally the last child says aloud what was heard at the end. Most often, this is different from what the first child said. Similarly, in a hundred years, our devotees may have different mantras if our tradition of mispronunciation goes uncorrected.

Some words that devotees mispronounce do change the meaning of or give the opposite meaning to a word. This can lead to philosophical misunderstandings. So we have to stop mispronunciation, go back to basics, and hear and say things right. Some senior devotees suggested printing a companion to our standard songbook that points out mispronunciations of verses and how they should be corrected. This book will serve that purpose, for there is a chapter devoted to avoiding common mistakes in reciting our daily prayers.

यद्यपि बहुनाधीषे,
तथापि पठ पुत्र व्याकरणम् ।
स्वजनः श्वजनो मा भूत्,
सकलं शकलं सकृत् शकृत् ॥

yadyapi bahunādhīṣe
tathāpi paṭha putra vyākaraṇam
svajānaḥ śvajano mā bhūt
sakalam śakalam sakṛt śakṛt

A child practicing phonetics should be trained not to mispronounce even a single syllable; otherwise, the meaning can completely change.

- One would not want to call *svajana* (the family and kinsmen) *śvajana* (dogs).
- Mispronouncing *sakala* as *śakala* changes the meaning from “the complete whole” to “just a part.”
- “*Sakṛt* means “once” and *śakṛt* means “excrement.”

ISKCON is not a new movement. We are *rūpānugas*, following in the footsteps of Rūpa Goswāmī and other great *ācāryas* in our *sampradāya*. To represent them, it is essential that we correctly pass on our oral tradition. If we do not utter mantras as they are, but instead impart distorted versions of them, then a corrupted form of the original scriptural knowledge will be

conveyed to future generations. Our tradition stresses the importance of hearing, but we must hear correctly. If the source is impure or unchaste and the receivers transmit that flawed rendering, an *apa-sampradāya*, or deviant tradition, will form.

Such an *apa-sampradāya* of mispronunciation arose in the very early days of our movement, when there were only a few devotees who could correctly pronounce Sanskrit words and *ślokas* and there were no songbooks that devotees could refer to. When I joined ISKCON in the early 1970s, the devotees had to learn by hearing from others, who had also learned by hearing from others. Playing the *mṛdaṅga* (drum) was learned in the same way. Previously no one was trained to play. The older devotees would just play, imitating what they had heard from other untrained devotees, and as a result they invented *mṛdaṅga* beats.

At that time we did not know whether what we learned was proper or not, and whatever pronunciation, songs, and *mṛdaṅga* beats we did learn, either by imitating Prabhupāda or the early devotees, eventually became the standard. Unfortunately, many such incorrect standards were continued. Many devotees think, “This was the way they were saying it in the early days of ISKCON, so it must be right.”

This is not necessarily anyone’s fault. Nevertheless, the Society is only slowly progressing out of its early days. My concern is to avoid the continuation of mispronunciation. The senior devotees and especially the leaders and Prabhupāda’s disciples should carefully learn to properly pronounce Sanskrit so that wrong standards are not passed down to the generations to follow.

When ISKCON was new, Indians appreciated the Western devotees and overlooked their mispronunciations of Sanskrit words, just as adults appreciate the imperfect speech of children. As children mature, of course, their language improves. ISKCON has progressed tremendously, and now its members should improve their recitation of Sanskrit. The credibility of our preachers will be greatly augmented by their learning to accurately chant Sanskrit. As Prabhupāda said:

“And wherever you go, in any part of the world, if you can chant this mantra, oh, you’ll be received like God. It is so nice. And in India they’ll actually receive you like gods if you chant this mantra. They will offer their respects, so many. *Veda-mantra*.”

Lecture, April 20, 1972

There is a huge difference between a new devotee’s mispronunciations and a senior devotee’s mispronunciations. If a new devotee mispronounces your name, you don’t mind, but it is absurd if after a few decades he still mispronounces your name. As we mature, we are expected to learn more intensely. Something not considered offensive in the beginning of spiritual life is considered an offense later on.

We learn from a passage in Hari Śauri Prabhu’s biography of Śrīla Prabhupāda that Prabhupāda wanted his disciples to correctly pronounce the Sanskrit words:

Moving over to sit at his desk, he asked, “So, what is your name?” Certainly he must have already heard it many times over the last few days, so perhaps it was his way of making me feel more comfortable. It relieved my embarrassment, making me feel that he is getting to know me on a more personal basis. “Arri Sawry, Śrīla Prabhupāda,” I said in my broad Northern English brogue. “Haree Showree,” Prabhupāda corrected in his elegant Bengali accent. Giving me a warm smile, he asked for some water...

Transcendental Diary, Part I

Mispronunciation is nothing to feel ashamed of. Learning a foreign grammar is difficult, and learning to pronounce a foreign language is even more difficult. This is because

our tongues are conditioned by our native language. These differences in pronunciation account for the difficulties that foreign devotees have in pronouncing Sanskrit properly. Many Indian devotees also do a poor job of pronouncing Sanskrit. But with practice one can learn the proper pronunciation of the Sanskrit language.

Any eager, keen, and opportunistic student can learn Sanskrit (or any other new language). It takes motivation and a respectful outlook toward the language and the culture surrounding the language. Along with enthusiasm and attitude, strategies and methods for committing to memory a new vocabulary and grammar are also essential. This is facilitated by hearing the language regularly and attentively, either in direct association with native speakers or by audio/video media. This regular practice is the best method of learning. To improve pronunciation, therefore, readers of this book can begin by attentively hearing and reciting the morning *Bhāgavatam śloka*s. A book, even the best one, can help only in a limited way if a language is not regularly heard and spoken without inhibition.

Sanskrit is a phonetic language. It is written as it is spoken. The readers are thus advised to learn the Devanāgarī script at the beginning, as this quickens the process of learning Sanskrit and also helps in correct pronunciation. Although the Sanskrit can be read in transliteration, an additional benefit of learning the Devanāgarī script is being able to read original texts that are unavailable in transliterations. Also, reading the Devanāgarī script affords one additional spiritual potency and originality, which is not fully achieved through the transliteration.

We hope that this pronunciation guide will help you improve your pronunciation and enable you to better comprehend the translations and deep meanings of Vaiṣṇava songs and verses. As Gopīparāṇadhana Prabhu says in the Preface, a book like this should have come out years ago. I originally planned to publish it in 1996, as a Centennial offering to Śrīla Prabhupāda, but “a good thing takes time” as he said. So it has been finished only now.

Lokanātha Svāmī
February 7, 2009
Nityānanda Trayodaśī
Aravade, Maharashtra, India

Preface (*Prāk Kathanam*)

Lord Caitanya's *sāṅkīrtana* movement is for everyone in the world, not just for a particular class of people, especially not just for Sanskrit scholars. In fact, the students of Sanskrit in Śrīdhāma Navadvīpa were the last people to surrender to Lord Caitanya, and it was in response to their disrespect of Him that He decided to take *sannyāsa*. But the basic scriptures of Lord Caitanya's movement, *Bhagavad-gītā* and *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* are in Sanskrit, as are also most books written by Lord Caitanya's immediate followers.

Sāṅkīrtana is a process of worshipping Kṛṣṇa by transcendental sound. And although Kṛṣṇa is *bhāva-grāhī* Janārdana, the Lord of all persons, who is happy to disregard the bad grammar and pronunciation of sincere devotees, why should our worship of Kṛṣṇa not be as nice as we can make it? Why not correctly pronounce the prayers and other texts we chant in Sanskrit as part of our *sāṅkīrtana* worship, at least if learning how to pronounce correctly is not all that hard?

We should not think that Śrīla Prabhupāda considered reciting the Sanskrit texts in his books unimportant. Otherwise, why did he bother to include the Sanskrit in both Devanāgarī and a transliteration? Why did he institute responsive chanting of the verses in his *Bhāgavatam* classes? Śrīla Prabhupāda wanted us to chant these verses – chant them often, chant them to ourselves and in public lectures – and he wanted us to try our best to chant them correctly.

His Holiness Lokanātha Mahārāja is presenting simple instructions for improving our Sanskrit pronunciation. His explanations are clear, entertaining, and thorough, but not more thorough than necessary for the purpose at hand. Every devotee in ISKCON should gladly study Mahārāja's instructions with care and attention. The readers will get the benefit of learning right Sanskrit pronunciation from an expert communicator and an empowered worldwide preacher.

I am very glad to see this volume finally in print and wish it great success. I regret that someone did not write a book like this years ago. But Lokanātha Mahārāja has taken the initiative to do the needful, and now we should all be very thankful.

Gopīparāṇadhana Dāsa
Senior Sanskrit Editor, The Bhaktivedanta Book Trust
Director, Bhagavat Vidyāpīṭh, Govardhana

Śrīla Prabhupāda Saṁskṛta Upadeśa:

"The League of Devotees, therefore, will maintain a Sanskrit academy and a degree college especially for the purpose of disseminating the benefit of this great language to all."

(On the mission of the League of Devotees, 1963)

"I am happy to learn that you have begun to teach our students Sanskrit pronunciation. Please see that they can pronounce very nicely the Sanskrit verses."

(Letter, April 17, 1970)

"Sanskrit should be compulsory for all our children."

(Letter, February 28, 1972)

"Pronounce these verses very nicely . . ."

(Lecture, April 14, 1973)

"It was my intention in presenting the books that anyone who would read would learn Sanskrit."

(Letter, September 28, 1975)

His Holiness Lokenātha Mahārāja has researched the original, scientific, and authentic method of learning and teaching the Sanskrit language. He has designed this book as a complete guide to Sanskrit pronunciation for any serious student, no matter which lineage and background they come from, so which accents and types of mouth and lip movements they may be accustomed to in their native tongues. The pain felt by Mahārāja when he hears Sanskrit words mispronounced is analogous to the pain felt by the Supreme Lord when He sees religious principles decline. Just as the Lord reestablishes religion, Mahārāja wishes to reestablish the exact articulations, accents, and mouth and tongue movements with which every word, letter, and syllable of Sanskrit is pronounced. Although such a great devotee as Mahārāja is engaged in worldwide missionary efforts, he has still devoted time to pursue this arduous task. I pray to the Lord to bless him with success. I recommend that all the devotees in ISKCON contribute to and take advantage of this project by reforming their own and others' Sanskrit pronunciation.

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