

इण्कुरी

for

SPIRITUAL SEEKERS

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DISCLAIMER

This book is published in the belief that it will help those who read and follow it to gain at least a nodding acquaintance with both Saṃskṛta and Sanātana Dharma.

This book has a [companion website](#) where additional material, as well as external web links, are provided.

Links to external websites are given both in this book and its companion website because—at the time of lookup—those websites contained material that could potentially benefit students. The content and opinion expressed in the linked external websites are not necessarily endorsed in consequence.

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Preface

Sanskrit for Spiritual Seekers is both a course of study and a hyperlinked text, designed specifically for those who seek a deeper understanding of the spirituality of Hinduism, through a study of the Sanskrit language.¹

You might be interested in comprehending the various Sanskrit prayers that you recite as part of your spiritual practice. Or you may yearn to know more about the culture that gave birth to India's distinctive spirituality. Or you may be a computer science student, specializing in error correcting codes, who wishes to probe whether natural languages can embody automatic error correction. Each of you will find something of interest in this book.

There are no pre-requisites for this course, except interest and persistence. I have tried to make the course fun and easy, so that it will evoke your natural sense of enquiry and wonder. There will be no formal assignments, assessments, or examinations, but I have thrown in some teasers and quizzes in the text for you to tackle, if you are so inclined. The greater your effort, the greater your gain.

This book is meant to be read in the sequence of its chapters. Skim through a chapter, if need be, but do not skip it.

The text is principally in English and romanized Sanskrit—also known as *IAST*—about which more will be said later in the text. It is not necessary for you to learn the *devanāgarī* (देवनागरी) script, but it will be covered as we make our way through the course. As just shown for the word *devanāgarī*, Sanskrit words written in IAST transliteration are, by and large, shown in sans serif font to allow readers to easily distinguish them from the English text. When occasion demands, proper nouns will be capitalized to accord with English usage, even though Sanskrit does not feature capital letters.

The emphasis is on the *oral* nature of the language, with particular attention to proper pronunciation. We will also attempt to understand different applicable meanings for the same prayer. This will highlight the plurality inherent in Indian spirituality. You will then enjoy the deep satisfaction that you are chanting the mantras correctly, and with the meaning most applicable to you.

The text is fully hyperlinked: you may click on the links and browse the relevant web pages for further information and knowledge. The companion website for this book is at <https://swanlotus.netlify.app/ss.html>. Access to media-rich websites will allow you to better

¹The proper term for Hinduism is *Sanātana Dharma* or the “Eternal Dharma”. Likewise, Sanskrit is called *Samskṛtam*. The anglicized versions are used here merely to assist the reader.

PREFACE

master the oral nature of sacred chants. Those who learn better by hearing and seeing, rather than by reading, will also be benefited.

One disclaimer before I move on. I am no Sanskrit expert. Nor do I lay claim to deep knowledge of Hinduism, spirituality, or to any of the specialized fields touched upon here, like phonetics, computer science, etc. I am simply one who chanced upon Sanskrit, and was charmed by what I encountered, and who now wishes to share some of the riches I found.

This course is more a leisurely stroll through the garden of Sanskrit rather than a rigidly scheduled journey where you risk missing the boat if you are tardy. There will be ample time for wandering around and smelling the roses and lotuses, and anything else that captures your interest.

The tone of the course is informal and relaxed. Feel free to [communicate with me](#) at any time to ask a question, correct an error, or seek some clarification. If something is not clear the first time, do not despair. I will return periodically to ideas that need reinforcement, until they become clear through repeated exposure.

As I said before, the pace of the course is unhurried. Just as a picture that is blurred may be focused gradually until it becomes sharp and clear, so too will the Sanskrit language become clearer with time and effort. The only two characteristics you should bring to this study are *interest* and *persistence*.

Even if you have been discouraged in the past from studying Sanskrit for any number of reasons, cast aside past fears and discouragement, sit back, relax, and enjoy the ride! Something wondrous awaits you as you tune in to the soul of Sanskrit!

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Part I

Sanskrit as a Language and a Discipline

Chapter 1

Introduction to the Sanskrit Language

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

JOHN 1:1

tasya vācakaḥ praṇavaḥ
His word is praṇavaḥ (written OM or ॐ).

yoga sūtra of patañjali 1:27

1.1 Introduction

Sanskrit, or saṃskṛta, is the ancient, sacred language of India. It means “completely done” or “well done”. The knowledge and wisdom of Hindu civilization, embodied in the Vedas, was primarily transmitted orally. The desire to preserve the Vedas, without distortion or error, led to a profound enquiry into the human voice, the origin and production of sound, of vibration, duration, grammar, metre, pitch, phonetics, recitation, memorization, language, etymology, etc.

Sanskrit was originally developed to be the vehicle used to preserve the knowledge and wisdom of the Vedas.

Because this wisdom was so precious, the vehicle had to be excellent as well. In time, the ancient Vedic language evolved into the polished classical Sanskrit that is now used

in daily prayers. The ṛṣis, or seers, responsible for this, were justifiably proud of their achievement, and christened the result “well done”.

This fascination with the sound produced by the human voice led to the profound investigation of the process of articulation, and, ultimately, to mantra śāstra, or the science of incantation, which saw unparalleled development in ancient India.

1.2 Sanskrit: Facts and Figures

1.2.1 Indo-European Language

Sanskrit is one of the world’s three oldest languages—Tamil, Sanskrit, and Greek—each of which can boast of a fully developed grammar. Sanskrit is also the eldest sister of all Indo-European languages, of which Greek, Latin, German, French, and English are members. Therefore, learning Sanskrit will aid in better understanding other Indo-European languages, especially how words are derived from *roots*. This relationship between words and roots will claim our attention throughout this course, and is essential to a good working knowledge of Sanskrit, especially for understanding the meanings of commonly recited prayers.

At this point, it is worth quoting what the eminent lexicographer, [Sir Monier Monier-Williams](#), late [Boden Professor of Sanskrit at Oxford University](#), has said of this subject:

...the Hindus are perhaps the only nation, except for the Greeks, who have investigated, independently and in a truly scientific manner, the general laws which govern the evolution of language.

The synthetical process which comes into operation in the working of those laws may well be called the *saṃskaraṇa*, ‘putting together’, by which I mean that every word in the highest type of language (called *saṃskṛta*) is first evolved out of a primary *dhātu*—a Sanskrit term usually translated by ‘Root’, but applicable to any primordial constituent substance, whether of words, or rocks, or living organisms—and then, being so evolved, goes through a process of ‘putting together’ by the combination of other elementary constituents.

Furthermore, the process of ‘putting together’ implies, of course, the possibility of a converse process of *vyākaraṇa*, by which I mean ‘undoing’ or ‘decomposition’; that is to say, the resolution of every root-evolved word into its component elements. So that in endeavouring to exhibit these processes of *synthesis* and *analysis*, we appear to be engaged, like a chemist, in combining elementary substances into solid forms, and again resolving these forms into their constituent ingredients.¹ [1, p. xii]

The above quotation perfectly encapsulates what we hope to achieve in this study of Sanskrit: we are engaged in a game of decomposing words into their roots to get at their meaning, using a magnificent set of rules, so that there is a sense of triumph at the end, once the meaning has been deciphered. If there are several meanings, all equally

¹The *emphasis* is mine. Today, not only is the chemist engaged in this analysis-synthesis; so are those involved in electronic signal processing and communications, genetic engineering, and many other contemporary fields of knowledge.

grammatical, the subject may be enriched by this plurality of viewpoints, which should lead to lively discussion and debate. This is one reason why commentaries abound in the literature of Sanskrit. Different thinkers present their own *viewpoints* on the text, consistent with grammar and logic.

1.2.2 Characteristics: syllabic, euphonious, inflected, logical

Sanskrit is a *syllabic language*² in which a single syllable is a single letter, assigned a single character in the written form of the language. The script is called *devanāgarī*, meaning “of the city of the gods or devās”, implying that it is the language of the devās.³ As already noted, Sanskrit has a strong oral tradition and many characteristics of the language derive from this. There is no upper case in the *devanāgarī* script; so all romanized Sanskrit names are shown in lower case only.

Each syllable in Sanskrit has an unambiguous pronunciation. For purposes for *euphony* Sanskrit has *sandhi* rules that govern how two sounds should coalesce when they are juxtaposed. We will cover *sandhi* in detail later on.⁴

Each syllable in Sanskrit is also classified into a normal or long syllable depending on the *duration* of the intonation. The old Vedic language also had a *pitch*, or change of tone, which is absent from classical Sanskrit, but which may be heard even today when priests schooled in the *vedās* recite hymns. This oral tradition has survived intact for almost five millennia and is testament to the vitality of mind over matter.

Sanskrit is an inflected language in which nouns and adjectives are *declined* and verbs are *conjugated*. It has *three* numbers: singular, *dual*, and plural. Although the details of Sanskrit grammar are demanding and will not detain us any more than is strictly necessary, some familiarity with recurring phrases and forms will assist us in understanding prayers better.

Among natural languages, Sanskrit comes closest in logic and structure to mathematics and modern computer languages.

We will explore these aspects in some detail later in the course.

1.3 Pāṇini and his grammar

Sanskrit has a clear and concise grammar compiled by the illustrious grammarian Pāṇini who states that he has drawn upon the work of 64⁵ predecessors.⁶ Another famous an-

²As are all Indic languages, in fact.

³The word *deva* literally means a luminous or radiant being who exist in a subtler dimension of existence. The proper masculine, nominative plural of *deva* is *devāḥ*, here written as *devās*, simply out of convenience. As we progress, such ungrammatical hybrid usages should gradually decline.

⁴In English, the absence of rigid *sandhi* rules makes the pronunciation of the similarly spelled *bough* and *cough* sound worlds apart.

⁵A favourite number of the Hindus: witness the 64 arts and the chessboard.

⁶He is in effect stating that his work is more of a *description* than a *prescription*.

cient grammarian was Patañjali although it is unclear whether he is the same person who codified the yoga darśana.

The grammar of Pāṇini is called the aṣṭādhyāyī, or the “eight chaptered” and consists of 3,959 sūtrās, or threads. Because of the oral tradition that relied on memorization, his grammar is very terse and may easily be printed on 48 A4-sized pages today. The Aṣṭādhyāyī has been called “...one of the greatest achievements of any ancient civilization ...[and]...the most detailed and scientific grammar composed before the nineteenth century in any part of the world.” [2, p 11]

Another illuminating article that establishes Pāṇini’s place in the world of mathematics is [the Panini entry at the MacTutor History of Mathematics archive](#).

1.4 Literature

Sanskrit has a copious literature—in excess of 160,000 major works, many of which deal with other than strictly spiritual subjects. The major classes of Vedic spiritual literature in Sanskrit are considered below.

1.5 Veda

The Vedās are four in number: Ṛgveda, Yajurveda, Sāmaveda, and Atharvaveda. The Vedās are *revealed*—*seen or heard*—*scriptures*. Swami Sivananda has written [3, pp 13–14]:

The Vedās are the eternal truths revealed by God to the great ancient ṛṣis of India. The word ṛṣi means a seer from *ṛś*, *to see*. He is the mantra draṣṭa, a seer of mantra or thought. The thought was not his own. The ṛṣi *saw* the truths or *heard* them. Therefore, Vedās are what are heard (śruti). The ṛṣi did not write. He did not create it out of his mind. He was the seer of thought which existed already. He was only the spiritual discoverer of the thought. He is not the inventor of the Veda.

For more details on the Vedās and of Hinduism in general, I very strongly recommend Swami Sivananda’s authoritative treatise, *All About Hinduism*. [3]. Online versions of this book are available as free downloads in [HTML](#) [4], in [PDF](#) [5], and in [epub](#) [6] formats.

1.6 Vedāṅga

The word Vedāṅga means “limb(s) of the vedās”. The Vedāṅgās are six fields of specialized studies, considered important enough to be conjoined with the vedās. They are tabulated in Table 1.1.

Vedāṅga	Field
Śikṣa	Phonetics
Candas	Rhythm and Metre
Nirukta	Etymology
Vyākaraṇa	Grammar
Jyotiṣa	Astronomy and Astrology
Kalpa	Ritual Practices

TABLE 1.1: The six Vedāṅgās and their fields of enquiry.

A comprehension of Nirukta and Vyākaraṇa serve the purpose of jñāna (wisdom) while Śikṣa and Candas subserve bhakti (devotion) and Jyotiṣa and Kalpa are harnessed for karma (rightly performed action).

1.7 Purāṇa

The major purāṇās number eighteen, as do the minor purāṇās. They were all compiled by the great polymath-ṛṣi Vyāsa, called Kṛṣṇa daipāyana, for this age. The purāṇas literally mean “belonging to the olden time” and deal with cosmogony, divine genealogy, right conduct, action and reaction, etc. They have been designed to have mass appeal and to make philosophy accessible to the general public.

The Śrī alitā Trīsatī (three hundred [names] of She who sports) occurs in the Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa. Interestingly, Mārkaṇḍeya is the great ṛṣi who, though destined to die young, sought refuge in Lord Śiva and recited the mahā mṛtyuñjaya mantra (great victory over death mantra) and become a cirañjīvi, literally “long-lived” or “immortal”. This is an interesting link between two very profound and powerful prayers.

The mahā mṛtyuñjaya mantra is regularly recited toward the end of the Śrī Rudram, which occurs in the Yajurveda.

The life of Bhagavān Kṛṣṇa is recounted in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, also called the Śrīmad Bhāgavatam.

1.8 Itihāsa

There are four itihāsās: the Rāmāyaṇa, the Mahābhārata, the Yogavāsiṣṭha and the Harivaṃśa. The word itihāsa literally means “thus it happened”, or “so it was”.

The Rāmāyaṇa means “Rāma’s path” or “Rāma’s way”, and consists of 24,000 verses in seven books, written by Vālmīki who is known as ādi kavi or “first poet” in Sanskrit. Legend goes that he saw a cruel hunter killing one of two birds that were engaged in amorous play on a tree branch. The grief of the surviving bird for its lost mate moved him so much that he composed his first poem in a metre that was henceforth known as a śloka,

denoting its origin in grief, or śoka. It is also noteworthy that the Rāmāyaṇa is mostly a chronicle of separation and its attendant grief.

It is mind boggling to think there were travelling minstrels and bards in India in bygone ages who could recite the entire Rāmāyaṇa from memory. The oral tradition of Sanskrit must therefore have embodied methods for training the mind to memorize. It is interesting to speculate whether there were error-correcting codes in the Sanskrit works themselves that could lead to an error being detected, and possibly corrected, as happens in modern electronic communications.

The Mahābhārata or “great epic of the Bharata dynasty” has 100,000 verses in its current form and was dictated by none other than Vyāsa to Gaṇapati who is reputed to have broken off one of his tusks to serve as a writing tool in order to function as a scribe. The Mahābhārata is so massive a compilation of human wisdom that it has been said that what is not in the Mahābhārata cannot be found anywhere else. Since human nature, conduct, and affairs have changed little over the centuries, this statement is very plausible.

One of the most-quoted of the Hindu scriptures, the Bhagavad Gītā or “Lord’s song” occurs in the Mahābhārata and consists of the advice Bhagavān Kṛṣṇa gives to Arjuna on the battlefield of Kurukṣetra on how to live life. Because it consists of 700 verses, the Bhagavad Gītā is also called the Saptaśati or “seven-hundred [verses]”.

1.9 Ṣaḍ Darśana

There are six orthodox systems of Hindu ,philosophy, called ṣaḍ darśanās literally “six viewpoints”. Each of these systems has a founding compiler of the viewpoint and is composed of laconic aphorisms called sūtrās, literally “threads”. The six systems are tabulated below:

Darśana	Founder	Field
Nyāya	Gautama	Logic
Vaiśeṣika	Kaṇāda	Categorization
Sāṃkhya	Kapila	Creation
Yoga	Patañjali	Consciousness
Mīmāṃsa	Jaimini	Action
Vedānta	Bādarāyaṇa	Contemplation

TABLE 1.2: The six systems of Hindu philosophy or Ṣaḍ Darśanās, their founders, and their fields of enquiry. Note darśana → viewpoint.

They are complementary but mutually supportive. For example, Sāṃkhya gives the theory, Yoga the practical methods, and Vedānta the experiential results that ensue when the discipline enjoined by these systems is followed. It is beyond the scope of this course to go any deeper into any of these systems, as their waters run deep.

Everything other than the Vedās and Vedāṅgās are called *smṛti*, meaning “what was remembered”.

1.10 Vocabulary

Sanskrit vocabulary is systematic and algorithmic. Knowing the *root* enables us to generate a whole corpus of words related to that root. We will examine roots of interest in a leisurely fashion as we progress through the course. The first root we will consider is *vid*.

1.10.1 The Root *vid*

The word *veda* comes from the root or dhātu $\sqrt{\text{vid}}$, “to know.”⁷ It is related to the English verb *wit* in the sense of *wittingly* or *unwittingly*. When we comprehend something, we say, “I see”. In this sense, the Sanskrit root *vid* and the English word “video” are also related. Sanskrit words descended from this root include:

Saṃskṛta	English
veda (m) ⁸	true or sacred knowledge
vidyā (f)	knowledge
veditavya (mfn)	to be known
vedya (mfn)	to be known
viddhi (v)	know
vidu (mfn)	intelligent
vidura	wise ⁹
vidvān (m)	knower
viduṣī (f)	knower
vedānta (m)	vedānta = veda + anta; end of the vedās; ādi → beginning; anta → end
avidyā (f)	ignorance; non-knowledge

1.10.2 Sacred text: Muṇḍakopaniṣad

In the sacred text, the Muṇḍakopaniṣad (1.1.4), we encounter an interesting question-and-answer dialogue on knowledge. We will translate only one verse here:

तस्मै स होवाच ।
 द्वे विद्ये वेदितव्ये इति ह स्म ब्रह्मविदो वदन्ति पराचैवापर च ॥ १.१.४ ॥
 tasami sa hovāca ।
 dve vidye veditavye iti ha sma brahmavido vadanti
 parā caivāparā ca ॥ 1.1.4 ॥

⁷The square root sign $\sqrt{}$ is a stylized letter “r” and stands for the word “radix” or root.

Saṃskṛta	English
tasmai	to him (Śaunaka, the student)
sa	he (the Ṛṣi Āṅgiras, the teacher) said
hovāca	said
dve vidye	two kinds of knowledge are to be known
veditavye	
iti	thus
ha sma	indeed
brahmavido	the knowers of Brahman have said
vadanti	
parā caivāparā ca	parā caivāparā ca = parā + ca + eva + aparā + ca; the higher and also the lower

Two kinds of knowledge are to be known—so indeed the knowers of Brahman declare—the higher as well as the lower^a

^aThe Upaniṣad goes on to say that knowledge, even of the Vedās, is of the lower kind, which might be contrary to our expectations. For an interesting read, take a look at Swami Krishnanda's text, available in HTML [7] and PDF [8].

The conjunction ca → “and”. It usually occurs in the middle or even at the end of a verse or sentence. The word eva → “verily, also, even”, etc., and is used for emphasis. The word sma is classified as a *particle* and is usually inserted as a syllabic filler, without specific meaning, to satisfy metrical constraints. More about this later.

This simple analysis should give you a flavour for what I call the *algebra of Sanskrit*. It involves simple addition, subtraction, and sandhi rules. Once you are so equipped, you can start developing your capability of *deciphering meanings by decomposition of texts*.

1.11 The Pañca Bhutās or Five Elements

Underlying all intellectual effort of the ancient Hindus was their quest to solve the master problem of life, solving which, all other questions were answered. In the process, they analyzed and classified creation with a thoroughness and rigour that modern researchers would envy. Fundamental to this analysis was the human focus: the observer was analyzed along with the observed creation. One outcome of this study was a revealing classification about speech and language.

Five *elements* or bhūtās were recognized by the ancient Hindus: earth, water, fire, air and ether, graded in order of increasing freedom and subtlety.¹⁰ All physical creation was seen as arising from these five elements. In the human body, five organs of sense

¹⁰Other ancient cultures like the Greeks and the Chinese also have similar classifications.

perception, pañca jñānedriyās, and five organs of action, pañca karmendriyās, were classified as each originating from one of the five bhūtās. This is shown in Table 1.3.

Bhūta	Element	Sense	Action
Prthvī	Earth	Smell	Excretion
Āpas	Water	Taste	Procreation
Agni	Fire	Sight	Speech
Vāyu	Air	Touch	Locomotion
Ākāśa	Ether	Hearing	Manual dexterity

TABLE 1.3: The five elements and their correspondence with the five modes of perception and five modes of action.

1.11.1 Speech as Fire-born

Speech and vision are *fire-born* according to this classification, and special emphasis was placed on seeing only good, and speaking only good, because of the destructive power of fire. It is noteworthy that the Tamil poet Tiruvalluvar in Tirukkural 129 has said

தீயினாற் சுட்டபுண் உள்ளாறும் ஆறாதே நாவினாற் சுட்ட வடு
 tiyinā cutṭa puṇ ullāum āṛādē
 nāvinār cutta vaḍu.

which means

A wound from fire will ultimately heal;
 But rarely does a wound caused by speech ever heal.

Interestingly, in English we have expressions like “he made a fiery speech that inflamed the passions of the audience”, indicating an implicit recognition of the fiery origin of speech and sound. Likewise, a statement like “he gave me a withering look,” seems to recognize that the sense of sight is also fire-born.

In the body, the fire element is associated with the maṇipura cakra in the lumbar spine, and the navel—associated with the solar plexus—on the front of the body. It was postulated that *a properly intoned sound will appear to issue from the navel*. While it may seem counter-intuitive, this assertion has withstood the test of time and of subjective experiential validation.

1.12 Prayer to Lord Hayagrīva

ज्ञाननदमयं देवं निर्मलस् स्फटिकाकृतिम् ।
 आधारं सर्वविद्यानां हयग्रीवं उपास्महे ॥

jñānanda-mayaṃ devaṃ nirmalas sphaṭikākṛtim ।
ādhāraṃ sarvavidyānāṃ hayagrīvaṃ upāśmahe ॥

Saṃskṛta	English
jñāna	wisdom
ānanda	bliss
mayam	permeated (with)
devam	radiant
nirmalaḥ	nis → without; malaḥ → flaw/taint
sphaṭika	quartz crystal
ākṛtim	form or body
ādhāram	foundation or substratum
sarva	all
vidyānām	of knowledge (plural)
haya	horse
grīvam	neck or face
upāśmahe	we worship; upa → near; asmahe → are

We worship hayagrīva (Lord with the neck [and face] of a horse), who is the substratum of all knowledge, who is permeated with wisdom and bliss, and whose form is radiant like a flawless quartz crystal.

1.13 Peace Chant: Saha Nāvavatu

The Upaniṣads begin with śānti mantrās or “peace chants” which are recited at the beginning and the end of periods of study and contemplation. Some are common to more than one Upaniṣad while others are distinctive to a particular Upaniṣad.

ॐ ॥
सह नाववतु सह नौभुनक्तु सहवीर्यं करवावहै ।
तेजस्वि नावधीतमस्तु मा विद्विषावहै ॥
ॐ शान्तिः शान्तिः शान्तिः ॥

AUM
saha nāvavatu saha naubhunaktu sahavīryaṃ karavāvahai ।
tejasvi nāvadhītamastu mā vidviṣāvahai ॥
AUM śānti śāntiḥ śāntiḥ ॥

OM! May that [Brahman] protect us both (Teacher and Disciple);
May that [Brahman] nourish us both;
May we work in harmony with great vigour;

May our study be illuminating and fruitful;
 May we not hate each other.
 OM ! Peace! Peace! Peace!

1.14 Books and online Resources

The [Sanskrit Documents](#) web site provides many important Sanskrit works online. We will delve later in the course into the formats in which the documents at this site are provided.

The book *The Wisdom of India* by the scholar Lin Yutang is once again in print and is available as an inexpensive paperback [9]. Anyone wishing to be educated in Indian culture and entertained at the same time will do well to read this book.

There are many books, in English and Indian languages, and online resources that are available to the keen student of Sanskrit. Many have been motivated by a desire to study the original spiritual teachings of India, rather than from a desire to learn a language or grammar for its own sake. This is similar to the aim of this course. These books and online web sites will be mentioned progressively in this course, as and when the need arises.

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Part II

Specific Scriptures