

Learning Sanskrit

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The class consists of 12 students, who are learning either out of a general interest in languages, or yoga, or to enable them to read ancient religious texts, although it would take quite a long time to learn enough to do that. Half of the students do not live in London, and it is thanks to Zoom that the course is accessible to all. By the end of the first module we should be familiar with the script, and be able to construct simple sentences in the present tense. It is very much a grammar / translation course, and not a conversation class, though we did start off with "my name is -", and "I live in -".

Sanskrit is a very grammatical language, and so far we have come across the following features.

- Nouns have eight cases, and are either masculine, feminine or neuter, singular, dual (for two people or things) or plural. That makes 24 endings!
- Verbs also have singular, dual and plural forms.
- The alphabet has 46 letters, and is organised according to which part of the mouth the sounds are produced in. Some of these sounds are quite difficult for native English speakers to pronounce.
- There are long and short vowels, and it is important to pronounce them as such.
- Adjectives agree with nouns.
- As in Latin and German, the verb goes at the end of the sentence.
- There is no verb "to have". Possession is expressed using the genitive case, e.g. to say "Rama has three brothers", Sanskrit expresses it as "of Rama there are three brothers."
- Parts of the verb "to be" do not need to be included in a sentence, although it is understood to be there, e.g. "my name (is) ----" .
- The word "avatar" comes from Sanskrit, from the verb "to cross" or "to descend". The avatars were incarnations of Gods who came down to earth.
- The "kri" part of "Sanskrit" comes from the Sanskrit verb "to do", which filters down into English as "to create".

The class is using two books, "The Story of Rama" part 1, which is a beginners' course book, with stories taken from the Ramayana, one of the two main Sanskrit epics of ancient India. It tells of the adventures of Prince Rama. The other book is "Writing the Hindi Alphabet Practice Workbook", to help us become familiar with the script. Sanskrit and Hindi are written in the Devanagari script. We are also learning the International Alphabet for Sanskrit Transliteration (IAST). Here are a few of the sentences and questions which the course has covered so far. The script is written from left to right, and there are online keyboards which enable us to type in IAST and in the Devanagari script.

English	IAST	Devanāgarī script
My name (is)	Mama nāma	मम नाम
I live in London.	Aham London nagare vasāmi	अहम् लन्डन् नगरे वसामि
Where do you live?	Tvam kutra vasasi?	त्वम् कुत्र वससि
What are you studying?	Tvam kim paṭhasi?	त्वम् किम् पथसि
The moon shines in the sky.	Candraḥ gagane bhāti	चन्द्रः गगने भाति
The fish swims in the water.	Mīnaḥ jale tarati	मीनः जले तरति
Rama goes to the forest.	Rāmaḥ vanam gacchati	रामःवनम् गच्छति
The king shoots an arrow.	Nṛpaḥ śaram kṣipati	नृपः शरम् क्षिपति
Sita becomes Rama's wife.	Sītā Rāmasya bhāryā bhavati	सीता रामस्य भार्या भवति

This is not the usual type of language course where you learn vocabulary connected with visiting a country on holiday, but rather it is an interesting introduction to a fascinating world of ancient knowledge and literature which has had a major impact on our modern languages and cultures of today. I am looking forward to the next module.

Websites which may be of interest are:

- www.citylit.ac.uk - the CityLit offers a vast number of courses on all sorts of subjects, many of them online.
- www.youtube.com - there are YouTube videos on how to write and pronounce the Devanagari script, and videos of Sanskrit lessons.
- www.facebook.com - a search on "Sanskrit" in Facebook brings up various pages, videos and pictures relating to the language.

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