

## **Romanization Scripts of India and Southeast Asia**

The scripts of India and southeast Asia are very similar in structure (even if not in form), and all have roots in the ancient Brahmi script of India. The scripts can be divided into the eleven scripts of Asia (Devanagari, Bengali, Gurmukhi, Gujarati, Oriya, Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, Malayalam, Sinhala, and Tibetan), and the four scripts of southeast Asia (Thai, Lao, Khmer, and Myanmar).

As in all languages, the alphabets of these scripts have both vowels and consonants. In all these scripts, however, the basic consonant carries an inherent “a” sound (some of the scripts of southeast Asia sometimes have a different inherent vowel, an “o”). This vowel is a part of the consonant (and is romanized) unless there is an explicit “subtraction” of the vowel, using a special mark, or an explicit different vowel added to the consonant.

Although it sounds simple in theory, the actual writing systems quickly make this idea quite complex. If the writing systems used simply the “subtraction mark” (called a “virama” in Hindi), working with the scripts would be fairly straight forward. However, in some of the scripts, if a vowelless consonant is immediately followed by another consonant, only half of the consonant is written. These “half forms,” therefore, indicate exactly the same thing as the full form with a virama: consonant only, no vowel “a.”

Vowels complicate the picture. In speaking, vowels always follow the consonant (as *pa, pi, po*, not *ap, ip, op*), but in writing, the vowel can be written after the consonant; before the consonant; both before and after the consonant; above the consonant; below the consonant; above and after the consonant; and even above, before, *and* after the consonant. The forms of these vowels may or may not be similar to the independent vowels of the script.

Combinations of consonants are often written with special “conjunct consonants” (ligatures), that may or may not be closely related to the individual constituent consonants. In all the scripts, the consonant “r” usually has a special form before the consonant and a special form after the consonant.

In summary, then, one can only work well with these scripts by having a table of vowel plus consonant forms, consonant + “r” forms, “r” + consonant forms, and consonant combination forms (conjunct consonants).