3. Beyond Spelling: Preserving Pali and Sinhala through Transliteration

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Transliteration represents languages written in one script through another. In Sri Lanka, accurately transliterating Pali and Sinhala into English (Roman script) is particularly important given their historical, religious, literary and cultural significance. It is not merely a matter of spelling but also of preserving linguistic accuracy, meaning and cultural identity.

Pali, the language of the Theravada Buddhist Canon, holds a central place in Sri Lanka's religious and intellectual traditions, while Sinhala embodies the language, literature and historical experiences of its people. Both languages possess distinctive phonological features that ordinary English spelling cannot adequately represent. A systematic transliteration system is therefore essential to preserve their sounds and structures.

One of the major reasons for maintaining correct transliteration is the preservation of pronunciation and meaning. In Pali, differences in vowel length, consonant articulation and aspiration can distinguish one word from another. For example, *dhamma*, *dāna* and *Nibbāna* contain phonological features that need to be represented accurately. Similarly, distinctions between dental and retroflex consonants, such as *ta* (ත) and *ṭa* (ට), are linguistically significant. Ignoring these distinctions may result in incorrect pronunciation and, in certain contexts, misunderstanding of the original meaning.

The need for accuracy is equally important, if not more so, when transliterating Sinhala words. Sinhala has a relatively

rich consonant and vowel system, with distinctions that are not adequately represented by conventional English spelling. For example, the distinction between short and long vowels can be demonstrated through *kala* (කල) and *kāla* (කාල), while the distinction between dental and retroflex consonants is illustrated by *tala* (තල) and *ṭala* (ටල). Similarly, the distinction between *n* (න) and *ṇ* (ණ), and between *l* (ල) and *ḷ* (ළ), needs to be maintained in scholarly transliteration.

Another important feature of Sinhala is the distinction between aspirated and unaspirated consonants, as illustrated by *k* (ක) and *kh* (ඛ), or *t* (ත) and *th* (ථ). The failure to represent these distinctions consistently can obscure the original pronunciation. Furthermore, Sinhala contains consonant combinations and vowel distinctions that require careful attention. For instance, *næ* (නැ) and *nǣ* (නෑ) illustrate the importance of representing vowel length and quality accurately.

The transliteration of proper nouns deserves particular attention. Personal names such as *Jayawardhana* (ජයවර්ධන), *Wickramasinghe* (වික්‍රමසිංහ) and *Abeysekara* (අබේසේකර), as well as geographical names such as *Anuradhapura* (අනුරාධපුරය) and *Mihintale* (මිහින්තලේ), are often represented through different English spellings. Although some variations have become established through historical usage, the absence of consistency creates difficulties in academic writing, official documentation, bibliographic records and digital information retrieval. It is therefore important to distinguish between conventional English spellings of established proper nouns and systematic scholarly transliteration.

Correct transliteration is also particularly important in Buddhist studies. Pali terms such as *Buddha*, *Dhamma*, *Saṅgha*, *Nibbāna*, *Kamma* and *Anicca* have established meanings within Buddhist philosophy. The use of diacritical marks helps preserve important phonological distinctions and facilitates accurate academic communication.

Another important consideration is the growing international visibility of Sri Lankan languages and cultural heritage. Sinhala and Pali words increasingly feature in international publications, research databases and digital platforms. Standardized transliteration would facilitate information retrieval, strengthen scholarly communication and ensure consistent identification of words across linguistic backgrounds.

Universities, academic institutions, publishers, editors and government organizations have a responsibility to promote accepted transliteration conventions. *The International Alphabet of Sanskrit Transliteration* (IAST) enables the lossless Romanization of Indic scripts, while *ISO 15919*, introduced in 2001, provides an international standard for their Romanization. However, the specific requirements of Sinhala transliteration must also be recognized and addressed through appropriate standards.

Correct transliteration is more than a technical exercise; it safeguards linguistic heritage, maintains academic integrity and promotes intercultural understanding. As Pali and Sinhala contribute to global scholarship, their accurate and consistent representation in English remains an essential academic and cultural responsibility.

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