

Rajendra Prasad: *Ātmakathā* (1947)

Rajendra Prasad (1884–1963) was the first President of the Indian Republic, a post which he gained after years of involvement in the Indian National Congress, and which he held from 1950 to 1962. It was under the influence of Gandhi that he chose Hindi as the medium for his modest output of essays and other writing; but his schooling had been primarily in Urdu, Persian and English — all essential qualifications for his chosen career as a lawyer — while Hindi and Sanskrit had been rather lower in his list of priorities.

Though ‘Rajendra Babu’, as he is commonly known in Hindi sources, did write on literary topics, and though his status ensures a degree of critical praise for his writing skills, he had no real aspirations to sophistication in his writing style, but rather maintained an almost conversational naturalness and simplicity in much of his work, preferring short colloquial words to long literary ones. His choice of vocabulary is, nevertheless, evidence of his literacy in the three cultural languages of Persian, Sanskrit and English.

Prasad’s autobiography, *Ātmakathā*, was published in the year of Independence, much of it having been written between 1942 and 1945 while serving the jail sentence which was the lot of so many Congress politicians involved in the Independence struggle. Much of the book is concerned, unsurprisingly, with the narration and analysis of political developments (including, in Chapter 115, the ‘national language’ question); but of equal interest is the description of Prasad’s childhood, and it is from this early part of the book that the extract is taken.

The passage begins with an account of Prasad’s initiation into the world of literacy by the Maulvi Sahab, a humorous but rather daunting figure who made a great impression on the boys in his charge. The second paragraph recounts details of the Persian classes given by the Maulvi in his little room adjacent to the family house; the daily routine started early, with lessons before sunrise, but allowed sufficient time for relaxation and the taking of meals; in the early afternoon the boys would rest with their teacher in his room, secretly playing chess and other games while he slept; after another round of lessons and relaxation there was the evening lighting of lamps before the final lesson of the day.

A description of the recitation of the Hindi *Rāmāyaṇ* follows in the third paragraph. In a predominantly illiterate society, few people were able to carry out the simplest of tasks to do with reading or writing; but a basic literacy in the Kaithī script was imparted to some of the villagers by a member of the Muslim weaver caste, and on the basis of such shaky education there would be almost daily readings of the *Rāmāyaṇ* in which the assembled audience would repeat the Hindi verses aloud and so learn a few stanzas and prayers by heart.

The Hindi text is taken from *Ātmakathā* (Patna: Sahitya Sansar, 1947), pp.62–7, 8–9, and 12–13. A very loose English version, apparently translated by the author, is published under the title *Autobiography* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1957), the relevant passages being on pp.7–8 and 11. For the background to Prasad’s involvement in the national language issue, see *LCND*, chapter V.

पाँचवे या छठे बरस में मेरा अक्षरारम्भ कराया गया था । उस समय मेरे भाई अँगरेजी पढ़ने के लिए छपरे भेजे जा चुके थे । उस समय की प्रचलित प्रथा के अनुसार अक्षरारम्भ मौलवी साहब ने कराया था । जिस दिन अक्षरारम्भ हुआ, मौलवी साहब आये, बिसमिल्लाह के साथ अक्षरारम्भ हुआ, शीरनी बाँटी गयी और उनको रुपये भी दिये गये । हम तीन विद्यार्थी उनके सुपुर्द किये गए -

५ एक मैं और दूसरे दो अपने कुटुम्ब के ही चचेरे भाई, जिनमें एक यमुना प्रसाद जी सबसे बड़े और मुझसे दो बरस बड़े हैं, तीसरे अब नहीं रहे; वह भी मुझसे बड़े थे ।

पढ़ने का तरीका था कि खूब सवेरे हम लोग उठकर मकतब में चले आते । मकतब मेरे पक्के मकान से अलग एक दूसरे मकान के ओसारे में था । एक कोठरी थी जिसमें मौलवी साहब रहा करते और सामने ओसारे में तख्तपोश पर बैठकर हम लोग पढ़ा करते । मौलवी साहब कभी अपनी चारपाई पर और कभी तख्तपोश पर बैठकर पढ़ाया करते । सवेरे आकर पहले का पढ़ा हुआ सबक एक बार आमोख्ता करना पड़ता और जो जितना जल्द आमोख्ता कर लेता उसको उतना ही जल्द नया सबक पढ़ा दिया जाता । मैं अक्सर अपने दोनों साथियों से पहले मकतब में पहुँच जाता और आमोख्ता भी पहले खतम करके सबक भी पहले पढ़ लिया करता । यह करते सूर्योदय होकर कुछ दिन भी निकल आता । तब नौकर आता और साथ ले जाकर मुँह-हाथ धुला देता और घर माँ के पास कुछ खिलाने के लिए पहुँचा देता । इसके लिए प्रायः आध घंटे पौन घंटे की छुट्टी मिलती । नाश्ता करके लौटने पर सबक याद करना पड़ता और सबक याद करके सुना देने के बाद मौलवी साहब हुकूम देते, किताब बन्द करो । किताब बन्द करके तख्ती निकालनी पड़ती । इन दोनों क्रियाओं के बीच कुछ समय खेलने-कूदने का भी मिल जाता या दोबारा घर जाकर कुछ खा लेने का भी मौका मिल जाता । तख्ती पर लिखना होता और जब तख्ती भर जाती तो उसे धोना पड़ता । इस क्रिया में भी कुछ समय आपस में हँसने-खेलने का मिलता । दोपहर को नहाने-खाने के लिए एक-डेढ़ घंटे की छुट्टी मिलती और खाकर फिर मकतब में ही उसी तख्तपोश पर सोना पड़ता । मौलवी साहब चारपाई पर सोते । हम लोगों को अक्सर नींद नहीं आती और तख्तपोश पर लेटे-लेटे शतरंज खेलते और जब मौलवी साहब के जागने का वक्त होता उसके पहले ही गोटियों को उठाकर रख देते । उसी जमाने में कभी शतरंज खेलना भी आ गया, पर उसका पता नहीं कि कब, कैसे और किससे सीखा । फिर सेपहर को दूसरा सबक मिलता और उसको कुछ हद तक याद करके सुनाने के बाद घंटा-डेढ़-घंटा दिन रहते खेलने के लिए छुट्टी मिलती । इसी समय गेंद, चिक्का इत्यादि खेल खेले जाते । संध्या को फिर चिराग-बत्ती जलते किताब खोलकर पढ़ने के लिए बैठना पड़ता । दिन के दोनों सबक याद करके फिर सुनाने पड़ते और तब हुकम होता, किताब बन्द करो । किताब बन्द करके, कायदे के मुताबिक मौलवी साहब को आदाब करके, घर जाकर सो जाते ।

३० एक चीज, जिसका असर मुझपर बचपन से ही पड़ा है, रामायणपाठ है । गाँव में अक्षरज्ञान तो थोड़े ही लोगों को था । उन दिनों एक भी प्राइमरी या दूसरे प्रकार का स्कूल उस गाँव अथवा कहीं जवार-भर में नहीं था । मौलवी साहब हम लोगों को तीन-चार रुपये मासिक और भोजन पाकर पढ़ाते थे । गाँव में एक दूसरे मुसलमान थे, जो जाति के जुलाहा थे, मगर कैथी लिखना जानते थे । मुड़कट्टी हिसाब भी जानते थे, जिसमें पहाड़ा, डचोढ़ा इत्यादि मन-सेर की बिकरी और की पैमाइश का हिसाब शामिल है । उन्होंने एक पाठशाला खोल रखी थी जिसमें गाँव के कुछ लड़के पढ़ते थे । अक्षर पहचानना तो बहुत थोड़े लोग जानते, पर प्रायः प्रतिदिन संध्या के समय कुछ लोग कहीं न कहीं, मठ में या किसी के दरवाजे पर, जमा हो जाते और एक आदमी रामायण की पुस्तक से चौपाई बोलता और दूसरे सब उसे दुहराते । साथ में झाल और ढोलक भी बजाते थे । वन्दना का हिस्सा तो जब रामायण का पाठ आरम्भ होता तो जरूर दुहराया जाता । इस प्रकार अक्षर से अपरिचित रहकर भी गाँव में बहुतेरे ऐसे लोग थे जो रामायण की चौपाइयाँ जानते और दुहरा सकते और विशेष करके वन्दना के कुछ दोहों को तो सभी प्रायः बरजबान रखते थे ।

- 1 *akṣarārambh*: 'initiation into literacy/schooling' — one of the rites of passage celebrated during childhood.
- 1 *mere bhāi*: honorific p. exemplifies the respect traditionally shown to an elder brother.
- 2 *chapre*: Chapra is a town in Bihar, to the west of Patna.
- 3 *bismillāh*: 'In the name of God', a Muslim invocation uttered at the commencement of any new work (742); cf. the taking of the name of Hindu deities, particularly Ganesh, in the Hindu tradition (and cf. also the phrase-verbs *bismillāh karnā* and *śrīgaṇeś karnā*, 'to commence').
- 4 *śīrnī* (= P *śīrīnī*): a gift of sweetmeats made at the celebration of an auspicious event.
- 5 *kuṭumb*: 'household'; a more commonly used term than *parivār*, which is more restricted in its reference, as is E 'family' (and HU *faimili*: 922).
- 6 *ab nahīn rahe*: 'is no longer [with us]', one of the very large number of HU euphemisms for death.
- 7 *ham log uṭhkar maktab meṅ cale āte*: 'we would all get up and troop in to the schoolroom'. The habitual nature of the actions described in this and the following sentences is underlined by the ptc. (*āte* etc.) without auxiliary. A *maktab* is a mosque school (722), the Muslim equivalent of a *pāṭhśālā* which teaches the rudiments of Hindu learning.
- 9 *takhtpoś*: a low wooden frame with a cloth covering.
- 10 *pahle kā parhā huā sabak*: 'the previously learnt lesson' (541).
- 11 *āmokhtā* (= P *āmoxṭā*): a P ptc. meaning 'learnt', used in the context of U education for going over or revising a learnt lesson.
- 11 *jo jītnā jald... usko utnā hī jald*: once one relative-correlative construction has been set up, it can readily carry a second in parallel.
- 13 *yah karte sūryyoday hokar kuch din bhī nikal ātā*: 'while [we were] doing this, the sun would rise and a little daylight would appear'. The delightful word-economy of this sentence is made possibly by typical HU ptc. usage (*karte* and *hokar* in their distinct functions).
- 24 *usī jamāne meṅ kabhī śatranj khelnā bhī ā gayā*: 'it was sometime in those days that I picked up how to play chess'; *bhī* has little emphasis here, but provides a link with the previous sentence as do the words 'it was... that...' in the E sentence. (542b)
- 25 *sepahar*: 'in the early afternoon': this P compound (825) is common in U but not in H, which has *tīsrā pahar* as the standard form.
- 26 *ghaṅṭā-derh-ghaṅṭā din rahte*: 'while an hour or so of daylight remained'.
- 27 *cirāg-battī jalte*: 'with the lamps burning'. The compounding of P *cirāg* 'lamp' with *battī* 'lamp, wick' is generalizing: 'the various lamps'.
- 29 *ādāb karke*: 'making a salutation'; the A word *ādāb*, the p. of *adab*, is central to the complex Muslim code of good manners and etiquette.
- 30 *rāmāyaṅpāṭh*: 'reciting of the *Rāmāyaṅ*', which by default refers to the 'Hindi *Rāmāyaṅ*', i.e. the *Rāmcaritmānas* of Tulsidas. This is the one text with a truly universal currency throughout the H area; its dual attraction is its strong narrative line and its depiction of the characters in the story as ideal models for human life and behaviour. The text is widely used both for straightforward recitation, or as the basis of the *Rāmīlā*, the enormously popular dramatic enactment of the Ram story performed by semi-professional troupes throughout the H-speaking area.
- 33 *kaithī*: the Kaithī script is a simpler version of Devanāgarī, without Devanāgarī's characteristic top line, used particularly in Bihar and also in U.P. Its main use is in accounts and record-keeping, and it is usually the special province of the Kayasth writer caste (which gives it its name).
- 33 *jāti ke julāhā*: 'by caste a Julaha'. Most North Indian members of this caste were converts to Islam. Most famous of all was the fifteenth century H poet Kabir.
- 34 *dyaurhā*: 'half-as-much-again', the reckoning of interest at 50%.

34 *man-ser kī bikri*: 'selling prices by the "maund" and "seer"'. A *ser* is just over two pounds, a *man* is forty *ser*. These traditional measures of weight have now been largely replaced by metric units (*kilo* etc.), though they live on in idiom just as the *ānā* does in expressions of currency.

35 *khol rakhī thī*: *khol rakhnā* means 'to set up', rather than simply 'to open', modal *rakhnā* adding a sense of 'establishing' to the main verb.

37 *maṭh*: a place where sadhus live, sometimes having a formal organisational structure under a *mahant* or 'abbot', but often (as here) a rather more informal institution.

38 *caupāī*, and 41 *dohā*: the prevalent metres of the *Rāmcaritmānas*, and early H literature generally. The *caupāī* is particularly well suited to prolonged recitation, being a quatrain with a regular rhythm and a strong rhyme; rhythmic and structural variation is provided by the *dohā* couplet (2).

39 *vandanā kā hissā*: that part of the text comprising verses of praise and dedication, rather than dealing with the narrative itself.

41 *barjabān*: (P; 843c) 'on the tongue', i.e. learned by heart and able to be recited. Cf. S *kaṇṭhasṭh* 'situated in the throat', with the same sense.