

Harivanshray Bachchan: *Kyā bhūlūn kyā yād karūn* (1969)

Harivanshray Bachchan (b. 1907) is one of the most popular Hindi poets of the present century. Accessibility is his hallmark, and he has earned an unrivalled reputation as a forceful reciter of verse in public performance. His writing is largely free of the wholesale Sanskritization which characterizes the verse of his contemporaries and forebears who wrote in the *Chāyāvād* style. Among his most popular compositions is his *Madhuśālā*, which borrows from Persian and Urdu poetry the traditional images of wine-cup and wine-bearer (his fondness for this theme led him to be dubbed a *hālāvādī* or 'wine-poet'); in this borrowing, and in his success as a *muśā'irā* performer, he represents that wing of Hindi literature lying closest to its Urdu cousin. Bachchan studied in Cambridge, writing a PhD thesis on the poet W.B. Yeats, and the impress of English is often to be seen in his syntax and choice of vocabulary.

The passage is taken from his autobiography, first published in 1969. The book shows Bachchan to have an eye for the close observation of domestic detail, and is particularly interesting in the way it shows the various cultural influences impinging on the education of a young man growing up in the early years of the twentieth century. Bachchan allows himself a free reign in incorporating digressions into the chronology of his autobiography, which is also laced with excerpts from his own poetry and that of others.

Amongst those described here are his maternal aunt Surasati and his maternal grandmother. No formal schooling was provided for the female members of the household: the first paragraph describes his grandmother's state of literacy, sufficient for her to read traditional devotional texts but insufficient for the task of written communication (which would hardly have been expected of her in any case). Bachchan's own mother, we are told, was hardly more successful in her attempts at mastering the Nagari script; but by sitting in on her brother's sessions with the Maulvi, she was able to acquire the rudiments of Urdu as well as Hindi — a relatively rare achievement.

These memories remind Bachchan of his own education, and in the second paragraph he describes the process by which he endured the task of learning to write Urdu by overwriting in ink his mother's etchings of the characters on a chalked board; in typical free-ranging style, Bachchan also extends the account to describe the way in which his own son, the film star and politician Amitabh, was taught the rudiments of literacy.

The passage is from *Kyā bhūlūn kyā yād karūn*, 5th ed., (Delhi: Rajpal, 1973), pp. 54–55. Bachchan's poetry is discussed in Peter Gaeffke, *Hindi literature in the twentieth century* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1978), chapter IX.

सुरसती को केवल हिन्दी की शिक्षा दी गई थी, घर पर ही, संभवतः उनकी माता के द्वारा। मेरी नानी हिंदी पढ़-लिख लेती थीं। रामायण वे नित्य पढ़ती थीं, अपनी दैनिक पूजा में; वेंकटेश्वर प्रेस का छपा सूरसागर भी दो जिल्लों में उनके पास था, पर उसके भजन वे यदा-कदा ही पढ़ती थीं। गद्य में उनके पास सुखसागर की पोथी थी और संभवतः प्रेमसागर की भी जिसे वे कभी-कभी दिन में अपनी पड़ोसिनों के बीच बैठ बाँचा करती थीं। लिखाई उनकी बहुत अच्छी नहीं थी। एक सीधी लकीर पहले खींच देतीं और उसी में अक्षर और मात्राओं को लटका देतीं। संयुक्ताक्षर उनके बस का नहीं था, ह्रस्व की जगह दीर्घ और दीर्घ की जगह ह्रस्व लगा देना उनके लिए मामूली बात थी। और किसी को उनका लिखा पढ़ने में कठिनाई हो, पर मेरी माता जी उसे बिलकुल ठीक पढ़ लेती थीं। ये सब कमज़ोरियाँ मेरी माँ की लिखावट में भी थीं।

माँ से बेटी में उन्नति का क्रम सिर्फ़ इतना चला था कि बेटी पहले सीधी लकीर नहीं खींचती थीं, एक-एक अक्षर लिखकर उसपर लकीर लगाती थीं, पर एक शब्द को दूसरे शब्द से अलग करने की बात उन्हें न सूझती थी। नतीजा यह हुआ है कि उनके हाथ की लिखी भजन, लोकगीत, गज़लों की एक पूरी कापी मेरे पास रक्खी है और मैं उसे बहुत प्रयत्न करने पर भी नहीं पढ़ पाता। उनकी स्मृति बड़ी अच्छी थी और उन्हें सैकड़ों गीत-भजन याद थे जिन्हें वे समय-समय पर गाती थीं और बाद को उन्होंने एक कापी में लिख डाले थे।

उर्दू की वे वर्णमाला भर जानती थीं - अलिफ़ से लेकर दो चरमी हे तक, जिसे वे बड़ी खूबसूरती के साथ लिख भी सकती थीं। जब उनके छोटे भाई विंध्येश्वरी प्रसाद को पढ़ाने को मौलवी साहब रक्खे गए तो वे भी उनके पास जाकर बैठ जातीं और इस प्रकार उन्होंने उर्दू की वर्णमाला पहचान ली थी और अवश्य ही उसके लिखने का अभ्यास किया था। मुझे उर्दू अक्षरों की शिक्षा पहले-पहल अपनी माँ से ही मिली थी। आज भी मुझे अपने छुटपन के दिन याद हैं कि मेरी माँ किन्हीं काम-धंधों में लगी हैं और मैं चटाई पर बैठ उनके द्वारा तख़्ती पर चँगीटे उर्दू के अक्षरों पर स्याही फेर रहा हूँ। जब मैं सब अक्षरों पर स्याही फेर लेता तब उनको दिखलाता; वे तख़्ती पर पानी छिड़क, खड़िया पोत, फिर से तख़्ती तैयार करतीं और जब वह अध-सूखी हो जाती तब सूखे क़लम से उर्दू की पूरी वर्णमाला उसपर चँगीट देतीं और फिर मैं उसपर स्याहीदार क़लम चलाता। वह क्रम दिन में कई बार चलता। बाद को मेरी माँ बतातीं कि वे तख़्ती धोते, सुखाते, चँगीटते ऊब जातीं, पर मैं न ऊबता। इस प्रक्रिया में ज़्यादा काम तो उर्दू को करना पड़ता था। जब सब कुछ हो जाता, मैं खचीनों पर स्याही भर फेर देता। माँ को बार-बार परेशान करने में मुझे कुछ मज़ा भी आता होगा, इसकी कल्पना मैं आज कर सकता हूँ। अमित जब पढ़ने योग्य हुआ तब तख़्ती का रिवाज़ तो ख़त्म हो गया था, पर तेज़ पेंसिल से अक्षर कागज़ पर लिख देतीं और उससे कहतीं इनपर स्याही फेरो, और वह उल्टे-सीधे उनपर क़लम चला फिर आ पहुँचता, "और लिको!"। बच्चे में बदले की भावना बड़ी प्रबल होती है। आप उससे कुछ काम लें तो वह भी आपसे कुछ अधिक काम लेकर ही संतुष्ट होता है। जब कभी मेरा मन लिखने में न लगता, मैं खेलना-कूदना चाहता तो क़लम की नोक को किसी तरह दबाकर तोड़ देता। नरकुल या किलिक को तेज़ चाकू से काटकर क़लम बनाना माँ को नहीं आता था, यह काम तो पिता जी ही दफ़्तर से लौटने पर कर सकते थे; और मुझे दिन भर की छुट्टी हो जाती। बच्चा चालाक भी कम नहीं होता।

Bachchan's prose style is casual, often reflecting the syntactic patterns of speech rather than the more complex arrangement of written Hindi. His vocabulary register is mixed, as appropriate to the various domestic and didactic situations described.

2 *rāmāyaṇ ve nitya parhī thīn*: placing the object (*rāmāyaṇ*) at the beginning of the sentence distinguishes this book from any other she might have read — 'The *Rāmāyaṇ* she would read every day'; cf. 5 *likhāi unki* 'as for her writing'. *apni dainik pūjā meh* is tacked on to the sentence as an afterthought. The *Rāmāyaṇ* referred to is the sixteenth-century H text of Tulsidas.

3 *venkateśvar pres kā chapā sūrsāgar*: 'the *Sūrsāgar* printed by the Venkateshwar Press'. This pre-modifying construction (541) is based on genitive *kā*; cf. 13 *unke hāth kī likhī... kāpī*. The Venkateshwar Press, located in Bombay, was one of the first printers-cum-publishers to bring out popular editions of the Hindi religious classics such as the *Sūrsāgar*, an anthology of verses by the sixteenth century devotional poet Surdas.

3 *yadā kadā*: a S borrowing calqued on *kabhī kabhī*.

4 *sukhsāgar*: a popular rendering in modern H prose of the S *Bhāgavata Purāna*, constantly being reprinted in cheap bazaar editions.

4 *pothī*: 'volume'; narrower in sense than its etymon *pustak*, *pothī* tends to designate a bazaar-printed edition of a traditional text.

4 *premsāgar*: Lallu Lal's H prose version of the Krishna story from the S *Bhāgavata Purāna*, first published at Fort William College in 1810.

7 *saṅyuktākṣar*: *saṅyukta* 'conjunct' + *akṣar* 'character' in sandhi (611).

8 *unkā likhā*: 'her writing', ptc. *likhā* being used nominally here.

9 *bilkul thīk parh letī thīn*: *lenā* here gives a sense of 'to manage (quite well) to'.

10 *unnati kā kram*: 'the march of progress', the deliberately high register of the H being tongue-in-cheek.

12 *unke hāth kī likhī*: agreement is with f. *kāpī*.

13 *loggīt*: a well-established calque from E 'folk song'.

13 *rakkhī*: this form with historical *-kkh-* (< S *-kṣ-*) is commonly retained in speech, but less so in writing. (521b)

14 *smṛti*: this unusual use of the word to mean 'power of recall' reflects the breadth of meaning in the E word 'memory', of which it is a calque; *smṛti* normally has the more restricted sense 'recollection, remembrance'.

15 *likh dāle the*: 'wrote out, transcribed'.

16 *varnamālā bhar*: 'the alphabet and nothing more'.

16 *do caṣmī he tak*: *he* is not actually the last character in the U alphabet — the author is perhaps thinking of the Nagari syllabary.

17 *xūbsūrtī ke sāth*: this usage of the ppn. *ke sāth* (lit. 'in company with') in place of *se* is not uncommon in the modern language, and may reflect the breadth of ablative usage familiar from E 'with'.

18 *rakkhe gae*: 'was taken on, appointed'.

18 *aur is prakār... aur avaśya hī*: the linking of successive clauses by *aur* is characteristic of the casual style of composition in this passage.

21 *kām-dhandhōn*: 'household tasks' (524).

21 *lagī haiñ*: the historic present of this and *pher rahā hūñ* subsequently gives way to the more common usage of ptc. without auxiliary (22 *pher letā... dikhlātā*).

21 *caṭāi par baith*: this use of the unextended abs. is common in narrative prose, especially when several actions occur in sequence; cf. 23 *pāñī chūrak*, *khariyā pot*, 31 *qalam calā*.

25 *syāhidār qalam*: 'inked pen' (823b).

- 26 *ve . . . ūb jātīn, par main na ūbtā*: following a negative a simple verb is preferred to a modal verb.
- 28 *iskī kalpanā . . .*: this picks up the reference of the preceding clause in the paratactic fashion typical of HU syntax (54).
- 29 *Amit*: the author's son Amitabh, possibly the best-known face in India from the late 1970s when he gained an enormous following as a Hindi film star before beginning a less successful career in Congress politics.
- 29 *parhne yogya*: note two distinct senses of this expression, according to context: of a book, 'worth reading'; or of a child (as here), 'capable of reading'; cf. *U ke qābil*.
- 31 *phir ā pahūncā, 'aur liko!'*: 'would again come up [saying] "write some more!"'. Deaspiration of a consonant, as in *lik-* for *likh-*, is characteristic of the speech of children (and foreign speakers of Hindi).
- 32 *āpse kuch adhik kām lekar hī santuṣṭ hotā hai*: 'is only content when he's got rather more effort out of you [than you got out of him]'.
- 36 *baccā cālāk bhī kam nahīn hotā*: H prefers a s. noun to express a gnomic observation, whereas E prefers a p.: 'Children aren't short on cunning'.