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 Rāmāyan 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 Rāmāyan 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.
पूँछे या छठे बरस में मेरा भारतराय बना गया था। उस समय मेरे भाई बहू रीजीजी पढ़ने के
लिए छपरे भेजे जा चुके थे। उस समय की प्रचलित प्रथा के बुनास भारतराय मौलिक शाहज़ ने
कराया था। जिस दिन भारतराय हुआ, मौलिक शाहज़ भाई, बिस्मिल्लाह के साथ भारतराय
हुआ, शीरी सीता और उनको सप्त भी दिये गये। हम तीन विशा्स के उत्पादन नामक जो सबसे बड़े और
मुझे दो बरस बड़े हैं, तीसरे बाबा नहीं रहे; वह भी मुझे बड़े थे।

पढ़ने का तरीका था कि खुद सब करके हम लोग उठकर मकबर में चले गए। मकबर मेरे पक्ष
के मकबर से अलग एक दूसरे मकबर के दाहरे में था। एक कोठी भी जिसमें मौलिक शाहज़ रहा
करते और सामने दाहरे में तक्कोपन पर बैठकर हम लोग पढ़ा करते। मौलिक शाहज़ कभी अपनी
चारापाइयाँ पर और कभी तज्जपपुर पर बैठकर पढ़ाया करते। सबसे आकर पढ़ने के पढ़ा हुआ सबक
एक बार मामोस्ता करना पड़ता और जो मिलना लद्दा मामोस्ता कर लेता उसको उन्मा ही जल
नया सबक पढ़ा दिया जाता। मैं अबसर अपने दोनों साक्षीयों में सबके मकबर में पढ़ूँच जाता और
मामोस्ता भी ढूंढे बतम करके सबके मौलिक शाहज़ पढ़े लिया करता। यह करते सुरूचिदाय होकर कूच
दिन भी निकल जाता। तब नौकर जाता और साथ ले जाकर मूँह-हुआ दुखा देता और दिन में के
पास कूच बिलासी के लिए पढ़ूँच देता। इसके लिए प्रवेश: भाभु गढ़े पैन गढ़े की छूटी मिलती।

नासी करते लौटने पर सब याद करना पड़ता और सबक याद करके सुना देने के बाद मौलिक
शाहज़ दूखम देते। फिटाब बन देते। फिटाब बन करके तबकी निकाली फिटाब। इस दोनों
क्रियाओं के बीच कूच समय खेलने-खुदने का भी मिल जाता या दोबारा जहाँ जाकर कूच खा लेने
का भी मोका मिल जाता। दिन के लिए फिटाब बनानेवाले के लिए.

अग्रेक-देढ़ गढ़े की छूटी मिलती और फिटाब फिटाब बन बन, कूच समय में ही उसी दबाव पश्च
सोना पढ़ता। मौलिक शाहज़ चारापाइयाँ पर सोते। हम लोगों को अबसर सी नहीं जाती और तक्कोपन पर लैंग-लैंग
शतरंज खेलते और जब मौलिक शाहज़ के नामों का बक्त होता उसके पढ़े ही गोटियों को उठाकर
रख देते। उसी जमाने में कभी शतरंज खेलना भी भी भाग, पर उसका पता नहीं कि कब, कौनों और
किससे सीखा। फिर जेंपर को दूसरा सबक मिलता और उसको कूच हुद तक याद करके सुनाने
के बाद घटा-देढ़-पैंता दिन रहते खेलने के लिए छूटी मिलती। इसी समय बैठे, जिसका दस्तादी
खेल खेले जाते। संध्या को फिर बिरान-बती जलने किताब खोलकर पढ़ने के लिए बैठना पढ़ता।

दिन के दोनों सबक याद करके फिर सुनाने पढ़ते और तब दूखम होता, फिटाब बन देते।
फिटाब बन करके, कामदे के मुताबिक मौलिक शाहज़ को आदर करने, घर जाकर सो जाते।

एक चीज, जिसका भाषा मूलमन बचपन से ही पढ़ा है, रामायणपाठ है। गौर में भारतसन तो
धोने ही लोगों की था। उन दिनों एक भी प्रभावी या शाहरुख प्राकल्प का व्याख्या है यह गौर अभय कहदी
जवार-भर में नहीं था। मौलिक शाहज़ हम लोगों को तीन-चार सप्त भाषी और भोजन पाक
पाते थे। गौर में एक दूसरे भुवनमलान, जो जाति के जुनरा थे, मुर जाती बिलासी जाते थे।
मुकुटी हिसाब भी जाते थे, जिसमें पाहाड़, खोलड़ा इत्तादि मन-सेर के विशद और की
पैसाश का हिसाब शामिल है। उन्होंने एक पाहाडिया बोल रखी थी जिसमें मौलिक के कुछ लड़के
पाते थे। भार पहुँचना तो बहुत धोने लोग जाते, पर तब भी जाते थे, मुकुटी हिसाब जाते थे।
बनना का हिसाब तो जब रामायण का पाठ शहर का तो जहाँ खून पड़ा जाता। इस प्रकार
वहाँ से अप्रतीत तब भी गौर में बैठे ऐसे लोग थे जो रामायण की पूरा हो जाते और
दूरहा सफल और विशेष करके बनने के कुछ होने को तो सभी प्राय: बरजबान रखते थे।
1. **akṣarārambha:** ‘initiation into literacy/schooling’ — one of the rites of passage celebrated during childhood.

2. **mere bhātī:** honorific p. exemplifies the respect traditionally shown to an elder brother.

3. **chapra:** Chapra is a town in Bihar, to the west of Patna.

4. **bismillāḥ:** ‘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 bismillāḥ karnā and śrīganes karnā, ‘to commence’).

5. **śirni** (= P śirīni): a gift of sweetmeats made at the celebration of an auspicious event.

6. **kutumb:** ‘household’; a more commonly used term than parivār, which is more restricted in its reference, as is E ‘family’ (and HU famili: 922).

7. **ab nahin rahe:** ‘is no longer [with us]’, one of the very large number of HU euphemisms for death.

8. **ham log uṭhkar maktab mēn cale āte:** ‘we would all get up and troop into 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 pāṭhshālā which teaches the rudiments of Hindu learning.

9. **takhṭpaśa:** a low wooden frame with a cloth covering.

10. **pahle kā parah huā sabak:** ‘the previously learnt lesson’ (541).

11. **āmoktā** (= P āmoktā): a P ptc. meaning ‘learnt’, used in the context of U education for going over or revising a learnt lesson.

12. **jo jīnā jāla... usko utnā hi jāda:** once one relative-correlative construction has been set up, it can readily carry a second in parallel.

13. **yah karte sūṛyoday 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 possible by typical HU ptc. usage (karte and hokar in their distinct functions).

14. **usī jamāne mēn kabhī satranj 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)

15. **sepahar:** ‘in the early afternoon’; this P compound (825) is common in U but not in H, which has tīrā pahar as the standard form.

16. **ghanțā-derh-ghanțā din rahte:** ‘while an hour or so of daylight remained’.

17. **cirāg-batti jalte:** ‘with the lamps burning’. The compounding of P cirāg ‘lamp’ with batti ‘lamp, wick’ is generalizing: ‘the various lamps’.

18. **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.

19. **rāmāyanpāth:** ‘reciting of the Rāmāyaṇ’, which by default refers to the ‘Hindi Rāmāyaṇ’, i.e. the Rāmacarītmānas 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 Rāmālīlā, the enormously popular dramatic enactment of the Ram story performed by semi-professional troupes throughout the H-speaking area.

20. **kaiṭhī:** the Kaiṭhī 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).

21. **jāti ke julāḥā:** ‘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.

22. **ādāb:** ‘half-as-much-again’, the reckoning of interest at 50%. 

159
34 *man-ser ki bikrī*: ‘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 thi: kho rākhnā* means ‘to set up’, rather than simply ‘to open’, modal *rākhnā* adding a sense of ‘establishing’ to the main verb.

37 *mahī*: 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 *Rāmcarītmānas*, 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 *kaṇṭhasth* ‘situated in the throat’, with the same sense.