Harivanshryay Bachchan: 
Kyā bhūlūn kyā yād karūn (1969)

Harivanshryay 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 Madhusālā, 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 hālavādī or ‘wine-poet’); in this borrowing, and in his success as a muṣā‘īrā 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.

युगली को केवल हिन्दी की लिपि दी गई थी, पर पर ही, संभवतः उनकी मात्रा के द्वारा।
मेरी नन्दी हिन्दी पढ़-लिख लेती थीं। रामायण वे नित्य पढ़ती थीं, अपनी दैनिक पूजा में, वेंकटेश्वर प्रस का छाया सुरसागर भी दो लिन्डों में उनके पास था, पर उसके भजन वे यदा-कदा ही पढ़ती थीं। यह में उनके पास सुखसागर की पोषी थी और संभवतः प्रसार्यसागर की भी जिसे वे कभी-कभी दिन में अपनी पढ़-लिखिनों के बीच बढ़ा बाँचा करती थीं। लिखाई उनकी बहुत बच्ची नहीं थीं।
एक सीधी लकीर पढ़ी-बाँटें देती और उसी में कसर और मात्राओं को सवार देतीं। संयुक्तराज उनके बस का नहीं था, हसन की जगह दीर्घ और दीर्घ की जगह हसन लगा देता उनके लिए मामूली बात थी। और फिर वे उनका लिखाया पढ़ते में कठिनाई हो, पर मेरी माता जी उसे फिर लोक के चढ़ाती थी। वे सब कमजोरीयाँ मेरी माँ की लिखाया में भी थीं।
मां से बेटी में उन्नति का क्रम सिधौं इतना चला था की बेटी पढ़ने सीधी लकीर नहीं बच्ची थीं, एक-एक शब्द लिखकर उसपर लकीर लगाती थीं, पर एक शब्द को दूसरे शब्द से बलात करने के बाद उन्हें न सुविदा थी।
नीतिजा यह हुआ है कि उनके हाथ की लिखी भजन, लोकगीत, ग़ज़लों की एक पूरी कापी मेरे पास रखकी है और मैं उसे बहुत प्रभाव करते थे पर भी नहीं पढ़ पाता।
उनकी स्मृति बड़ी बच्ची थी और उन्हें सफकों गीत-भजन यद थे तो वहीं वे समय-समय पर गाती थीं और बाद की उन्होंने एक कापी में लिख बाले थे।
उद्दी की वे वर्णमाला भर जाती थीं - परिच्छेद से लेकर दो चरमी हैं तक, जिसे वे बड़ी बच्ची थीं के साथ लिख भी सकती थीं।
यह उनके छोटे हाथ में विशेषतः प्रसार को पड़ताल के मोली-माँझ में रखकर उनके हाथ की लिखी चढ़ा देती थी। माता भी मुझे अपने छुट्टने के दिन दिया था कि मेरी माँ किसी काम-धोरों में लगी है और उन्हें चटाइयों पर बैठने के लिए बाहर ना रहे।
जब मैं में भजन देता था मां उनकी दिखाई देती थी।
जब मैं सब अवसरों पर माता के दरबार में उनको दिखाता था, तब उनकी भजन रह जाती है।
उसका यह रहना ऊपर यहीं था, तब उनकी भजन रह जाती थी।
उसके लिए माता किसी ने नहीं दिया, जब मेरी माँ के हाथ को लेकर उन्होंने रोने के बाद कोर कर वहाँ करती थी।
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Harivanshray Bachchan

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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 rāmāyana ve nitya parthi thīn: placing the object (rāmāyana) at the beginning of the sentence distinguishes this book from any other she might have read — ‘The Rāmāyana she would read every day’; cf. S likhāī unki ‘as for her writing’. apni dainik pūja meh is tacked on to the sentence as an afterthought. The Rāmāyana referred to is the sixteenth-century H text of Tulidas.

3 venkateshvar pres kā chopā sūrsāgar: ‘the Sūrsāgar printed by the Venkateshwar Press’. This pre-modifying construction (541) is based on genitive kā; cf. 13 unke hāth ki likhī...kāpi. 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 Purāṇa, 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 premśāgar: Lallu Lal’s H prose version of the Krishna story from the S Bhāgavata Purāṇa, first published at Fort William College in 1810.

7 sānyuktākṣar: sānyukta ‘conjunct’ + akṣar ‘character’ in sandhi (611).

8 unkā likhā: ‘her writing’, ptc. likhā being used nominally here.

8 bilkul thik parh leil 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 ki likhī: agreement is with f. kāpi.

13 lokgī: a well-established calque from E ‘folk song’.

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

14 smrṭī: 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; smrṭī 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 caṃmi he tak: he is not actually the last character in the U alphabet — the author is perhaps thinking of the Nagari syllabary.

17 xūsbūrti 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 rakkhē gaē: ‘was taken on, appointed’.

18 aur is prakār...aur avisya hi: the linking of successive clauses by aur is characteristic of the casual style of composition in this passage.

21 kām-dhandaḥ: ‘household tasks’ (524).

21 laṅgi hain: the historic present of this and pher rahā hūn subsequently gives way to the more common usage of ptc. without auxiliary (22 pher leitā...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 pāṇi chirāk, khariyā poti, 31 qalam calā.

25 syāhidār qalam: ‘inked pen’ (823b).
26 ve...ūb jātīn, par maṁ na ūbtā: following a negative a simple verb is preferred to a modal verb.

28 iski 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 pahunctā, ‘aur liko!’: ‘would again come up [saying] “write some more!”’. De-aspiration of a consonant, as in lik- for likh-, is characteristic of the speech of children (and foreign speakers of Hindi).

32 āpse kuch adhik kāṁ lekar hi santusṭ hotā hai: ‘is only content when he’s got rather more effort out of you [than you got out of him].’

36 baccā cālāk bhi kam nahiṁ hotā: H prefers a s. noun to express a gnomic observation, whereas E prefers a p.: ‘Children aren’t short on cunning’.