

Saraswati Samman, 1991
Author: Harivansh Rai 'Bachchan'

Bachchan, the poet, became famous overnight when he first recited *Madhushala* to a huge audience in the year 1935. It had an electrifying effect on his listeners who hailed it as an extraordinary literary work. Fifty years later, Bachchan published *Dashdwar Se Sopan Tak* – the fourth and the last volume of his autobiography which, again, was widely hailed not only as a great literary masterpiece but also as the *Summum bonum* of his writing.

These two events underline the most remarkable aspect of Bachchan's creativity—that after capturing the imagination of vast readership once, it continued to hold it. His literary career spread over more than half a century and is characterized by an unbroken series of achievements culminating in his autobiography, published in four parts namely: *Kya Bhooloon Kya Yaad Karoon*, *Needa Ka Nirman Phir*, *Basere Se Door* and *Dashdwar se Sopan Tak*. This body of work is widely regarded as Bachchan's *magnum opus* and also as one of the best autobiographies in Indian literature.

Harivansh Rai 'Bachchan' ('Bachchan' being the pet family name adopted by the poet as pen name also) was born at Allahabad in a middle-class family on 27th November, 1907. He was educated at the Municipal School, Kayastha Pathasala, Allahabad University and Banaras Hindu University. After doing a couple of odd jobs, he taught English Literature at the Allahabad University from 1941 to 1952 before he went to the University of Cambridge for research and obtained the degree of Ph.D. for his thesis on 'W.B. Yeats and Occultism'. Returning from England, Dr. Bachchan resumed teaching at his old university for a year and then after a short stint at the All India Radio, Allahabad as a Producer of Spoken Word, he joined the Ministry of External Affairs, New Delhi as officer on Special Duty (Hindi) in 1955. He remained there for about ten years and was intimately involved with the evolution of Hindi as a vehicle of official functioning in the Central Government. In recognition of his contribution to Hindi literature and language, he was nominated to the Rajya Sabha in 1966. Among the other distinctions conferred on him are: Padma Bhushan, Sahitya Akademi award, Soviet Land Nehru Prize, Afro-Asian Writers' Conference Lotus Prize, Hindi Sahitya Sammelan's Sahitya Vachaspati etc. Bachchan passed away in 19 January, 2003 at the ripe old age of 68 even in death he remains a symbol of eternal growth, passion, rebellion and enlightenment—the qualities which have illumined his life and work throughout.

His early writings, which included the famous trilogy of *Madhukavya* – *Madhushala*, *Madhubala*, and *Madhukalash*, show very clearly how intensely he had cultivated his sensitivity with the help of simple diction and transparent language. At the same time the poetry contained the multi-dimensional response of the individual to some basic human values. This was followed by some of the finest lyrical poetry which remains unsurpassed in Hindi to this day. His many-splendoured tributes to Gandhiji in *Khadi Ke Phool* are as deep and intense poetry as the expression of other emotions of love lyrics. He has about thirty collections of poems. In addition to this original work, his translations of *Omar Khayyam*, *Bhagwad Gita*, *Yeats*, *Shakespeare* and

others signify his untiring search for excellence and profundity. All this makes Bachchan the most outstanding poet of post-chhayavadi era.

Bachchan's prose writing is as significant and substantial as his poetry and his translation. His numerous short stories, prefaces, introductions, critical studies, talks, articles and interviews formed a solid foundation on which his major prose work – the Autobiography – was erected and completed.

Awarded Book : *Autobioraphy (in four volumes*

Bachchan's autobiography (in four parts), which was selected for the prestigious Saraswati Samman, was written and published during a period of about twenty years i.e. from 1969 to 1985 which indicates that it was meticulously planned and executed. The first part covers the author's life up to 1936, the second up to 1951, the third up to 1955, and the fourth up to 1985, coinciding with his retirement at the age of 77 years 7 months and 7 days. While concluding his autobiography, Bachchan has very pungently referred to the *Mahabharat* in which 'this age' has been associated with divinity. Bachchan states with utter simplicity and humility that although he has lived up to this age, he does not find any divinity around himself except the feeling of inefficiency and imperfection as a human being. Bachchan had started the first volume with a quotation from Montaigne whose view of his autobiography was that 'people may see me in my simple, natural and ordinary form. It is a tribute to Bachchan's vision of life that he was able to pursue this ideal from beginning to end.

Bachchan's autobiography has been universally acknowledged as a modern classic. It is a document covering a great writer's life and work. Bachchan's poetry always had an autobiographical touch but his autobiography is virtually an epic and his powerful prose is infused with delicate poetry.

The autobiography works like magic key for opening up so much which had remained hidden in Bachchan's life and work. Above all, it provides a unique perception of the poet's milieu which makes it an important work both artistically and historically. This autobiography is not a mere narration of Bachchan's personal life and the undercurrent of his own poetry. It is also a vivid and graphic survey of the entire post-chhayayad literary scene in Hindi. Bachchan's personal association with a large number of contemporary writers and eminent people constitutes another interesting aspect of this work. This autobiography stands out among other similar works because of its sweep, scope, perspective and literary and artistic excellence.