

बैठना — *to sit*

Could there be a more down-to-earth, unremarkable word than बैठना ? And yet the simple concept of ‘sitting’ yields a wide range of metaphorical and idiomatic meanings in both Hindi and English. In some ways the two traditions run in parallel: for example, in both languages बैठक / *sitting* has acquired the abstract sense of a ‘session’ (this word itself derives, like ‘sit’ itself, from Latin *sedere* ‘to sit’); but elsewhere the idioms work out differently, giving us plenty to think about as we sit contemplating the histories of these words.

Let’s begin by surveying the usages listed in OHED:

बैठना *baithnā* [*upaviśati*], v.i. 1. to sit, to sit down. 2. to board, to mount (on or in, पर or में: any conveyance); to mount (a horse). 3. to brood (a hen). 4. to sink; to decline, to be impaired; to grow hoarse (the voice); to founder (as a business). 5. to subside (as a swelling); to settle (a precipitate). 6. to collapse (a building). 7. to grow lukewarm (in support). 8. to take up, to assume occupancy. गद्दी पर, to mount a throne; to be seated (a shopkeeper, to receive custom); to assume leadership of a sect. 9. to be expended (on, पर: money). 10. to take part (in, में: a class); to sit (an examination). 11. to take root, to grow (a crop). 12. to alight, to settle; to take (as a graft); to take up residence. 13. to sit idle, unemployed. 14. to set (as the sun). 15. to pair, to couple (with, के साथ: animals, birds). 16. to lose quality, taste, flavour, &c. 17. to weigh (on a scales, &c.); to amount to (in weight, value). 18. to strike home, or true (a blow, a shot). 19. to be placed, to sit (on, पर: as a hat). 20. to have force. ठीक, to carry conviction (words, &c.). 21. to become practised (as the hand, in a skill). — बैठे-ठाले, adv. (while) sitting doing nothing.

While OHED separates out 21 meanings, the शब्दसागर offers a nearly identical total of 22; but differences between the two lists show that the matter of what constitutes a separate ‘meaning’ is subjective and reflects the corpus from which examples are drawn. That being said, OHED’s list stands (or sits) as a useful basis for some reflections on the overall range of meanings covered by the verb बैठना.

Many of the 21 ‘meanings’ involve literal actions, such as *to assume a sitting posture, to ride a horse, and a bird to incubate its eggs*; but in others we see a subtle extension of meaning into more abstract or metaphorical areas. Interestingly, this may involve either ‘positive’ associations (such as *to become established; to achieve comfort or permanence; to settle; a projectile to find its target*), or ‘negative’ ones (such as *a building to collapse or subside; to grow lukewarm; to lose flavour; to sit idle, to be inactive*), as suggested by these internet headlines:

हम चूड़ियां पहनकर नहीं बैठे हैं: सेनाध्यक्ष बिक्रम सिंह
‘We’re not exactly sitting here wearing bangles’ — army chief Bikram Singh
[commenting on his readiness to respond to aggression from Pakistan]

मोदी दुश्मनी पालकर बैठे हैं तो हम दोस्ती क्यों करें...
If [PM Narendra] Modi is sitting there nursing hostility then why should we be friendly?

विश्व कप में खेलने की उम्मीद लगाये बैठे हैं वीरु
Viru (Virender Sehwag) is quietly fostering the hope of playing in the World Cup

It is perhaps the ‘negatively’ sedentary associations of बैठना, involving a lack of energy, an element of inactivity or redundancy, a sitting idly by disengaged from action, that makes बैठना such an articulate member of compound-verb constructions — अरे मैं क्या लिख बैठा *Oh what have I written!* Here, Such expressions suggest something done *unthinkingly or unwisely* — some ill-advised action whose consequences might have been avoided with a little forethought. (Compare the colloquial English expression ‘to go and do something’ — *What have you gone and done now?*) Unsurprisingly, news stories featuring this usage often refer to human follies perpetrated in the name of love and/or desire:

अंगरक्षक से ही प्यार कर बैठी ब्रिटनी !

Britney (went and) had an affair with her *bodyguard!*

इश्क के नशे में ये क्या कर बैठा इंजीनियर !

What this engineer (went and) did in the intoxication of love!

रामपुरी लड़का इश्क कर बैठा नाबालिग से, गया जेल

A youth in Rampur (went and) made love to an under-age girl, went to jail

खूबसूरत दिखने के चक्कर में ये सितारे बिगाड़ बैठे अपना चेहरा

Obsessed with looking beautiful these stars (went and) ruined their faces

Being such a plain and humble verb, बैठना is sometimes felt to be too commonplace for formal contexts. Polite imperatives are likely to feature a more upmarket register, using such rhetorical elegances as तशरीफ़ रखिए or विराजिए, *Please have a seat.*

In contrast, there are also moments when specific expressions such as इंतज़ार / प्रतीक्षा करना *to wait* may seem overkill for a simple context, and here बैठना can serve as a superordinate: ज़रा दो मिनट बैठो *Just wait a couple of minutes; हम भी बैठे हैं We're also (sitting) waiting!*

Based on intransitive बैठना, the transitive verb बैठाना (also spelt बिठाना) has a range of highly expressive meanings. Here is the OHED entry:

बैठाना baiṭhānā [cf. H. *baiṭhnā*], v.t. 1. to cause to sit, to give a seat (to, को). 2. to install (in a position); to place (in a school: a child); to keep (in a house: a concubine). 3. to set (a guard, &c.: over, पर). 4. to set up (as a monument). 5. to set in place; to set (a stone); to set (a bone or joint); to plant (a tree); to sow (seed). 6. to place (for the moment); to put in a cooking vessel (ingredients). 7. to cause to coagulate (as rice in cooking); to cause to solidify. 8. to cause to be convened (a session, &c.). 9. to cause to settle (a community, in an area). 10. to establish (a fair rent, &c.). 11. to impose (a tax). 12. to cause to settle (a precipitate; or dust). 13. to cause to subside (as a swelling). 14. to allay (feelings). 15. to impress (an idea or feeling on the mind: मैं or पर); to win acceptance for a (view). 16. to depress (the feelings). मन, or दिल, to cause the heart to sink. 17. to expound (as the sense of an obscure verse). 18. to perform (a calculation); to calculate (a sum). जोड़ ~, to add. 19. to assign, to risk (money or a stake: on, मैं or पर). 20. (esp. w. देना) to cause to subside (a building); to depress (a market). 21. to demolish, to raze. 22. to knock down (with a blow, मैं). 23. (w. रखना) to keep seated; to detain; to keep (a marriageable daughter) at home.

And finally some more headlines:

रचनात्मकता और स्टारडम में संतुलन बिठा रही प्रियंका

Priyanka [Chopra is] maintaining a balance between creativity and stardom

हिंदी वालों ने कोशकारों को मज़दूरों की श्रेणी में बैठा दिया है

Protagonists of Hindi have classified lexicographers as laborers

मंदी का असर : 19 हजार को [काम से] बैठाया गया, तीन ने दी जान

Effects of the slump: 19,000 made redundant, three took their own lives
