

Writeup on Premchand :

As a man he was one of the most remarkable Indians of his time. All those who knew him talk of his simple, self-effacing, cheerful, unassuming nature, of his uncompromising honesty, freedom from malice, his sense of humour, his open ringing laughter. Shunning publicity he is a man who easily merges into the crowd – both as a man and a writer he remained a man of the people, identifying himself completely with the unfulfilled aspirations of the Indian masses. He was not one of the greatest Indians, yet he was one of the so many lovable, humane yet rebellious ones – a non-believing saint, as Jainendra has affectionately called him.

As a writer, his contribution to Hindi literature is so substantial that it is impossible to imagine Hindi prose fiction of the first forty years of the 20th century without Premchand. By switching over from Urdu to Hindi he hastened the process of modernization of Hindi literature, inducting into it the realism and social concern. He weaned away the Hindi reading public from the crude sensationalism and infantile escapism and brought it face to face the contemporary social reality. Through a dozen or so novels and a few hundred short stories and scores of essays spread over two decades he made Hindi literature a faithful mirror of the renascent consciousness and the awakened aspirations of the Indian people. And he was the first writer to have brought to the centre of Hindi literature the lowliest Indian and to have passionately pleaded that his life was as important as anyone else's, and that the central issue before the Indian civilization was to rescue him from the abyss of poverty and inhuman degradation, not out of mercy, not out of pity, but because social justice demanded it.

"Bade Bhai Sahab" is one of the revered literary works of the legendary Indian writer Prem Chand. It is a light-hearted short tale about the relationship of two brothers written in a serious and innocent tone of the narrator - the younger brother, with overwhelming doses of humor, at the same time, questioning some important and intrinsic issues related with the education system, such as rote learning, teaching quality and expectations, problems pertaining to learning new languages and history etc as well as the tradition which imparts a person qualification to command respect based on his age. The story ends taking a sweet turn when the "Bade Bhai Sahab" lets go of the shackles of his pretensions and joins the younger brother in the kite-flying, a happy reunion.

So, it's a sweet tale worth reading without a second thought.

Bade Bhai Sahab, one of Premchand's most notable short stories was published in 1910, shortly after he dropped his name Dhanpat Rai and adopted the pseudonym Premchand. The early 1900s were important and interesting times for the Indian freedom movement and its consciousness as a nation. This was the time when nationalism was finally taking firm shape in India with literature both shaping the discourse and responding to it.

In the first instance, it is a merry story about relationship between the narrator and his brother, five years his senior in age and their divergent approaches to studying in school. If one looks closer it is an excellent critique of colonial educational system and its impact on Indians.

This was the time post Macaulay's Minutes on Education, known as the English Education Act of 1835. In this, a concerted effort was made to move away from Sanskrit and Muslim education to teaching primarily a Western curriculum with English as the

medium of instruction. This was based on the premise that native learning was inferior and through English language higher education “a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect.” The motivation was standard white man’s burden, “To have found a great people sunk in the lowest depths of slavery and superstition, to have so ruled them as to have made them desirous and capable of all the privileges of citizens would indeed be a title to glory all our own (Macaulay’s speech in House of Commons, 1833).”

The ultimate purpose was to make Indians more amenable to British rule and institutions, who could serve as useful intermediaries in imperial expansion. The results were often incongruous.

Bade bhai sahab admonishes the narrator several times on the importance of mastering English and the related difficulties of the endeavour – how it is not a joke, how it requires sustained study, and how even several great intellectuals cannot still master the language. He later, however, undercuts the superiority of the British when he scolds his brother on his supposed arrogance, taking interestingly a very Indian example of Raavan and how he fell due to his hauteur. He compares the mighty empire of Raavan with the British Empire and explains that even though the latter has expanded, there are many countries that do not accept the British and are independent, hinting at their fallibility. He then hilariously demonstrates the pointlessness and the absurdity of the English education for the vast majority of Indians and the remoteness of the context when he speaks about remembering the names of dozens of ‘Williams’ and ‘James’ and ‘Henrys’ and how the lack of new names necessitated annoying addition of generational suffixes.

A large part of bhai sahab's critique of the education system is valid even today. The issues range from problematic emphasis on rote learning – bhai sahab says that this is what is known as education today; the irony of writing absurdly long essays on the importance of time; and the ultimate importance of life experience, demonstrated through the superior understanding of their mother and grandfather, over knowing trivia like the number of marriages of Henry VIII, or the number of constellations in the universe.

Ultimately the short story's enduring appeal lies in its bittersweet reminiscences and vignettes about childhood, school, relationship with siblings and the life of a student – the futility of making a timetable that is soon abandoned, (the narrator makes a rigorous timetable – with half an hour allotted to walking in front of the hostel – but is very soon distracted by green fields, football and kabaddi), the doodles bhai sahab draws on the back of his notebooks that are incomprehensible to the narrator, the food losing its taste as the narrator is admonished, and the changing power dynamics between the brothers as narrator passes with little effort while bhai sahab's momentous industry fails him.

Bhai sahab, in the story, is a tragicomic figure, a victim of colonial education. He makes Sisyphean efforts towards mastering the master's tongue, fails spectacularly, and hilariously subverts the system. He tries to maintain his dominance and dignity over his outperforming younger brother while taking a momentous load of familial responsibilities over his young shoulders. However the story ends with touching poignancy. As the narrator guiltily concedes to bhai sahab's righteous indignation (narrator had been caught goofing with friends), a stray cut kite passes over them. This prompts bhai sahab to shelve his lecture. He is, despite

his self appointed role as a conscientious guardian, a young boy. In a moment of joyous abandon, he catches the stray and runs towards his hostel.

