



Madhavrao Sapre at the Advent of Writing

Reading the "First" Hindi Short Story

Mantra Mukim

To cite this article: Mantra Mukim (2022): Madhavrao Sapre at the Advent of Writing, Interventions, DOI: [10.1080/1369801X.2022.2099941](https://doi.org/10.1080/1369801X.2022.2099941)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369801X.2022.2099941>



© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 22 Jul 2022.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 136



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

MADHAVRAO SAPRE AT THE ADVENT OF WRITING

Reading the “First” Hindi Short Story

Mantra Mukim 

Department of English & Comparative Literary Studies, University of Warwick, Coventry, UK

.....
Keywords:
early Hindi writing
event
genre
Derrida, Jacques
Hindi short story
Indian modernity
literary historiography
.....
By placing itself strategically within the debates surrounding the first Hindi short story, its authenticity and its colonial context, this essay wants to understand the repercussions that any claim of “first-ness” has for literature in general and Hindi literary historiography in particular. The underlying assumption is that in claiming something as a “first”, one inaugurates a tension – an event – in history. Latent in such a claim is the suggestion that the event, the first short story in this case, actually inaugurates a kind of prose writing that is absolutely new and singular without any historical antecedents. Instead of making any historically definitive claims of its own, or vouching for one of the many contending Hindi short stories, this essay traces the gestures of historiography that circumscribe Madhavrao Sapre’s short story Ek Tokri Bhar Mitti, and announce its originality. The essay’s focus on the Hindi prose, especially short story, would be guided by the historiography of the form, the choice of narrative technique, thematic models, the register of Hindi used in the stories, and quite significantly, the place and motive of publication. Also relevant to the essay, as both a backdrop and a conceptual optic, is Derrida’s theorization of generic events – events that mark the beginning

of a specific genre of writing and of the laws that give the genre its proper name. The proper name attributed to Sapre’s work, to the advent it marks, is kahaani or short story and, with Derrida, this essay will question the possibilities of both the advent and its attendant proper name.

1 Vasudha Dalmia and others have demonstrated that *khari boli* (modern standard) Hindi was not a consolidated or clear category until the 1920s. Dalmia (1997) traces the nascent steps towards this standardization:

The cause of creating an explicitly Hindu cultural idiom was taken up by spokesmen of the Hindu elite, concentrated in the cities of Allahabad and Banaras. The language issue gained new national and, with it, political dimensions. The standardization sought at this stage in the 1890s demarcated itself sharply from the ‘alien’ which the Urdu language and script had now come to represent. (218)

2 In a constrastive claim, Gajarani (2004) writes: “The literature of the period also reflected the search for and an attempt to establish a distinctive identity. As early as 1901

Madhavrao Sapre’s short story *Ek Tokri bhar Mitti* (A Basketful of Earth), written and published in 1901 in the journal *Chhattisgarh Mitra* edited by Sapre himself, is considered by many as the first Hindi short story, or at least one of the many first short stories (Kamleshwar 1985; Das 2005, 307; Rai 2008, 48; Shukla 2011, 25; Mody 2011, 134). Sapre’s story came at a time when Hindi itself was crystallizing as a language, separate from its diverse dialects spoken across North and Central India. This crystallization gave stability to the publishing industry for Hindi, which already had a sporadic presence in the form of missionary texts and company pamphlets translated and published in Hindi.¹ Coming right at the beginning of *Dwivedi Yug*, named after Mahavir Prasad Dwivedi, who tirelessly promoted Hindi as a literary language, Sapre’s story is written in this crystallized – what some would call modern – Hindi. Despite living and writing in Pendra Road, still a small village in Chhattisgarh, Sapre writes in the then nationally recognized Hindi and attempts the same universality in his story, which refers to no geographical area in particular² and is set entirely around a landlord’s palace. This undefined spatiality, however, is not carried forward to the story’s temporal coordinates, which very clearly refer to a time in Indian history that was feudal and marked by oppressive landlords. It is in this fashion that Sapre’s story first opens up to history, where the lack of geographical specificity is useful in creating a pan-Indian image of feudalism, but at the same time, the image is made meaningful by a certain temporality. Both these qualities of Sapre’s writing, its use of Hindi and its attempt at pan-Indian imagery, are significant from the point of view of historiography since they refer to a historical moment in the development of Hindi language and a parallel growth of nationalism and nationalist literature.

In his canonical essay “The Law of the Genre” (1980), Jacques Derrida asks, “What indeed happens when the edge pronounces a sentence?” (71). The “edge”, synonymous here with borders, limit points, frontiers and thresholds, stands guard against the great unknown of language. For Derrida, a “sentence” or sentences, in the form of a text, that are produced on the border or the “edge” of language, are utterances or formal products that are waiting to be circumscribed by the genre and its pre-existing laws. Madhavrao Sapre’s work, as I would argue below, is a product of this “edge”. The border it crosses to arrive into the Hindi literary canon is from

M. R. Sapre from Pendra Road published a magazine called *Chhattisgarh Mitra* which focused on the region". It is clear from this account that the journal in which *Ek Tokri Bhar Mitti* was published was geographically quite conscious and specific.

a linguistic space without a defined genre and into one where it can only be legible as a short story or *kahaani*. However, the very genre that makes it legible, whose laws it is understood to be pledged to, is a genre it is claimed to have invented. Genre in Derrida's work is held up as a phenomenological category, using which a text is intuited, received, and classified. Sapre's work comes at the very advent of such categorization. It is studied in Hindi literary historiography as both the evidence and the origin of the category of short story – a contradictory yet structurally necessary position. It is this very syzygy of contradiction and necessity that this essay will bring to its reading of Sapre's short story, and the unique problem it opens up for the field of historiography, reading, and modernity alike.

Stirrings

As a short story, though, Sapre's writing has a far greater radical significance. Read by many as a transition from the *katha* (fableau) mode of writing to *kahani* (story), Sapre's story occupies a crucial position in the development of the Hindi short story even when it's not recognized as the very first story (Shukla 2011, 302). However, before probing into historiographical accounts that the story has invited, it would be useful to read the story, reproduced in full below, once without according it any historical exceptionality and as merely an act of language, if such a reading is even possible. This is not to say that the question of firstness becomes irrelevant in such a reading; in fact it is all the more acute as a first time reader of the story would encounter here a form that is vaguely familiar and unfamiliar at the same time.

These are are some of the quarrels between historiographical approaches that come into play while reading Sapre's work: i. locating the story in the colonial history that produces it ii. the history of the form in which this work is arguably the first of its kind, and, iii. treating literature as an event that destabilizes a reader's sense of both history and form in order to produce something new. There follows an English translation of Madhavrao Sapre's 1901 story, *Ek Tokri Bhar Mitti* or *A Basketful of Earth*, in its entirety. The original Hindi text can be found in Appendix 1.

In very close proximity to a respected landlord's mansion was a poor and orphan widow's hut. The landlord had been wanting for a very long time to extend the boundary of his mansion and thus was repeatedly requesting the widow to vacate the plot she called home. But she had lived in that hut for ages now, both her son and husband had died in that very hut and so had her daughter-in-law,

leaving behind a five-year-old girl. Her granddaughter was very much the only source of support she had in her old age. Anguished, she would weep whenever she was reminded of this cruel past and had been half-dead even before she had heard her gentlemanly neighbour's request. Being very attached to this hut, she had no intention of abandoning it, not at least till her death. When the gentleman's efforts bore no concrete results, he turned to tricks common to landlords. Using the services of some shrewd lawyers, the landlord got the court to transfer the possession of the hut to him, which allowed him to turn the widow out. Being the orphan she was, she just started living elsewhere in the neighbourhood.

One day, when the landlord was walking around the hut, giving orders, the widow arrived there with a basket in hand. As soon as he saw her, he asked his employees to remove her from the premises. But she started pleading with him, "Maharaj, now this hut is all yours. I haven't come to claim it. However, Maharaj, if you allow, I do have one request." Seeing the landlord nod, she continued, "After leaving the hut, my granddaughter has stopped eating or drinking anything. I've tried to reason with her but to no effect. She only demands to be taken home. I'll only eat my *roti* there, she says. This is why I thought I should carry a basket full of earth from here to built a *chulha*, and make *rotis* on it. I believe she might start eating again. Maharaj, kindly allow me to fill this basket with earth." The landlord acceded.

The widow entered the hut. All the memories of the place brought tears to her eyes. Somehow containing her sorrow, she filled her basket with earth and hauled it outside. With folded hands she pleaded with the gentleman, "Maharaj, please give me a hand with the basket so I can haul it up on my head." This request vexed the landlord initially, but as a result of her insistent supplications, and with her finally falling flat on his legs, he was struck with sympathy. Instead of asking a servant to help her, he himself took a step forward to pick the basket. But the moment he touched the basket he knew the task was beyond him, which only made him exert himself further, but the basket didn't rise an inch from the ground. Embarrassed, he began to say, "No, I won't be able to pick this basket up –"

Hearing which the widow announced, "Maharaj, please don't mind my saying, but you couldn't pick one basket full of this earth, while the hut is full of thousands of such baskets. Would you be able to bear its burden for a lifetime? You should perhaps think about it."

The landlord, in his drunken quest for money, had forgotten his duty and the widow's words seem to have jolted him awake. As a penance for his actions, he asked the widow for her forgiveness and returned her the hut.

(Madhavrao Sapre 2020, translation mine)³

3 For an alternative translation, see Sapre (2012).

4 Stories under consideration for this distinction have included "Rani

The debate surrounding the first short story in Hindi literary criticism is an old one and not short of equally deserving contenders.⁴ While Devi Prasad Verma reads *Ek Tokri Bhar Mitti* (1901) as the very first short story written in the Hindi-language, for Acharya Ramchandra Shukla it is Kishorilal Goswami's story *Indumati* (1900) that deserves the honour, and while for

Mantra Mukim

Ketaki ki Kahani” (1803) by Insha Allah Khan; “Ek jamindar ka drishtant” (1871) by Reverend J. Newton; “Pranyani-parinay” (1887), “Indumati” (1900), and “Gulbahar” (1902) by Kishori Lal Goswami; “Chali Arab ki katha” (1893; author unknown); “Subhashit ratna” (1900), “Man ki chanchalta” (1900) and “Ek tokri bhar mitti” (1901) by Madho Rao Sapre; “Plague ki Chudail” (1902) by Bhagvan Das; “Gyarah varsh ka samay” (1903) by Ram Chandra Shukla; “Pandit aur Panditani” by Girijadatta Vajpeyi (1903); “Dulaiva” (1907) by Banga Mahila; “Rakhiband bhai” (1907), “Gram” (1911) by Jaishankar Prasad; “Sukhmay Jivan” (1911) and “Usne Kaha Tha” (1915) by Chandradhar Sharma Guleri”. (Mody 2011, 134)

5 In their essay on comparative historiography, Valdes and Hutcheon think of literary institution as the field that allows literary experience:

The “history” of literature is, in fact, the multiple and complex histories of its production,

Lakshmi Narayan Lal this first-ness should be attributed to the 1903 story *Gyarah Varsh ka Samay*, for Raykrishna Das it is Bangmahila’s 1907 story *Dulaiwali* (see Singh 2007, 5). Instead of reinstating such a comparative framework and laying down *a priori* laws with which to hold one story amongst many as the beginning of a genre, it would be useful at this point to see how this historiographical technique unfolds. By looking at different reasons and claims cited for just one story, Madhavrao Sapre’s *Ek Tokri Bhar Mitti* in this case, one can probably arrive at such an understanding of historiography, which is not always an investigation of how literature is produced but also how a “literary institution” is produced which lays down the ground for any literary experience.⁵

The stirring that produces Sapre’s writing or produces the literary experience, which will retrospectively be classified as a story, has its basis in more than one understanding of literary genealogy in the subcontinent. Early commentators like R. S. McGregor attribute this advent of prose writing, what I am calling a stirring here, to the exposure Hindi writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had to western literary modernity. Writing about *Pariksha Guru*, widely considered to be the first Hindi novel, McGregor argues that Lala Srinivas Das produces a certain realist experience in the novel by “setting his scenes in time and place, and introducing his characters within them, in exactly the tradition of the European historical novel” (1967, 119). However, McGregor finds Das’s novel ultimately lacking in the very characteristic – realism – by abiding to which Das’s text makes its generic claims. For McGregor, the “short sentences of the scene-setting passages [in *Pariksha Guru*] have a perfunctoriness about them which reminds us that he is doing this somewhat as an obligation, and generally has little real interest in creating elaborate, realistic settings” (119). This is a strange charge to make against a text whose ontological determinations as the first Hindi novel are established by McGregor himself, by studying the extensive use *Pariksha Guru* makes of the English novelistic tradition and its generic bylaws. Yet, contradictorily, any major divergence from this law is pointed out by McGregor as a weakness of Das’s text, thus implying that any claims of novelistic writing in Hindi not only have to conform to laws that McGregor takes for granted in the western tradition, but also for an advent to be made in Hindi prose, the work has to break the pre-established (read: pre-colonial) laws of literary fiction and submit itself to a new one. The proper name “novel” can only be granted to *Pariksha Guru* within this contradictory paradigm, where a text is never not without laws, and the very law that claims to make it historically legible is the law it is claimed to be in violation of. This contradictory structure, as I would argue below in Sapre’s case, is germane to any historical genealogy of advent, but this is particularly pitched with regard to early Hindi prose, as it ties itself to the advent of realism and also to the alleged beginnings of modernity, critical thinking and Hindi language.

but also of its reception. Literary historians over the centuries have always been aware of the complexity of literary production, but the new methodological paradigms developed by various critical theories in the last few decades have made it impossible not to add to this an awareness of the equally complicated and equally significant nature of literary reception. What has come to be called the ‘literary institution’ – the field in which literary experience occurs – is therefore as much a part of this history as is the development of genres or thematic motifs. (1995, 3)

Makhan Lal Chaturvedi’s comments on Sapre, lauding the latter’s life as a journalist and social thinker more than his literary work, are still notable for how they work out the event-ness of Sapre writing within the context of national freedom struggles and the emergence of Hindi as a literary language:

Being myriad-minded and an original thinker, for the past 25 years, Madhav Rao Sapre has been a strong pillar of Hindi literature and co-producer and collaborator of literary, social and political organization. Infusing the spirit of nationalism into literature, society, and political organization; touring the land, visiting villages to do so. Putting his writing skill to the best possible use, that of serving his motherland; expressing the agonised cry of the people gripped in the clutches of foreign domination; delving deep into religious theology and compelling it to serve the motherland, erasing his identity completely. In order to highlight the importance of the people and organisations in order to immortalize them. (qtd. in Pandey 2012, 10–11)

Chaturvedi situates Sapre’s achievements in a nexus between political mobilization against colonial rule and the developments of new literary forms that both attest to these changes in the political landscape and commit to imagining an alterity. For a reader such as Chaturvedi, the generic stirrings brought about by *Ek Tokri Bhar Mitti*, or those that the story utilizes in its composition, are responding directly to the event of colonial rule and its widespread consequences for everyday life. Sapre’s narration of the peasant woman’s experience, her displacement within the same landscape, is a sign, at least for a reader such as Chaturvedi, of how literary form has been reshaped through its experience of feudalism, colonization and the several reform movements that resist it. Ann Grodzins Gold (2012) raises the important question of social change in the rural landscape, something central to Sapre’s story of rural Central Provinces, as the pivot of modernity, where new desires ultimately culminate in imagining, achieving, or failing to achieve a specific kind of alterity. Gold writes: “They often simultaneously embrace opportunities for altered lives – in the realms of technology, education, consumer goods – while critiquing and at times resisting associated social and cultural consequences” (16). Of course, Sapre’s description of the old woman resisting her eviction from the landlord’s property is geared towards a similar sense of subversion, however faint or oblique such an act of resistance might be. Sapre’s story works with a network of requisitions and permissions: beginning with the landlord “repeatedly requesting the widow to vacate the plot she called home” and her denying him the permission; followed by the landlord appealing to “the court to transfer the possession of the hut to him, which allowed him to turn the widow out”; after which the widow is turned out immediately but returns to the demolition site later on to say, “Maharaj, if you allow, I do have one request”; granting

the widow's request, the landlord allows her to dig a basketful of earth from the site of her old hut; with that the widow makes her final request to the landlord, "Maharaj, please give me a hand with the basket so I can haul it up on my head", a request that the landlord reluctantly accepts before it is revealed – and this is a revelation central to the plot and the theme of Sapre's story – that he is incapable of lifting a basket full of earth from a land that he now legally owns. This drama of request and permissibility culminates in the landlord requesting the widow's forgiveness, redeeming himself and the moral arch of the story. It is important to note that Sapre's story, however rudimentary in its plotting and characterization, draws the causality of his characters' actions neither from a mythological past nor through a monarchic regime, but through (a misuse of) the word of law and, ultimately, through the material fact of the "basket full of earth" being too heavy for the landlord who otherwise has proprietary control over that piece of earth.

Commentators such as Sisir Kumar Das, whose reading I will discuss in more detail in the next section, have isolated such moments as the work of modernity in Sapre's work, and thus bolster its claim as the first short story. Thus, inherent in this generic claim is not the law of imitation or realism, both paradigms that serve as the cornerstone of McGregor's study of early Hindi prose, but another law: alterity. Sapre's work is among many early twentieth-century Hindi literary works that were committed to the imaginative labour of alterity, of thinking a future. Supriya Chaudhuri (2012) attributes a similar alterity to Tagore's work, when she writes that Tagore overcomes "limitations of nineteenth-century romance and realism and to ask new questions about human subjects and social conditions in prose of astonishing depth and sensitivity" (114). In Chaudhuri's reading, Tagore makes a genuine attempt to find a language that would be adequate for the immense social change that surrounds him. Sapre's story, despite being too short to warrant the same argument, does perform a similar gesture of accommodating social change when it places the dispute between the landlord and his indigent tenant at its centre. Chaudhuri's essay, however, uses a different rubric, not dissimilar to McGregor's, when studying the first Bangla novel, *Alal Alaler Gharer Dulal* or "The Spoilt Son of a Rich Family", serialized in *Masik Patrika* from 1855 to 1857. Chaudhuri finds that the novel's historical conditions are by

no means the sole determinants of the new form, which draws upon a variety of narrative exemplars. Colonial readers represent a rapidly growing market for books imported from England. Early translations and imitations in several Indian languages attest to the popularity of Shakespeare, Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, Johnson's *Rasselas* and Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield*. (103–104)

The idea behind comparing Chaudhuri and McGregor’s approach here is not to diminish their claims, but to demonstrate how all claims of narrative advent remain caught between attendant social conditions and immediate literary contexts, not privileging one over the other. These historiographical claims show another discomfort with the idea of advent that is crucial to the debates around the first Hindi short story: invention. By providing a rich context of translations and imitations from English into Indian language, both these historiographical accounts try to prove that despite Das and Dulal being the first practitioners of the novel in the subcontinent, their generic innovation wasn’t unprecedented. In other words, they were not responsible for inventing the genre that they were working in and adapting within.

This historiographical distinction between innovation and invention takes us back to the problem of Sapre’s work and its alleged first-ness. The question here is not merely of what stirs Sapre into producing the first Hindi short story, but what does his work contribute towards the invention of story form, or does it merely innovate with a genre that was already there. Delineating innovation from invention, Derek Attridge’s *The Singularity of Literature*, a major text of deconstructive literary analysis, channels this debate to precisely show the limits of historiography and its exposition of literary experience. While innovation primarily raises the question of aesthetic skill and technique, invention, on the other hand, suggests a new critical framework that proves all previous models of judgement insufficient. For Attridge, a literary text (he does not clearly classify which kind of texts) is always brimming with this inventive potential, a potential to interrupt pre-existing discourses and laws:

In attempting to clarify just what happens at these moments, I shall continue to use “originality” to refer to the opening up of new possibilities achieved by the work of art in its own time and accessible via a process of historical reconstruction, reserving “inventiveness” for the quality of innovation which is directly sensed in the present – a somewhat special meaning of these terms on which the rest of this book will elaborate. Whereas the experience of originality in art, as in other fields, is a matter of re-creating the past, artistic inventiveness – unlike inventiveness in science, mathematics, economics, or politics, which is not clearly distinguishable from originality – bridges past and present. An artistic invention is inventive now. (Attridge 2015, 45)

Although none of the commentators on Sapre give it such an important literary position that it can catalyze or have any affective or ethical events, and even to give it such a position would be to overestimate its value as a short story, they do so by claiming it as the first short story to enter the question of invention and innovation at the level of genre. Crucial to this question, however, is the fact that the genre itself remains either undefined or too

loosely defined in all these discussions about Sapre. It again brings us to Derrida's "Law of the Genre", which argues that structurally a genre can never be defined: "As with the class itself, the principle of genre is unclassifiable; it tolls the knell of the knell (glas), in other words, of classicum, of what permits one to call out (calare) orders and to order the manifold within a nomenclature" (61). Thus, the genre always already exists, like the "knell of the knell", before the work. The stirring of the kind I have associated with Sapre's work here, tracing the causes that lead to its inventiveness, goes on to perform the generic requirements of a short story at that historical juncture, and the accounts that register its achievement to do so do not go on to unravel the category of short story itself, which is allowed a position of primacy. Thus, *Tokri Bhar Mitti* becomes the site for the genre of story to perform its function, its attribute, while interacting with a specific historical condition and at the same time evading any comprehensive or finalized understanding of story form. For Derrida, such an understanding is impossible under the laws of the genre, laws which protect the genre from explaining itself. In the hermeneutical gesture where *Ek Tokri Bhar Mitti* gets classified as a story, the short story form itself remains an invention and, thus like the "knell of the knell", remains unclassifiable. It is another matter, though, that Sapre's reformist, non-literary works were classified quite firmly and legally by its unintended reader, who were, however, its intended target: the British government in India. Classified as anticolonial and "dangerous" for the empire, Sapre "was arrested on 22nd August, 1908" for the publication of his book "Swadeshi Movement and Boycott" in 1906, which was also subsequently banned. "In order to evade detection, and again becoming a victim of British policy of suppression", Pandey informs us, Sapre "wrote articles under different names; some of the names that he used were: Madhavadas Ramdasi, Trimurti and Trivikram Sharma" (Pandey 2012, 11). The heteronymy here attempts to protect the texts from being classified as revolutionary, even while the act of veiling itself responds to the event of colonial struggle. While on the one hand, Sapre veils these texts, on the other he practises great clarity within them by prescribing the boycott of foreign goods, education of women and other reformist and insurrectionary methods. *Ek Tokri Bhar Mitti*, however, adapts characteristics of both pre-colonial folk tales with strong moral epicentres and new developments in western storytelling, and its inventiveness is unclassifiable in a very different way from Sapre's other non-literary works and for very different reasons.

The haunt of the real

In his landmark *History of Indian Literature*, Sisir Kumar Das defines the early Hindi stories by their realism. In his account, it seems that realism is

treated as a prerequisite for a short story and is co-terminus with a colonial modernity where western texts help Indian texts “come-of-age”. He writes:

The early Hindi stories are also realistic in the main, though with a moral bias. “Indumati” is a love story against a historical background, but Madhav Rao Sapre’s “Eka Tokri Bhar Mitti” (A Basketful of Earth, 1901) is a story of conflict between a poor widow and a wealthy landlord. (Das 2005, 307)

Das actually sees realism in Tagore’s stories as the beginning of the short story in the subcontinent and his mention of Sapre’s work as an “early” short story is only due to its conformity to developments in Bengali form. Literary critics writing in Hindi, on the other hand, have attended to the moral centre in Sapre’s story rather than its realism. In Santosh Shukla’s biographical work on Sapre, Pandit Sharda Prasad Tiwari is quoted as saying,

In the beginning of Dwivedi Yug, literature governed by ideas of morality, idealism and decorum was being spearheaded by the late Madhavrao Sapre ... His writing was founded on a decorous morality and it emphasized literature’s potential to communicate to a larger public sphere. (2010, 24–25, trans. mine)

Another way the freshness of form in Sapre’s *Ek Tokri Bhar Mitti* has been read is by relating it to the history of Hindi print journals in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As the freedom struggle in the subcontinent took a national turn, regional languages started getting consolidated and utilized as literary languages in the production of journals, for sensitization or otherwise. This has often been cited as the reason behind the simultaneous development of journalism and regional literature (Shukla 2010, 44). Sapre’s own story was published as part of his journal *Chhattisgarh Mitra* (Chhattisgarh’s Friend), inspired by Durgaprasad Mishra’s 1878 journal *Bharat Mitra*. Despite being named after and catering to a regional audience of Central India, *Chhattisgarh Mitra* was written in khariboli, which was gaining prominence in North India and in the national freedom movement. By choosing not to use the regional dialect, the journal was working with an idea, however flawed, of linguistic unity that could integrate culturally and economically far-off provinces, such as the erstwhile regions of Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, into the national struggle. Vamanrao Lakhe, a practising advocate from Raipur, helped with the publishing of the journal, since Pendra Road in Sapre’s time was too small a place to have a printing press, and Ramarav Chincholkar, an advocate from Bilaspur, became a co-editor and thus helped with commissioning pieces from national writers (Shukla 2010, 20). Although the journal carried articles on a range of subjects and genres – news items, poems, short stories, satire and ideological tracts – according to Pandey “it was mainly reputed for its critical reviews”. Pandey also quotes Kamta Prasad Guru’s

hyperbolic claim that “the art of literary criticism in Hindi began and its influence spread with ‘Chhattisgarh Mitra’” (Pandey 2012, 12) to suggest the significance Sapre held for Hindi literary life, even as he and the journal he produced were physically decentred from centres of Hindi literary production. It is ironic, however, that the nascent models of literary criticism Sapre was trying to establish in his journal would in a few decades struggle to habilitate and properly place his own prose as a short story.

Unlike other nationalist journals, *Chhattisgarh Mitra* employed prose techniques which were not entirely factual or reportage oriented. Although regarded as the progenitor of modern Hindi journalism (Shukla 2010, 2), Sapre was constantly being influenced by developments in Hindi literary and narrative strategies that were starting to surface with the publication of journals like *Saraswati*, *Sudarshan*, *Vaishyopkarak* and *Zamana*. This is what has led many to read *Ek Tokri Bhar Mitti* as occasioned by a publishing history, where journals create a narrative space for short fiction to emerge. This can be seen as one of the many ways historiography has tried to come to terms with Sapre’s story, which as a narrative is almost unprecedented. In explaining its publishing context, however, historiography largely misses the very historical moment when the story would have been published; this moment would have been defined by a surprise and awe that awaits any experience which can be qualified as a first. Additionally, the language employed in the story was actively participating in the construction of what would become khari boli or standardized Hindi two decades later, rather than as being expressed in an already crystallized standard register of Hindi. In the process, Sapre is also repressing another language, quite deliberately, the local dialect of Chhattisgarh with which he must have been surrounded. This would also have been the spoken dialect for most of his potential audience in Central India, an audience that a journal like Sapre’s was trying to integrate into a pan-Indian imaginary.⁶

6 For a note on the historical development of the Chhattisgarhi dialect, see Zograph (1982).

Genre of the other

In his account of early Hindi prose, McGregor considers the Urdu poet Insha Allah Khan’s story *Rani Ketki ki Kahani* as “a literary curiosity which is generally classed as the first piece of prose fiction in Hindi”. McGregor quotes at length from Khan’s preface to the story, drawing attention not just to the generic component of Khan’s work but also his choice of Hindi as a language:

One day as I was sitting about I had the idea of composing a story in which no other language than Hindi would be used. On deciding this my heart expanded like a

flower-bud. It should contain no foreign language (bahar ki boli) or local dialect. A certain literate, conservative, shrewd old fellow of my acquaintance protested at this, and with shaking head, screwed-up face, raised nose and eyebrows, and rolling eyes said, “This can never come off. Your story will neither lose its Hindi character nor take on *bhasa* character? You will simply write just as worthy folk generally talk among themselves? Using no admixture of language? It won’t succeed!” (McGregor 1967, 115)

The preface is crucial in two senses: (1) Khan identifies his own foremost place as a writer of Hindi prose; (2) he registers Hindi language as a potential language of literature and distinct from foreign languages and even local dialect with no previous tradition of prose fiction. This in many ways establishes the language of the story as one of the crucial laws of the genre, and not something I have seriously considered in my assessment of Sapre thus far. One has to remember that the debates around the first Hindi story do not merely evaluate the story’s stylistic or thematic singularity but also the fact that these were written at the specific juncture in the long history of language formation. *Chattigarh Mitra*, the journal edited by Sapre and in which *Ek Tokri Bhar Mitti* appears, despite working with the express aim of carving out a niche identity for Central India, does not employ any of the local dialects of the area it is produced in and instead, like Sapre’s story, chooses to use Hindi as its medium. This break from regional dialect is significant in how stories, not just Sapre’s, are historically received as Hindi stories, by submitting to generic laws of not just story form but also those of language. The advent of the short story, or rather historiographic accounts of it, are thus fundamentally marked by this submission, even as they break away, as they are declared to do in Khan’s preface, from other linguistic laws that precede it. Another linguistic law, mentioned briefly before, that demands entanglement rather than a rupture is that of English language. Commentators have tried to read Sapre’s text in precisely that rubric, where its generic foundations depend on how it opens up to the generic developments in other languages, or the other’s language, namely the English language. In his comprehensive history of the Hindi short story, Gopal Rai writes:

In the last years of the nineteenth century, with the publication of *Sarasvati* (1900), editors felt the need to publish short form stories. This might have been the internal necessity of the journal or the influence of the already popular form of “short story” in English literature. (Rai 2008, 17; trans. mine)

Although Sapre’s story is not directly adapted from a western text, unlike Kishorilal Goswami’s *Indumati* (1901), which was adapted from Shakespeare’s *Tempest*, its realism and the presence of an omniscient narrator are hints enough of the western model of storytelling. It might be

problematic, then, that the story's very conformity to English realism makes it the first short story for its many readers, but it doesn't take away from the fact that in Sapre's story the readers were finding an experience that had no equal in the Hindi literature that preceded it.

Shukla (2011, 275) draws a very strict line between *katha* and *kahani*, which became another way of approaching the newness of Sapre's story. According to Shukla, while *katha* was governed by single incidents and emotional responses, modern *kahani* wasn't unidirectional and was open to a variety of ideas and identities. Shukla saw the moment of the modern Hindi story as a rupture from erstwhile narratives such as *Baitaalpachhisi*, *Brihatkatha*, or *Kadambari*, which were either mythological or reductively moralistic. It is on these grounds that critics like Gopal Rai have rejected Saiyyad Insha Khan's *Rani Ketki ki Kahani* (1903), considered by many to be the first short story, as a short story. According to Rai, Khan's narrative doesn't leave the *katha* mode and is too bound by historical incidents and its linearity to be called a *kahani*. On the other hand, while describing Sapre's realism, Rai writes: "*Katha* is nowhere to be found" (Rai 2008, 58). He goes on to claim that "amongst the stories published in 1900–1905, Madhavrao Sapre's story *Ek Tokri Bhar Mitti* appears closest to western story" (48, trans. mine). This analogy with the western story becomes all the more important when one places it beside Sapre's own insistence in the 1913 historiographical text "Lessons to be learnt from European History", published in the journal *Saraswati* as a set of six essays spanning Greek, Roman and French revolutions to the history of the Renaissance, the English industrial revolution and the religious life of Europe. Sapre's historical account in these essays already set up a dynamic relation between his own work as a prose stylist and the style and form of prose being published throughout the history of Europe but specifically in the nineteenth century.

Although Rai does acknowledge the irregularity that a story like Sapre's produces, he explains this deviance through the influence of western story. Rai's account challenges the orthodox historiography of someone like Acharya Shukla or Sisir Das and understands the first-ness of story as an irregularity in the narrative history, but at the same time he doesn't allow this irregularity to become the defining feature of Sapre's story. Rowner, in her work on the literary event, outlines how this irregularity can become the very definition of a literary work:

From the outset, it is necessary to state that the literary event cannot be reduced to mere extralinguistic occurrence or textual-narrative incident, to the *mimesis* of history, or to a *poesis* of plot. It must rather, be ... encompassing an unknown factor that is responsible for the *irregularity* of the happening and which answers the demand for a singular linguistic creation. (2015, 25; italics mine)

This demand for singularity is not met in any of the historiographical readings of Sapre's story because they read the first-ness of the story not as an event that escapes sense and history but, rather, as reinforcing a specific kind of publishing or narrative history.

The birth of the new

It is not easy, however, to latch on to a conspicuous irregular element in Sapre's story. Written with simple and immediate realism, it offers no semantic or syntactic challenge as such. The challenge comes from the very quarters that have been highlighted in the historiographical accounts cited so far. These accounts have mentioned challenges, or rather the historical differences, in the form of realism, presence of a narrator, brevity, nationalist consciousness, and interface with western texts, but they have all cited these differences in order to decode the first-ness of Sapre's story. One should rather read these as the qualities that define any literary experience of Sapre's story, an experience which by itself is eventful and lacking any semblance to anything before it. It is with this kind of reading, which places the text in its irregularity with history, that one can come to a fuller understanding of why Sapre's story has sometimes been touted as the first Hindi short story. This experience of irregularity is not very far from Sapre's own *oeuvre*, as any reading of his earlier narrative *Subhashit Ratna* (1900), reproduced in Appendix 2 below, would prove. Written just a year before *Ek Tokri Bhar Mitti*, the very first paragraph of this earlier narrative seems irregular with everything this essay has attributed to Sapre so far:

Once upon a time, a gardener tied his many hatchets together and took them to the garden. At the sight of him and the hatchets, the trees in the garden started shaking with fear. The older tree amongst them spoke – 'Brothers! Why are you already so fearful! Unless a piece of wood amongst us, which is what hatchets are made of, joins the gardener, his hatchets won't be able to destroy us'. (Pandey 2020, trans. mine)

The fabulist moral tale *Subhashit Ratna* is starkly different from the social realist tone of *Ek Tokri Bhar Mitti*, and even though they are divided only by a year, Sapre seems to follow the same laws of the genre in the latter work that he upends, perhaps without knowing, so readily in the earlier story. As mentioned earlier, Sapre, as the editor of *Chhattisgarh Mitra*, authored a number of critical essays in the short period between 1900 and 1902, ranging from essays on poetry and contemporary prose to astrology, grammar, and the education of women. However, there is one particular aspect of Sapre's work as an essayist that is quite relevant to the argument I have been trying to make here about generic boundaries and literary

event. Published in December 1902, Sapre's essay on Dandin's *Dashkumar-acharitam*, a Sanskrit prose-romance arguably composed in the seventh century, takes issue with the turn-of-the-century readings of Dandin and other prominent Sanskrit works as novels. For Sapre, this retrospective casting of Sanskrit literature and of writers such as Kalidas, Bhavbhuti, Subandhu, and Banbhata in generic moulds reserved for modern prose, such as the novel form, resulted from a deliberate misunderstanding of the specificity of generic models such as the novel and its unique place within literary history. It is worthwhile to quote here at length Pandey's account of this essay, which explains in some detail Sapre's reasons for drawing firm generic boundaries when it came to assessing a genealogy for the Indian novel:

This [Sapre's essay on Dandi] was the beginning of comparative study in literature. During the last few decades a new trend seems to have emerged – a quest for 'Hindu India'. As a concomitant to that quest deep-rooted Indian values embedded in modern and classical Hindi Literature are being explored. Some literary critics in an attempt to pick out the Indian element in novels are intent upon placing 'Dashkumar Charitra; Vasavdatta; and Kadambari' in the category of novels. Refuting this claim made by the critics Sapreji goes on to prove the contrary. He observes: 'The novel lacks a story, the most essential element in a novel. Neither has the poet tried to trace its legendary origin, nor has he tried to embellish his work according to the demands of a particular school of thought. Moreover, it does not reflect the characteristic of the age in which it was born.' In other words Sapreji has found no feature of the novel in any of these works. (Pandey 2012, 26–27)

Sapre offers a traditional approach to the question of genre here, arguing that the older Sanskrit texts, despite their prose structure, (1) do not conform to the accepted formal model of the novel that is pivoted on a narrative story and, (2) by not reflecting in any concrete terms their own contemporary realities these texts did not possess the novel's designated content. This is particularly relevant to how my own discussion of Sapre's text has developed in this essay and how different strategies of reading and situating Sapre's text as a story have either shown it conforming to the laws of the genre or demonstrated how such a law is reinvented through the event of Sapre's story. I have argued here how what makes *Ek Tokri Bhar Mitti* irregular and eventful does not automatically make it the first Hindi short story; instead, its irregularity calibrates the very discourse of first-ness, of an untraceable origin from which the short story becomes possible.

For Derrida, the genre exists in a text like a demarcation, and a text only belongs to the genre in that it chooses to not outstep borders set by it. While *Ek Tokri Bhar Mitti* does precisely that, it is in no way a prototype Hindi

short story itself. Rather, finding himself in the instance of the advent or beginning, Sapre opens his work to the laws of storytelling – a certain kind of realist, critical storytelling – that he wasn't open to in his own early works, but in this instance he also engenders a law – a law of how a Hindi short story operates in its advent. Even though both the advent and the genre of short story are categories reserved in historiography and are not innate to Sapre's work, these categories are what make the story legible within its historical moment. To conclude, *Ek Tokri Bhar Mitti* participates in the advent of a form, a generic law, yet it does not merely belong to that law. It participates in this law without inheriting all its injunctions, and thus it performs some of the generic features of a short story but does not belong to the genre in its entirety. It is another matter that the law or the genre do not reveal themselves in their entirety in any literary work, and as Derrida argues, the genre only operates as demarcation or borders for the literary work – its operational limit and its hermeneutical identity. Derrida and Ronell (1980) argue that this kind participation without belonging allows the literary work to take part in a genre, be “contaminated” by it, without pledging itself to all the generic laws:

in the code of set theories, if I may use it at least figuratively, I would speak of a sort of participation without belonging – a taking part in without being part of, without having membership in a set. With the inevitable dividing of the trait that marks membership, the boundary of the set comes to form, by invagination, an internal pocket larger than the whole; and the outcome of this division and of this abounding remains as singular as it is limitless. (59)

Ek Tokri Bhar Mitti participates in the laws of a short story to whatever degree they are ascertained historically and stylistically, yet at the same time it is pledged to a literary experience that is “larger than the whole”, and stands at the liminal point where it has to be responsible for inventing the very law it is going to be judged by.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Mantra Mukim  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0230-2876>

References

- Attridge, Derek. 2015. *The Singularity of Literature*. New York: Routledge.
- Chaudhuri, Supriya. 2012. "The Bengali Novel." In *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Indian Culture*, edited by Vasudha Dalmia and Rashmi Sadana, 99–123. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Dalmia, Vasudha. 1997. *The Nationalisation of Hindu Tradition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Das, Sisir Kumar. 2005. *History of Indian Literature, 1800–1910 Western Impact: Indian Responses*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi.
- Derrida, Jacques, and Avital Ronell. 1980. "The Law of the Genre." Translated by Avital Ronell." *Critical Inquiry* 7 (1): 55–81.
- Gajarani, S. 2004. *History, Religion and Culture of India*, Volume 5. New Delhi: ISHA Books.
- Gold, Ann Grodzins. 2012. "Scenes of Rural Change." In *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Indian Culture*, edited by Vasudha Dalmia and Rashmi Sadana, 13–29. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kamleshwar. 1985. *Peheli Kahani*. New Delhi: Rajpal and Sons.
- McGregor, R. S. 1967. "The Rise of Standard Hindi and Early Hindi Prose Fiction." *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain & Ireland* 99: 114–132.
- Mody, Sujata Sudhakar. 2011. *Literature, Language and Nation Formation: The Story of Modern Hindi Journal 1900–1920*. Berkeley: University of California, Graduate Division.
- Pandey, Manager. 2012. "The Importance of Madhav Rao Sapre." *Hindi: Language, Discourse, Writing* 7 (1): 9–27.
- Pandey, Manager. 2020. Madhavrao Sapre ka Mahatva. <https://www.hindisamay.com/content/3678/1/मैनेजर-पांडेय-आलोचना-माधवराव-सप्रे-का-महत्व.csp>
- Rai, Gopal. 2008. *Hindi Kahani ka Itihaas*. New Delhi: Rajkamal Prakashan.
- Rowner, Illai. 2015. *The Event: Literature and Theory*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Sapre, Madhavrao. 2012. "Ek Tokri Bhar Mitti." *Hindi: Language, Discourse, Writing* 7: 7–8.
- Sapre, Madhavrao. 2020. *Ek Tokri Bhar Mitti* [A Basketful of Earth]. <http://www.hindisamay.com/contentDetail.aspx?id=788&pageno=1>
- Shukla, Santosh Kumar. 2010. *Madhavrao Sapre: Patrakarita ke yug Nirmata*. New Delhi: Prabhat Prakashan.
- Shukla, Acharya Ram Chandra. 2011. *Hindi Sahitya ka Itihaas*. Jaipur: Malik.
- Singh, Dinesh Prasad. 2007. *Kahani: Nayi Kahani*. New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas.
- Valdes, Mario J., and Linda Hutcheon. 1995. "Rethinking Literary History – Comparatively." *Ocassional Paper*, 27.
- Zograph, G. A. 1982. *Languages of South Asia: A Guide*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Appendix 1. *Ek Tokri Bhar Mitti* (1901) by Madhavrao Sapre.

किसी श्रीमान जमींदार के महल के पास एक गरीब अनाथ विधवा की झोंपड़ी थी। जमींदार साहब को अपने महल का हाता उस झोंपड़ी तक बढ़ाने की इच्छा हुई, विधवा से बहुतेरा कहा कि अपनी झोंपड़ी हटा ले, पर वह तो कई जमाने से वहीं बसी थी; उसका रिय पति और इकलौता पुत्र भी उसी झोंपड़ी में मर गया था। पतोहू भी एक पाँच बरस की कनया को छोड़कर चल बसी थी। अब यही उसकी पोती इस वृद्धाकाल में एकमात्र आधार थी। जब उसे अपनी पूर्वस्थिति की याद आ जाती तो मारे दुःख के फूट-फूट रोने लगती थी। और जबसे उसने अपने श्रीमान पड़ोसी की इच्छा का हाल सुना, तब से वह मृतप्राय हो गई थी। उस झोंपड़ी में उसका मन लग गया था कि बिना मरे वहाँ से वह निकलना नहीं चाहती थी। श्रीमान के सब प्रयत्न निष्फल हुए, तब वे अपनी जमींदारी चाल चलने लगे। बाल की खाल निकालने वाले वकीलों की थैली गरम कर उन्होंने अदालत से झोंपड़ी पर अपना कब्जा करा लिया और विधवा को वहाँ से निकाल दिया। बिचारी अनाथ तो थी ही, पास-पड़ोस में कहीं जाकर रहने लगी।

एक दिन श्रीमान उस झोंपड़ी के आसपास टहल रहे थे और लोगों को काम बतला रहे थे कि वह विधवा हाथ में एक टोकरी लेकर वहाँ पहुँची। श्रीमान ने उसको देखते ही अपने नौकरों से कहा कि उसे यहाँ से हटा दो। पर वह गिड़गिड़ाकर बोली, “महाराज, अब तो यह झोंपड़ी तुम्हारी ही हो गई है। मैं उसे लेने नहीं आई हूँ। महाराज क्षमा करें तो एक विनती है।” जमींदार साहब के सिर हिलाने पर उसने कहा,

जब से यह झोंपड़ी छूटी है, तब से मेरी पोती ने खाना-पीना छोड़ दिया है। मैंने बहुत-कुछ समझाया पर वह एक नहीं मानती। यही कहा करती है कि अपने घर चल। वहीं रोटी खाऊँगी। अब मैंने यह सोचा कि इस झोंपड़ी में से एक टोकरी-भर मिट्टी लेकर उसी का चूल्हा बनाकर रोटी पकाऊँगी। इससे भरोसा है कि वह रोटी खाने लगेगी। महाराज कृपा करके आज्ञा दीजिए तो इस टोकरी में मिट्टी ले आऊँ!

श्रीमान ने आज्ञा दे दी।

विधवा झोंपड़ी के भीतर गई। वहाँ जाते ही उसे पुरानी बातों का स्मरण हुआ और उसकी आँखों से आँसू की धारा बहने लगी। अपने आंतरिक दुःख को किसी तरह संभालकर उसने अपनी टोकरी मिट्टी से भर ली और हाथ से उठाकर बाहर ले आई। फिर हाथ जोड़कर श्रीमान से प्रार्थना करने लगी, “महाराज, कृपा करके इस टोकरी को जरा हाथ लगाइए जिससे कि मैं उसे अपने सिर पर धर लूँ।” जमींदार साहब पहले तो बहुत नाराज हुए। पर जब वह बार-बार हाथ जोड़ने लगी और पैरों पर गिरने लगी तो उनके मन में कुछ दया आ गई। किसी नौकर से न कहकर आप ही स्वयं टोकरी उठाने आगे बढ़े। ज्योंही टोकरी को हाथ लगाकर ऊपर उठाने लगे त्योंही देखा कि यह काम उनकी शक्ति के बाहर है। फिर तो उन्होंने अपनी सब ताकत लगाकर टोकरी को उठाना चाहा, पर जिस स्थान पर टोकरी रखी थी, वहाँ से वह एक हाथ भी ऊँची न हुई। वह लज्जित होकर कहने लगे, “नहीं, यह टोकरी हमसे न उठाई जाएगी।”

यह सुनकर विधवा ने कहा, “महाराज, नाराज न हों, आपसे एक टोकरी-भर मिट्टी नहीं उठाई जाती और इस झोंपड़ी में तो हजारों टोकरियाँ मिट्टी पड़ी हैं। उसका भार आप जनम-भर क्योंकर उठा सकेंगे? आप ही इस बात पर विचार कीजिए।”

जमींदार साहब धन-मद से गवित हो अपना कर्तव्य भूल गए थे पर विधवा के उपर्युक्त वचन सुनते ही उनकी आँखें खुल गयीं। कृतकर्म का पश्चाताप कर उन्होंने विधवा से क्षमा माँगी और उसकी झोंपड़ी वापिस दे दी।

Appendix 2. An excerpt from Madhavrao Spare's Subhashit Ratna (1900).

किसी समय एक माली बहुत सी कुल्हाड़ियाँ रस्सी में बाँध अपने बगीचे में गया। उसको देखते ही सब वृक्ष मारे डर के थर थर काँपने लगे। तब उनमें से एक पुराने झाड़ ने कहा - “भाड़यो! अभी से क्यों डरते हो! जब तक हम लोगों में से कोई भी बँट, अर्थात् कुल्हाड़ी का डंडा इन कुल्हाड़ियों में शामिल न होगा, तब तक उनसे हमारा नाश नहीं हो सकता।” सच है, स्वजातीय अथवा आत्रमीयजन के विश्वासघात से ही नाश होता है, अनयथा नहीं।