



Pandit Ratan Nath Sarshar

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In a short essay on the writings of Pt. Ratan Nath Sarshar which was included in my booklet called "The New School of Urdu Literature", I paid the following tribute to this great writer of Urdu fiction:—

"He is a man with a marvellous power of observation of minute detail and gifted with a vast experience of every phase of life which he has tried to depict in his books. His descriptions are word pictures in which we see all classes of the Lucknow society moving before our eyes in an unending panorama not in a dumb show with mere gestures, but endowed with the power of speech supplying a chorus for the ear as well"

The novelist was alive and at the height of his fame, when the above tribute was paid to him by one who was a young student of Urdu literature. A few years after the above words were written, the cruel hand of death deprived our country of the services of this great master of Urdu prose, early in the beginning of the present century, in 1902. Years have gone by and I have since read a lot more of Urdu literature but my admiration for Sarshar, the author of the *Fisana-i-Azad* has not diminished. I think our language owes a lasting debt of gratitude to

Pandit Ratan Nath. He is undoubtedly a pioneer in novel writing in Urdu.

An interesting sketch of his life from the pen of Pt. Brij narain *Chakbast* appeared in the *Kashmir Drapan* and was subsequently reproduced in the *Zamana* of Cawnpore. I am indebted to that article for some of the details of the life of Pandit Ratan Nath. He was born in Lucknow. According to *Chakbast* the exact date of his birth is not known, but Mr. R. B. Saxena, in his history of Urdu literature has given it as 1847 or 1848. He was only four years old when he lost his father, Pt. Baij Nath *Dar*. This Brahman family had originally migrated from Kashmir. Like most Kashmiri Brahmans of those days Ratan Nath received a liberal education in Persian and also learnt some Arabic. There were several respectable Muslim families residing in the neighbourhood of the house of the parents of Ratan Nath and as a young boy he had frequent opportunities of contact with the ladies of those families and of hearing the Urdu language as spoken in the best Urdu speaking homes. He himself acknowledged that he owed his facile use of Urdu to the chance he had in his childhood of moving freely in those homes and learning the language in its purity, undefiled by heavy foreign words. When he grew up he had the advantage of studying English. He joined the Canning College of Lucknow, which was established for imparting modern education. He could not complete his College studies, but he came out of the College with a fair knowledge of English, which he improved afterwards by self-study and which was turned to great advantage

by him later in life, in his journalistic and literary career.

Ratan Nath began life as a teacher in the District School at Kheri, but finding that the work of teaching young boys was not the vocation for which he was meant by nature, he diverted his attention to literature. His earliest contributions appeared in a monthly magazine started by the Kashmiri Pandit community, which was known as the *Murasala-i-Kashmir*. The artificial style of Rajab Ali Saroor, the author of *Fisana-i-Ajaib*, was in vogue in those days in Lucknow and Ratan Nath imitated the same for some time but he soon gave it up in favour of a natural style of writing, which he eventually made his own. The first specimens of his new style appeared in the *Oudh Punch*, a humorous journal of Lucknow, made famous by Munshi Sajjad Husain, who was the first writer to introduce it and humour in Urdu periodicals. He found in Ratan Nath a person who was also gifted by nature with a sense of humour and they became great friends and co-workers. It is stated that their mutual relations were strained some years afterwards when some adverse criticism of the writings of *Sarshar* began to appear in the *Oudh Punch*, but their good relations were restored shortly afterwards through the interventions of some common friends.

Pt. Ratan Nath in his early days was a free lance journalist. He contributed to many journals besides the *Oudh Punch*, among which the *Mirat-ul-Hind* and the *Riazul Akhbar* may be particularly mentioned. Urdu translation of some scientific books written in English were also published by

him. One of these was a book on physics, called *Shamsul Zaha*, which received considerable appreciation at the time. When the late Munshi Nival Kishore, who was the most enterprising publisher of his day of Urdu and Persian books, heard of the rising fame of Pandit Ratan Nath and saw some specimens of his style, he invited him to edit the *Oudh Akhbar*. It was an Urdu daily published at Lucknow. In the capable hands of Pt. Ratan Nath the *Oudh Akhbar* became the leading newspaper of the day. The editor started writing a series of humorous stories to add to the attraction of the paper. These stories were the nucleus round which the structure of the voluminous novel, *Fisana-i-Azad* was subsequently built. The basic theme of the story is (based on a "Don Quixote" the famous novel of the Spanish writer Cervantes. The hero of the novel to whom the name of *Azad* is given is a chivalrous knight errant, shaped after Don Quixote Khoji the faithful attendant of Azad is an Indianised model of Sancho Panza, who accompanied Don Quixote in his adventures. We are told by Chakbast that the idea of producing in Urdu a story on the lines of Don Quixote was suggested to *Sarshar* by a friend of his Pt. Tir Bhawan Nath, who was himself a literary man with the *Nom-de-plume* of *Hijr*. This suggestion was accepted by *Sarshar*. The names of Azad and Khoji have become household words in every part of India, where Urdu is read. The hero and his attendant are both unusual personalities, but the art of the author has clothed them with reality so that the reader of the book regards them as living

characters and feels in sympathy with the triumphs of the hero and laughs at the empty heroics of Khoji, his boastful attendant, who comes to grief at every step, in spite of all his boasts of past bravery and soldierly experience.

The *Fisana-i-Azad* is a book of four large volumes. This is at once a defect and a merit. The defect is the lack of coherence in the story and the merit is the marvellous flow of the pen of the novelist. He had read numerous English novels, and digested them. What had appealed to him most in the course of his reading was consciously or unconsciously woven into the series of stories, which are contained in the *Fisana*. The idea of imitating the speech of people in humble walks of life must have been borrowed by him from Dickens and was successfully worked in reproducing the forms of speech of persons of different classes of society in Lucknow. I read this book for the first time in my school days and was under its spell for a long time.

It is a pity that Pt. Ratan Nath had to write his best book in the form of daily contributions to a newspaper, but the lack of coherence, caused by this process, is compensated, to some extent, by the freedom enjoyed by the author in frequent changes of scene and action.

The *Fisana* was widely welcomed as soon as it was printed in book form, and interesting passages culled out of it have adorned many a book of selections from Urdu literature, which have been used as Text Books in Schools and Colleges. A number of small books consisting of

selections from the *Fisana* were prepared by a literary society in Lahore, which was founded by Shamsul-Ulma Maulana Tajwar, for presenting to the Urdu reading public the best specimens of Urdu prose and poetry. These books were published by Messrs. Attar Chand Kapoor & Sons of Lahore, a well-known firm of Publishers.

It is interesting to note that the service rendered to Urdu literatue by *Sarshar* received a sincere recognition from one of his best known contemporaries, Maulvi Abdul Halim *Sharar*. Chakbast has reproduced a letter of *Sharar* in Urdu, which is to the following effect :—

“By writing the *Fisana-i-Azad* you have acted as a Mesiah for Urdu language and have put a new life into it. . . . . It is so heartening that you are a helper of our old and good but unbefriended language. I thank God for this. How can I show my appreciation, except by sending you a few verses, in the last line of which the date of the publication of your book is brought out.”

The three lines of Urdu verse, which were sent by *Sharar* to Pt. Ratan Nath may be translated in prose as follows :—

“You have admirably struck a new path in fiction and have used numerous idioms with great effect. Friend and foe have both acknowledged the power of your pen, with this difference, that friends said “Wah” (bravo), and foes said “Ah” (alas). *Sharar* presents you a line from which the year of publication can be extracted and admires your writing, which reads like a talk.”

The date yielded by the words “Ratan Nath *Wah Wah*” in the last line, is 1298 A. H., which is equivalent to 1881, of the Christian era.

The above extract of the opinion of *Sharar* shows that both these famous writers of good Urdu recognized the worth of one another. It is a pity that later on a controversy started as to the relative merits of these two benefactors of Urdu literature. Without any intention on my part to start such controversy, my booklet referred to above, was responsible for it. There was a chapter in that booklet on *Sharar* along with the chapter on Ratan Nath *Sarshar*. I had given due praise to both of them, but the following observations of mine were misunderstood by some of the admirers of Pt. Ratan Nath. The following passage formed part of the opinion expressed by me in my Essay :—

“To *Sharar* I believe belongs the credit of being the first novelist in Urdu, in the true sense of the term. . . . The only other writer contending for rivalry with *Sharar* as the originator of the Urdu novel can be his own Lucknow contemporary, Pt. Ratan Nath. He called his *Fisana-i-Azad* a novel and his subsequent writings great and small were also called novels. In simplicity of style and in picturing Lucknow life the Pandit's books deserve to be classed as novels. The trouble, however, is that the more important of them are so unweildy in length that the plot, though capable of being interesting, grows obscure and leaves no impression of a continued story upon the mind.”

My criticism was not meant to take away any part of the credit due to Pt. Ratan Nath as a pioneer, nor to detract from the great value of his contribution to Urdu literature, but simply to bring out the fact that a novel, in the true sense of the term, is expected to have a regular plot and to be much less voluminous than the *Fisana-i-Azad*. Pt. Bishan Narain Dar, a leading lawyer of Lucknow and a friend and relative of Pt. Ratan Nath, first joined issue with me regarding the above criticism and wrote to a Lucknow paper, conducted in English, supporting the claims of Sarshar to superiority over Sharar. Some other writers wrote in the columns of a paper, conducted in Lahore, claiming that Sharar deserved a higher praise than Sarshar. In my opinion the controversy was not justified. The fact is that the spheres of the two writers differ so much from one another and the style of each one of them, though charming in itself, has very little in common. Similarly the services rendered by each of them to the growth of prose literature in Urdu are great in their respective spheres, but afford no common basis of comparison. I have made a passing reference to this old controversy, as it has occasionally been revived by critics, otherwise it is practically set at rest by the words quoted above from Maulvi Abdul Halim Sharar himself, recognising the work and worth of Sarshar.

Pt. Ratan Nath wrote many other books of Urdu fiction of which the *Sair-i-Kohsar* and the *Jam-i-Sarshar* deserve special mention, but they do not come up to the level of the *Fisana-i-Azad*, though the author keeps up the general excellence

of his style. A number of short stories were also published by Sarshar, but they did not add in any way to the reputation which he had earned by his first book.

About 1895 Pt. Ratan Nath went to Hyderabad Deccan, which has always attracted famous writers of Urdu, as it has invariably extended its patronage to them. Pt. Ratan Nath had gone to Madras as a member of the Indian National Congress. On his return he visited Hyderabad. He has given an interesting account of this visit in a paper called *Kashmir Parkash*, from which the following extract is translated:—

“The members of the Hindu and Muslim gentry and the public in general have given me a cordial welcome. Maharaja Kishan Parshad, who is at present the War Minister of the State Army, and who has held the office of *Madarul Maham* has appointed me to correct his writings in prose and poetry on a salary of Rs. 200/- a month. If any verse of mine pleases him he gives me a gold Mohar as a reward. He also grants Khilat, etc., three or four times during the year. I have had the privilege of presenting my books and the *nazar* to the Nizam. He knew all about me already. For about an hour he sat reading the *Sair-i-Kohsar*. He then looked at the *Jam-i-Sharar* and said to his A. D. C. I have already read this novel and it is in my Library” . . . My name has been included among the Darbaris of the court, and it is likely that a Mansab (permanent

allowance) may be awarded to me, which may be made hereditary. . . . A new novel of mine called *Gor-i-Ghariban* will, God willing, be published in a fortnight".

Owing to the welcome received by Sarshar in the court of the Deccan, the optimism of his letter quoted above appears to have been quite natural, but Fate had willed otherwise. Proposals about allowances took time to mature and before the goal could be attained, his health began to fail and his untimely death put an end to his hopes and the aspirations of his friends about him. It is not known whether the novel which was expected to come out ever saw the light. The name chosen by him for it that is "the grave of exiles" remained as a sort of epitaph for his last remains in Hyderabad.

Sarshar passed away on the 27th January 1902, at the age of 55 or 56. In his youth he was a tall, fairly well built and handsome man, known for his smiling face, his ready wit and his power to entertain his hearers with his interesting talk and with humorous quotations from the writings of famous poets, but towards the end of his life in Hyderabad he was a very different man, consumed by slow fever and reduced to a comparative skeleton. He could scarcely digest any food. It is stated that he had unfortunately taken to drinking in his youth and when the habit grew, he could not shake it off. It became one of the banes of his life. We are told by Chakbast that even Maharaja Kishan Parshad

withdrew his patronage from Sarshar towards the latter part of his career in the Deccan.

This tragic end of such a brilliant writer is painful. Those who knew him say that the fertility of his brain had also suffered during the time that he spent in Hyderabad. In one of his poems, which he wrote for the Kashmiri Conference, he has addressed a few lines to himself showing that he regretted the decline of the power of his pen. The lines are to the following effect (in translation):—

"It is a thousand pities that thou didst not realize thy own value with the gifts which thou had. The former brilliance of thy writings is gone. The damsel of thy literary productions has lost the rose-like glow on her cheeks. The strength of thy memory and the power of comprehension has diminished. How could it last, as every thing has its limits".

The *nom-de-plume* of Sarshar, which Pt. Ratan Nath had chosen in his youth, proved an unhappy choice. The word "Sarshar" means an "inebriated person". The augury unfortunately came true. He has, however, left a name in Urdu literature which will not be forgotten.

A feature of Sarshar's life deserving special mention is that he was singularly free of any racial or communal feeling. The Hindus and the Muslims were the same in his eyes and in cultural tastes he had more in common with his Muslim friends. He used to wear a Turkish cap which

was the popular head dress of the Muslims in those days. In all the photographs that I have seen of him, he is wearing a Fez, but one distinction was noticeable that his cap was without a tassel. It is difficult to say whether it was by chance that this tassel had dropped or whether the lack of it was meant as a distinguishing mark. In literature, however, there was hardly anything besides his name to show that his novels were the composition of a Hindu author.

THE END