

## PANDIT RATAN NATH SARSHAR.

No account of the best modern Urdu writers can be complete, without a reference to Pandit Ratan Nath Sarshar of Lucknow, one of the most popular novelists of India and the well-known author of the "*Fisana-i-Azad*." The idea is very common and not without some grounds, that the Urdu language, though spoken alike by Muhammadans and Hindus in all parts of India where it is understood, has come to be a sort of special property of Muhammadans. In fashionable literary circles the productions of a Hindu writer are generally at discount and are not thought much of. Though it will not do for purposes of fair criticism to start with a prepossession against the merit, of writings in Urdu by Hindu authors, yet many, who condemn such literature as of small literary value do so under the influence of that prepossession. The time is not very near when India will have number of just literary critics, deciding things upon their merits and not on personal bias or inclination. But as to writings of Hindu authors in Urdu, it must be confessed at the same time, that the Hindus also have not thought it fit to devote that attention to this literature which characterises their efforts in other directions, nor have they brought that application to bear upon a study of Urdu, for which they are reputed. The language, though based on Bhasha the language of the Hindus, has gradually acquired more of Arabic and Persian words than the indigenous ones, owing to the influence of Muhammadan rulers of the land who adopted it and while the Muhammadans have got attached to it more and more, the former have grown lukewarm to it in proportion. Moreover its earlier literature and much of its present one being devoted more to amusement and pleasure than instruction and profit, a cultivation of its taste did not quite accord with the practical

genius of the Hindu people. They thought it better to leave the luxury of objectless versifying to the Muhammadans who had grown comfort-loving and inactive and devoted themselves to the world. Now that the change of times has infused a new spirit into the language and a power to write in some of its branches or to speak it fluently is coming to be regarded as an enviable privilege, as a matter of course those who had lost themselves as it were, in studying the language, have the better of others who never gave it a moment's thought. The assertion, therefore, that by far the best writers in Urdu are to be found among Muhammadans and quite a number of them to boot, while the Hindus have few and far between, is true and need not be disputed. But the notion among some that they have not the power to equal Muhammadan authors in this respect, if they wish and turn themselves to it, is as groundless as possible, and Pandit Ratan Nath Sarshar stands a notable example of the height a Hindu may attain to in literary worth in Urdu, if he only applies himself to it. He is a rare example, no doubt, all over India, of a Hindu, who can stand comparison, can well bear the comparison and maintain his own ground. Though generally speaking the Hindu people have reason to be proud of him as a writer, yet the Kashmiri Pandits have in him a shining ornament of their caste and may justly feel a pride in owning him. A tribute and a deserved one to the caste itself may not be out of place here. The Kashmiri Pandits are, to my mind, a sort of beautiful link between the two sister communities living side by side in India, whose relations unfortunately have of late not been very sisterlike. The reason of this in addition to political, religious and other causes, is that the tastes of both are not very common in point of food, dress, arts and literature. The political and religious causes of difference must

always subsist, in the nature of things in India, as there seems no prospect of their being removed, but the state of things would have been much better, had there been a community of tastes between Hindus and Muhammadans. The Pandits, ingenious as every native of Kashmir has been made by nature, adapted themselves more to the tastes of Muhammadans, who ruled India when they settled here, than any other class of the Hindus. They began to mix with them more freely than others, they adopted much of the nourishing food used by Muhammadans, and showed great ingenuity in picking up the Urdu language which they now use as their mother tongue wherever they may be, with a pure and faultless accent and with perfect accuracy in idiom. In the refinement of literary tastes they did not lag behind and are to this day adepts in appreciating the subtleties of poetry or prose in Urdu. This bond of common likes and dislikes in literature, it goes without saying, is hardly to be despised. It was remarked some time ago by an Indian speaker in a public meeting, that no educated native of India could help binding his fate with the English people, as long as educated India and England had Shakespeare and Milton in common. He meant emphatically to give expression to his admiration of the two great writers of England and allowing for some exaggeration, this much may be safely asserted that no two admirers of Shakespeare, knowing the fact of their common liking, can long be enemies. A similar fact was very well illustrated in the earlier days of British rule. The Englishmen that came out to India as Military or Civil officers had among them many a good scholar of Oriental languages. Though the literary tastes of these scholars, served more to amuse themselves and beguile some dull hours of what was felt a life of exile, yet they were of immense service to their nation through these tastes and proved a boon to India.

Their translations of some of the master-pieces of Sanskrit, Arabic or Persian writers had a world of influence in dissolving the prejudice against Orientals in the minds of the Europeans and could not but infuse in them a sense that a people with such grand literatures could not be uncivilised and senseless as could possibly be supposed without such acquaintance and deserved kind treatment. The respect for the representatives of the race or religion of their admired writers made those Englishmen themselves mix on a very friendly footing with Indians, which bound the Indian minds to their English rulers more firmly than any other thing could possibly do and the ties of these times have not broken asunder in spite of short-sided efforts to the contrary. Such, is the power of literature when properly used, and it is not uncommon to find a Muhammadan admirer of Sarshar and a Hindu admirer of Nazir Ahmad feeling very friendly towards each other. I have not the slightest hesitation in saying that the *Fisana-i-Azad*, of Sarshar has been read more by Muhammadans than by Hindus and there must be many among his readers, who but for this book, would not have felt so warmly for the writer and his people, as they do. Thus it will appear that Pandit Ratan Nath has not only added to the bulk of the literature of his country, but has also done good to it otherwise.

Coming to the particular from the general, we have to give an estimate of his writings. I am sorry to be unable to introduce my readers, at this stage, to the personality of this author, as I have not had the pleasure of seeing him upto this time myself. As is evident from his writings, he is a man with a marvellous power of observation of minute detail and gifted with a vast experience of every phase of the life which he had tried to depict in his book. His descriptions are word pictures in which; we see all

classes of the Lucknow society, to which he has confined himself, 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 ears as well. I have verified the faithfulness and truth of Sarshar's pictures by a comparison of them with the real Lucknow life for myself and daresay that not a single individual in Lucknow from the indolent and ease-loving *Wasiqadar* to the commonest street rough or the infester of the drug shop with his empty boasts or the opium-drinker (for they do not eat opium in Lucknow) with his castles in the air, but you will find his representatives or prototype in the books of Pandit Ratan Nath Sarshar. The pandit was the editor of the *Oudh Akhbar* of Lucknow, when he produced his first, his best, and to my mind his last book, which earned him the fame which he enjoys. Far above the common run of the editor of a vernacular newspaper in India, who believes all ability to consist in stringing together a few sentences in broken Urdu and being an expert in defaming and libelling, and regards a sweet recklessness of consequences in writing, as equivalent to the moral courage of the best European journalist of which he has but faintly heard, Pandit Ratan Nath made the paper of which he was in charge a great success in his time. The voluminous story of *Azad*, he first gave to the world in small instalments, through the columns of the *Oudh Akhbar* and almost killed people by anxious waiting to hear the fates of the heroes and heroines of the story, in whom he had successfully interested them. When after its completion, the story began to appear in book form, and was finished in four volumes, it had a very encouraging sale, inspite of its price being somewhat prohibitory for India. It was read more vastly than it was sold and charmed everybody. There were

some voices here and there of the critics of the class indicated in the beginning of this essay, finding fault with the language of Pandit Ratan Nath and giving expression to the same unfounded preposition, that the Pandit could not be expected to write fully idiomatic Urdu, put this elicited a very frank and at the same time a very bold reply from the author, who could well defy puny critics with no writings of their own, indicating a fault here and there in the four volumes of good Urdu before them. He wrote that he frankly admitted that he owed his facile use of Urdu and his intimate knowledge of it to the opportunity he had in his childhood of moving freely in respectable Muhammadan homes and there learning the language in all its purity, undefiled by heavy foreign words, from the ladies of the families, and subsequently to the society of learned Muhammadan gentlemen. While ready to acknowledge where gratitude was due, he said he could boldly claim that every common Muhammadan writer was not in a position to assert his superiority over him merely for being a Muhammadan and we admit that he was quite justified in throwing the gauntlet in the above terms, which needless to say, has not been picked up.

The rest of his writings the *Jam-i-Sarshar*, the *Sair-i-Kohsar*, and the minor ones such as *Pi Kahān*, *Kamni*, *Bichhri hui Dulhan* and *Hashu*, cannot be said to be possessed of any peculiar merit, as the life described is essentially the same, the persons introduced very similar, their dialects and language repeating themselves with monotony, and even some of the same quotations and verses occurring again, as had been used in the former works. The peculiarity of Pandit Ratan Nath in which he stands distinct from all the rest of the living writers is that he is prolific. The strange way in which he manages to turn out large volumes upon volumes makes

one only wonder how he managed to write so much. But in this bulk of his books again lies his only fault as a writer. In fact it is to be regretted that he thinks it proper to write stories for magazines and newspapers. He may find in it an extra source of income, but it certainly deteriorates the quality of his work. Work for magazine, and periodical is always destined to be done in a certain amount of hurry and even for an experienced hand, it cannot be without the defects incidental to haste. I have lately seen, for instance, two of his latest small stories, *Pi Kahan* and *Hasho* and though advertised in the papers as masterpieces of his genius, they are perhaps just a blot on his name. If Pandit Ratan Nath has the least care for leaving a name as writer for posterity and is not content with the passing whims of the public, which must accept even trash from known writers, he would be well advised to stop such careless writing. The stories are utterly destitute of art, have very nominal plots, deal with very improbable incidents and on the whole leave the blankest possible impression on the mind after one has done reading them. The *Pi Kahan* for example is a tragedy, which ends in a lover dying of broken heart and his beloved girl coming to see him while breathing his last and dying there all at once, with her hands clasped round her lover's neck. Nothing could be more miserable than the mockery of a lecture on temperance with which the *Hasho* ends. Not only is his present writing stories for periodicals to be pitied but I have always felt a regret as to why his great book the *Fisana-i-Azad* ever appeared in the columns of a newspaper. This book would have been simply matchless had it been of just the half of its present bulk. Had it been written as a book, the plot would have been more artistically connected, the humorous and witty portions describing the ever amusing

*Khoji* more sparingly introduced, so as not to be felt as spoiling the effect of the beautiful story. But the exigencies of an editorial life and the necessity of giving the story piecemeal are responsible for robbing the book of almost half the beauties which it would have otherwise possessed. As it is, however, it is a splendid combination of essays, lectures, travels, and fiction and can give food to persons of every turn of mind and of all literary tastes. The two beautiful sisters Husn Ara and Sipihr Ara, the heroines of the book, are accomplished, educated and gifted girls whom nobody can help admiring and sympathising with.

Sarshar has succeeded in completely lifting the veil from off the impregnable *Zenana* of the higher circles of Lucknow Muhammadan life and it is quite a privilege to go with him to visit scenes of inner life which, as a rule, are a sealed book to the majority of native males, not to speak of foreigners. Pandit Rattan Nath shows a wonderfully remarkable acquaintance with the manners and conversation of respectable Muhammadan ladies and describes it with a fidelity which many less observing men who have lived all their lives in the sphere cannot command. His imitation of the numerous dialects and accents distinguishing the speech of ladies from that of men of city-folk from villagers, of the educated from the uneducated, of the *Musahib* from the street beggar and so on in endless detail, is entirely his own. The hero of his story, however, named *Azad*, is a creation of his imagination and an individual not very ordinarily met with. He is a perfect man of the world, he is very handsome, very enlightened, knowing several languages, a soldier and a wit, a poet and a lover, a clever conversationalist falling in love with several women or rather having every one that sees him falling in love with him. He can adorn the highest society, but is at the same

time easily at home among the lowliest. Now you find him flirting with a *Bhatiari* girl for purposes of his own and again you find him admitted to the harems of the highest in the land without any introduction but his good looks and smooth tongue. There is much in him that is shocking to one's sense of the congruous and the possible, but no one can help liking him as much for his own sake as for the sake of his faithful attendant and companion, *Khoji*. In *Khoji* we have a bundle of weaknesses, physical as well as intellectual a pigmy unconscious of his dwarfishness, always boasting of his past deed of valour which are anything but real, exciting ridicule and laughter at his own expense wherever he goes and deeming the world somehow or other intentionally shutting its eye to his excellences. In his own way *Khoji* is a unique creation in the whole range of Urdu literature and would have done immense credit to the genius of Pandit Ratan Nath, if he had been more sparingly introduced. As it is he excites a good deal of interest in the beginning and affords real amusement, but as the reader gradually finds himself deeply concerned as to the fortunes of the chief characters in the story, *Khoji* begins to appear an intrusion, till he becomes quite tiresome. The reason of this shortcoming has been referred to already, that is the want of artistic excellence due to the hurry natural in case of stories written for newspapers. On the whole, however, the *Fisana-i-Azad* is a work of exceptional merit and entitles Ratan Nath to a permanent place among the best and most original novelists of the present day in the Urdu language.

#### MAULVI ABDUL HALIM, SHARAR.

In *Sharar* we have, in a way, the most characteristic writer of the modern age of Urdu literature. Maulvi Abdul Halim, hails from a place near Lucknow and was till recently not so largely known outside the capital of Oudh. He seems, however, to have been qualifying himself for the work he completed, till all of a sudden he surprised the literary world of India by a monthly magazine which he issued some ten years ago and took it, as it were, by storm. The monthly paper called "*Dilgudaz*" (The Melter of Hearts), which proved his making, was really an imitation of some English periodicals in its plan, but periodicals were till then so rare in this country and that particular kind was so novel, that it was welcomed by the public with a zeal which had not fallen to the lot of many a good Urdu book. The secret of its success was that the editor had grasped firmly the inclination of the modern taste as to style as well as subject matter. The spread of a knowledge of the English language and literature, and the contact with European modes of thought and speech had made people dislike the old laboured bombast of the *Fisana-i-Ajaib* days and a simple, easy flowing style was becoming the fashion. The *Dilgudaz* of *Sharar* came out with interesting and readable essays of the *Spectator* and *Rambler* type, on historical, social, and moral subjects and with a novel based on the history of the crusades. Essays exactly of the type referred to were, in the first place, never known in Urdu and in the second place their adaptation to native taste by the writer was so complete that every body began to read the magazine very eagerly and there were many who used impatiently to wait for the next number. The writings of Hali, and Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and energetic workers of the Aligarh school had by