

## Exploring Awadh through the works of Ratan Nath Sarshar

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**Received**– 23 May 2026

**Accepted**– 27 May 2026

**Published**– 30 June 2026

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**DOI**-<https://doi.org/10.67275/SU.2026.041403>

### **Funding Policy-**

‘Shodh Utkarsh’ is an independent journal and receives no financial support or grant from any public, commercial, or not-for-profit organization.

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‘शोध उत्कर्ष’ एक स्वतंत्र पत्रिका है। इसे किसी भी सार्वजनिक, वाणिज्यिक या गैर-लाभकारी संगठन से कोई वित्तीय सहायता, अनुदान या फंडिंग प्राप्त नहीं होती है।

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### **कापीराइट सूचना-**

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**Abstract** : Awadh a historical sanctuary for Hinduism that blossomed into a sophisticated melting pot of diverse faiths, including Islam, Jainism and Sikhism. This reason reached a cultural peak characterized by exceptional artistry and a unique social atmosphere where different communities thrived through deep-rooted communal harmony and mutual respect. At the heart of this vibrant society was the writer Ratan Nath Sarshar, a Kashmiri Brahmin from Lucknow who bridged cultural divides by mastering the Urdu language. Through his groundbreaking novel Fasana-e-Azad. His writing serves as a vivid, living document a literary mirror that reflects everything from the rhythmic storytelling of traditional Dastans to the intimate, day to day realities of both the common street-dwellers and the sophisticated courtiers and Taluqdars of Lucknow.

**Keywords** : Awadh, Lucknow, Sarshar, Culture, Fasana-e-Azad, Civilization, Language and Literature.

The violent disruption caused by Nadir Shah’s conquest, the city of Delhi was stripped of its creative energy. It did not just cause physical destruction, it was a move that redefined the geopolitical, architectural, literature and cultural landscape of modern India, leaving a ‘literary vacuum’ where art and intellect used to thrive. This vacuum acted as a catalyst, pushing the era’s most brilliant minds towards Awadh, a region that was seen as beacon of safety

and celebrated for its rich, inclusive diversity. As Delhi’s status as a literary capital withered. Awadh flourished in its place, becoming a thriving sanctuary for the era’s most brilliant minds. This migration of poets and thinkers, drawn by the region’s inclusive spirit and rich diversity. Allowed Awadh to fill the literary void left behind the invasion of Nadir Shah. By soaking up this immense talent, the region transformed into a bustling new capital for literature and a refined civilization. The region Awadh, particularly its capital city, Lucknow, which was ruled by many Nawabs and kings. The region is also referred to as Aryavarta, the sacred land where ancient holy text like the Vedas and Upanishads were first spoken and passed down through memory before being written down. A major part of Awadh's identity comes from the legend of Lord Ram, who was born into the ruling family of this land. The story of Ram has provided the people of Awadh with a lasting standard for family ethics and social behaviour that was survived for generations,

regardless of which rulers were in power. They became part of this shared Hindu philosophy, creating a cultural bond that remains strong in the region even today.

The common people of Awadh lived in villages that functioned like one large, harmonious family. Despite differences in social class and religion people of all backgrounds stood together in times of danger and shared in each other's happiness and sorrow.

Mr. S.N. Singh explains it very well and he writes,

" The common people however, were free from most of the above mentioned vices. They were frank, honest, trustworthy and conscientious. The village was still on itself sufficient social unit and all class of people inhabiting it lived like the members of one great family or brotherhood. All high or low, stood together in the face of a common danger and each shared the others joy or sorrow. Here there were no caste barriers except for diet, marriage and ceremonial believes. High class Brahmins and Rajputs addressed the Chamars or Passis and their wives 'Kaka' or 'Dada' , ' Kaki' or ' Dadi' not by their names and their sons and daughters played together in equal terms. The women folk even of the house of Zamindars observed no Parda except as a mark of respect before the older men of their village. The disputes of the people were decided by caste or village panchayats or by the Zamindars who were the centres of the village life. This was the general pattern observed during those days. "

The region of Awadh, particularly under the rule of the Nawabs from the 18th to mid 19th century, developed a sophisticated and unique cultural identity that rivaled even Delhi in its magnificence. This era saw the height of ' Lucknow Culture' a distinct civilization characterized by significant advancement in music, poetry, folk arts and architecture with the cities of Faizabad and Lucknow.

A feature of this society was a deep sense of mutual respect and refined etiquette , exemplified by the famous expression 'Pahle Aap' (after you), which became a hallmark of the region's social interactions. This was not just about being polite, It was a deep philosophy of coexistence. It meant respecting others, views before putting forward your own. Despite some historical accounts that overlook the role of various communities, the prosperity and stability of Awadh were built on a foundation where different groups participated and lived with a shared sense of security and prosperity. This peaceful environment provided the necessary support

for profitable industries and liberal arts to flourish, creating a lasting cultural ethos that is still recognised for its elegance and harmony.

Deputy Nazeer Ahmed, often cited as the first Urdu novelist, he treated the novel as an educational tool, focusing on teaching lessons rather than just telling a story. He used fiction as a medium to actively reshape and improve society. However, Ratan Nath Sarshar represents a departure from this approach by acting as cultural chronicler rather than a moralist. Sarshar shifted the focus toward a more secular and realistic portrayal of culture. His masterpiece, 'Fasana-e-Azad, is described as a comprehensive 'mirror' of its time. His contribution is particularly notable for its secular lens, which allowed him to document human life with a focus on earthly experiences rather than religions or purely ethical instruction. He used 'vibrant colors' in his writing to help people see, hear and feel what was happening in society and he did not just tell a story, he made the traditions and cultural of Awadh come alive for the reader. He brought to life the details of contemporary society, including the energy of local fairs, the drama of theaters and the rhythm of traditional dances. By using vibrant colors to paint a portrait of society that was simultaneously decaying and deeply alive. Sarshar's work provides a realistic and multi-dimensional observation of the human condition in 19<sup>th</sup> century India.

Fasana-e-Azad is considered a modern Urdu narrative, it is deeply rooted in older storytelling traditions. Storytelling was respected in Urdu poetry long before it was accepted in prose. Even before this book was written , there was a rich culture of oral stories that had not been written down yet. The most important part of this tradition is the Dastan, which a long, epic tale of heroes and romance similar to the legends of medieval Europe.

Fasana-e-Azad is very long work comprising four quarto volumes with a total a about 3000 pages and roughly two and quarter million words. Most of the statement about its date are misleading, mainly because they speak of ' Fasana-e- Azad', when Ratan Nath Sarshar spent the greater part of his life in and around Lucknow. He has an understanding of the history of Lucknow, the state of which Lucknow was the capital, from the time when during the 18th century it became the major centre of Mughal culture in Northern India is therefore, this is a highly significant for assessing the importance of Sarshar's work.

Firoz Husain analyzing it in great detail, he writes,

“They infact mean the first volume only. Thus Chakbast writes that the story ran from December 1878 to December 1879 and was published in book form in 1880. This statement reproduces almost word for word that which appears on the title page of volume one. Yet even in relation to this volume it is completely inaccurate, as reference to the file of Avadh Akhbar shows. As started earlier Sarshar conceived the idea of writing Fasana-e-Azad after the success of his articles contributed to Avadh Akhbar under the heading Zarafat, and incorporated some of these articles in it. The files of Avadh Akhbar shows that the Zarafat series had been started in the issue dated 13 August 1878 with humorous sketch of a conversation between school master and the father of a boy who had failed his examinations. It was followed on 17 August by a sketch of Lucknow mushaira. On 23 August appeared the article which now forms the opening of Fasana-e- Azad and a continuation of this appeared on 28 August.”

Ratan Nath Sarshar stands as a monumental figure, particularly for his role in immortalizing the vibrant 19<sup>th</sup> century Awadh through his pioneering contributions to the Urdu novel. Sarshar’s legacy is defined by his creation of iconic characters such as the ‘Azad and Khoji’, who served as a literary ‘mirror’ reflecting both the inherent foibles and the transformative potential of his contemporary society. Sarshar adopted a secular and realistic perspective that brought the senory richness of Lucknawi culture to life, including its theaters, festivals and traditional dances. His work, most notably Fasana-e-Azad, transcends simple storytelling to act as a cultural archive of India’s pluralistic ‘Ganga Jamni’ heritage, proving that the Urdu language, with its unique idiomatic beauty, belonged to all who cherished it. Sarshar captured a society in transition, painting a portrait of decaying era in such vivid colors that he provided an unparalleled window into every dimension of human life.

In his book Life and Works of Ratan nath Sarshar, Feroz Husain further writes in a very philosophical manner, saying that,

" Sarshar's importance as writer is threehold. First, one find in his works an unrivalled picture of Lucknow society in the letter half of the nineteenth century, secondly, his constant preoccupation with the new intellectual, social and political ideas of his time gives an exceptionally clear picture of what were the great controversial issues of the day. And thirdly, his choice of a fictional medium through

which to express his ideas, his attachment to the old prose narrative tradition, his conscious attempt to mould his own tales on the pattern of the European novel, and the considerable talents which he brought to his task gives his works an exceptional interest and importance in the history of Urdu literature. It is this last aspect which forms the central theme of the present study, but the didactic aim is so prominent in all Sarshar's work that this too must necessarily receive detailed attention, and a picture is thus presented of Sarshar's development both as an artist and as propagandist of the new ideas of his time."

Sarshar's major work is Fasana-e-Azad , this specific work is comprised of four large volumes, totaling approximately 3000 pages and over two million words. Newspaper ' Avadh Akhbar' reveal that the series actually began on 13 August 1978 with humorous sketches. Between 1878 and 1890, Sarshar's writing style underwent a significant transition from the traditional storytelling found in Fasana-e- Azad towards more modern novel techniques seen in works like ‘Jam-e- Sarshar’ and ' Sair-e- Kohsar' and his later work ' Kamini' he returned to more traditional styles. While another famous writer Mirza Hadi Ruswa, eventually perfected the modern Urdu novel with ' Umrao Jan Ada' in 1899, the text notes that Ruswa seemed largely influenced by Sarshar, instead referencing others writers like Nazir Ahmad. Munshi Prem Chand the true successor to Sarshar. Both writers share similar characteristics, realistic writing and strong tendency to include moral lessons in their stories.

Sarshar is deeply connected to the Awadh where he spent the major time of his life. To understand the importance of Sarshar's work, one must look at the history of Awadh. During the 18th century. Awadh emerged as the prominent centre for Mughal culture in northern India , a historical setting that forms the backbone of his narratives. His famous work, Fasana-e-Azad, is considered a modern story, but it is also based on an old tradition of heroic adventure tales Dastan. Beyond just telling stories, Sarshar wrote for adults and used his books to talk about serious issues. He felt that many people in India at that time had become lazy and only cared about hobbies like flying kites or opium smoking. He reminded them that India used to be a world leader in science and learning, and he encouraged them to work hard and understand the modern advancement that the British were achieving.

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