

# *Karwān-e-Rafta* as Cultural Archive: Rewriting the History of Azimabad

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## Abstract:

*Karwān-e-Rafta* (1995) by Naqi Ahmed Irshad is a significant contribution to the cultural and social historiography of Azimabad (Patna). Written in dialogue with earlier tazkira-style works—most notably Badr-ul-Hasan's *Yādgār-e-Rozgār* and Shad Azimabadi's *Naqsh-e-Pāydār*—the book seeks to correct historical inaccuracies, fill archival silences, and extend the temporal scope of Azimabad's civilizational memory into the twentieth century. Drawing upon eyewitness accounts, family traditions, literary sources, and historical documents, Irshad records the lives of poets, scholars, nobles, saints, and lesser-known figures whose contributions were overlooked or only partially represented in earlier works. The study foregrounds Azimabad's geographical formation, fortifications, gates, tunnels, shrines, and urban transformations, while also offering detailed genealogies of prominent families such as the *Sadat-e-Barah*. A distinctive feature of *Karwān-e-Rafta* is Irshad's self-reflexive historiography: he revises his own earlier claims and critically engages with established narratives. Although the work does not consistently follow modern scientific research methodologies, the richness and precision of its data render it an invaluable historical source. This abstract argues that a critical reorganization of *Karwān-e-Rafta* in accordance with contemporary historiographical standards could transform it into a foundational text for the cultural history of Azimabad.

**Keywords—** *Karwān-e-Rafta*, Naqi Ahmed Irshad, Azimabad (Patna), Cultural History, Urdu Tazkira Tradition, Literary Historiography, Genealogy and Urban Memory

## I. INTRODUCTION

The cultural history of Azimabad (Patna) has been primarily preserved through tazkiras and memoir-based narratives such as Shad Azimabadi's *Naqsh-e-Pāydār* and Badr-ul-Hasan's *Yādgār-e-Rozgār*. While foundational, these works are marked by chronological gaps, selective remembrance, and limited critical verification. Naqi Ahmed Irshad's *Karwān-e-Rafta* (1995) intervenes in this tradition by correcting earlier inaccuracies, extending the historical narrative into the twentieth century, and documenting families and cultural figures omitted from previous accounts. Combining urban history, genealogy, and lived memory, the book occupies a hybrid space between tazkira and historical archive. This study examines *Karwān-e-Rafta* as a significant contribution to Azimabad's cultural historiography, emphasizing its corrective impulse and archival value despite its non-academic form.

## II. LITERATURER SURVEY

The cultural and literary history of Azimabad has primarily been documented through tazkiras, memoirs, and semi-historical narratives produced from the late nineteenth century onwards. Among the earliest and most influential works is Shad Azimabadi's *Naqsh-e-Pāydār* (1), which offers detailed portraits of poets, scholars, and notable figures associated with Azimabad. While invaluable for its firsthand observations and literary insight, the work remains limited by its selective focus

and lack of systematic historical verification. Shad's later writings, including *Hayāt-e-Faryād* (2), further enrich the cultural record but continue to rely largely on personal memory and oral tradition.

Badr-ul-Hasan's *Yādgār-e-Rozgār* (3) represents another significant milestone in Azimabad historiography. Distinguished by its eyewitness accounts of individuals across social classes—including artists, artisans, nobles, and common citizens—the book broadens the scope of cultural documentation beyond elite literary circles. However, subsequent scholars, notably Qazi Abdul Wadud, have identified genealogical inaccuracies and chronological inconsistencies in Badr-ul-Hasan's work, pointing to the absence of a sustained critical methodology.

Badrudin Ahmed's *Haqīqat Bhī Kahānī Bhī* (4) occupies a transitional position between anecdotal memoir and historical narrative. While it preserves valuable social memory, its narrative mode privileges storytelling over documentation, resulting in factual ambiguities. Collectively, these works establish a rich but uneven corpus, characterized by narrative vitality alongside historiographical limitations.

Critical engagement with this tradition is most notably advanced by Qazi Abdul Wadud, whose research-oriented writings introduce methodological rigor into the study of Azimabad's literary and cultural past. His emphasis on documentary evidence and critical scrutiny marks a departure from purely memoir-based historiography and significantly influences later scholars.

Naqī Ahmed Irshad's *Karwān-e-Rafta* (5) emerges within this intellectual context as a corrective and supplementary work. Drawing upon earlier tazkiras while critically revising them, Irshad extends the historical narrative into the twentieth century, incorporates neglected families and individuals, and integrates urban geography and genealogy into cultural history. Although Irshad does not consistently employ formal academic conventions, his work is distinguished by its depth of detail, self-corrective stance, and reliance on lived memory corroborated by historical references.

Despite the importance of *Karwān-e-Rafta*, existing scholarship has largely treated it as a source rather than as an object of critical study. There remains a notable gap in systematic analyses that assess its historiographical method, narrative strategy, and contribution to cultural history. The present study seeks to address this gap by situating *Karwān-e-Rafta* within the broader tradition of Azimabad historiography and evaluating its significance as a cultural archive capable of informing future research grounded in modern historical methodology.

### III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative and historiographical approach based on close textual analysis and comparative reading. *Karwān-e-Rafta* is examined in relation to earlier works such as *Yādgār-e-Rozgār* and *Naqsh-e-Pāydār* to identify additions, corrections, and narrative revisions. Contextual analysis situates Irshad's work within the Urdu tazkira tradition, where oral memory, personal observation, and documentary fragments intersect. Rather than applying strict positivist verification, the study adopts an interpretive framework that treats *Karwān-e-Rafta* as an archive of cultural memory, assessing its historical significance and potential for reconstruction according to modern research standards.

### IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

*Karwān-e-Rafta* was published by the Khuda Bakhsh Library in 1995. Abid Raza Bedar notes that Naqī Ahmed Irshad undertook this work under the inspiration of Badr-ul-Hasan's *Yādgār-e-Rozgār*. Badr-ul-Hasan's book consists of eyewitness accounts of the inhabitants of Azimabad across different social strata. Alongside writers and poets, it records practitioners of various arts; along with the elite and the nobility, it also preserves the voices of workers and common people. When Qazi Abdul Wadud raised objections regarding Shad's lineage and related issues, Irshad expressed his intention to produce a work of a similar kind. Khuda Bakhsh Library published Qazi Sahib's articles, and through Tunqi Ahmed, Irshad apprised Abid Raza Bedar of the actual state of affairs. On the basis of references in Badr-ul-Hasan's work, he refuted several claims. At Bedar Sahib's urging, Irshad composed *Karwān-e-Rafta*, presenting the history of Azimabad's leaders and noble families in the form of carefully structured notices.

From Abid Raza Bedar's introductory notes and Naqī Ahmed Irshad's own preface, it becomes evident that, despite its many merits, Syed Badr-ul-Hasan's book also contains certain historical inaccuracies. Badr-ul-Hasan records the conditions of Azimabad up to 1931; Irshad extends this

narrative temporally. The importance of *Karwān-e-Rafta* can be gauged from Irshad's own words:

"After reading *Yādgār-e-Rozgār*, I felt compelled to describe the conditions as accurately as possible... I do not say that Badr-ul-Hasan's efforts were futile, but there is a certain deficiency—namely, the absence of the families belonging to the ancient royal period, whose descendants have been effaced by time, and of whom even those who once knew them no longer survive." (6)

He further clarifies:

"This book largely records those individuals whose circumstances are absent from earlier works such as Shad Azimabadi's *Naqsh-e-Pāydār*, Badr-ul-Hasan's *Yādgār-e-Rozgār*, and the late Badruddin's *Kuch Haqīqat Bhī*, *Kuch Kahānī Bhī*; or it supplements and corrects the accounts of persons already mentioned therein." (7)

This explanation makes clear that earlier civilizational and cultural histories of Azimabad suffer from certain omissions. Many events were either not recorded in their proper chronological context or were based largely on oral tradition and personal observation, lacking a sustained research perspective. Irshad sought to supplement these works by incorporating information about individuals and families previously overlooked. Conscious of the objections raised by Qazi Abdul Wadud to Shad's *Naqsh-e-Pāydār*, Irshad devoted a separate chapter to Shad and his ancestors.

The book opens with a discussion of the history and geography of Azimabad. As in the first volume of Shad kā 'Ahd aur Fan, Irshad outlines the city's geographical and social conditions. Azimabad, identified with present-day Patna, is described—on the authority of Francis Buchanan (1811)—as extending three miles in length and one mile in breadth: bounded by the Ganges to the north, the tomb of Haibat Jang (father of Siraj-ud-Daulah) to the south, Mircha Mirchi and Alawalpur further south, the East Gate to the east, and the West Gate to the west. Both gates were removed after the events of 1857 to widen the roads. Historically, the city was known variously as Pataliputra, Kasumpur, and Patna. Except on the river side, it was encircled by high mud walls, with moats at its four corners.

Irshad records fascinating and informative details about these ancient fortifications. During the Muslim period, the walls were reinforced with *dum-dumās*—old-style cannons—serving defensive purposes. In the same era, as Sufism acquired an enduring religious form, shrines of four eminent saints were established at the four corners of the city.

One such shrine, that of Shah Mansur, stands by the moat to the northeast of Patna City Railway Station, giving the area the name Mansurganj. Today, only one Muslim family remains there, entrusted with the shrine's upkeep. Another saint, Shah Ma'ruf, had a shrine near Bihari Mall; much of its subterranean structure has since collapsed, and the present commercial hub of Marufganj occupies the site.

Shad Azimabadi discusses these underground passages in detail in *Naqsh-e-Pāydār* and *Hayāt-e-Faryād*, referring to them as *Salāmat Kocha*. They were so wide that an elephant of average height could pass through them and were used in earlier times for concealment and escape. In *Naqsh-e-Pāydār*, Shad also provides an eyewitness account of the collapse of a tunnel near Patna Fort during the tenure of Mir Abu Sa'id.

Another Salāmat Kocha is mentioned in Hayāt-e-Faryād in connection with Nawab Bahadur Wilayat Ali Khan. Until the 1940s, traces of such tunnels were visible in Nawzar Katra, and one still exists near Gulzarbagh Station, attributed to Shah Mehdi, after whom Mehdiganj is named. Together, these tunnels and fortifications constituted the ancient fort of Azimabad.

Irshad also supplements earlier accounts with new details. He records that during Jahangir's reign, the Iranian historian Mirza Muhammad Sadiq resided in Patna for four years and authored the four-volume Subh-e-Sadiq. He composed a poem, San'at-e-Patna, praising the city, excerpts of which Irshad quotes. In the same period, Shah Arzan and Pir Bahur, a disciple of Hazrat Abu Turab Madani Suhrawardi, also visited Patna.

One notable strength of Karwān-e-Rafta is Irshad's willingness to correct his own earlier errors. In Shad kā 'Ahd aur Fun (8), he had mistakenly stated that the mansion of Wal-Nazir no longer existed. In Karwān-e-Rafta, he revises this view, acknowledging that while the mansion's existence cannot be confirmed, its mound remains. Such attentiveness to detail and readiness to amend earlier claims characterizes much of his later writing.

Regarding the gates of ancient Azimabad, Irshad—citing a masnavi by Shad's disciple Ghulam Rasool Hasrat—initially claimed the city had 360 gates, a view he had also expressed earlier. Later, relying on personal recollection, he enumerates eight specific gates, detailing their locations and subsequent fates, many of which were sold, dismantled, or taken over by the government after independence.

Irshad also expands upon and corrects accounts found in Badr-ul-Hasan's Yādgār-e-Rozgār and Badruddin Ahmed's writings. A notable example concerns Rai Isri Prasad. Where Badr-ul-Hasan provides brief and sometimes inaccurate details about his family, marriages, and descendants, Irshad offers a far more precise and personal account, correcting errors, adding biographical depth, and supplying names, dates, and social contexts omitted earlier.

Beyond genealogical corrections, Karwān-e-Rafta records instructive historical incidents. Irshad notes, for instance, that Siraj-ud-Daulah's marriage to the daughter of Iraj Khan was marked by such tension that, after the defeat at Plassey, Iraj Khan refused him refuge. When Siraj-ud-Daulah's body passed through Iraj Khan's gate after his assassination, the doors were reportedly shut.

The book meticulously records the genealogies of numerous families. A representative example is the chapter "Sadāt-e-Barah, sakin-e-Azimabad wa Hussainabad Palamau." Here, Irshad situates genealogical data within a broader historical framework, tracing the lineage of Syed Abul Farah Wasti and his descendants, their migration to India in 1204, and their settlements across various regions. He connects these lineages to major political figures and events from the Delhi Sultanate to the Mughal period, thereby giving the tazkira a distinctly historical dimension absent from earlier works on Azimabad.

Irshad further corroborates genealogical narratives with historical documentation, noting executions, imprisonments, and political upheavals, and explaining how members of these families came to settle in Azimabad. He also extends the

narrative into his own lifetime, recalling, for example, the presence of Sadat-e-Barah families in the Hamam locality during his childhood and their participation in Muharram observances—details that lend the work immediacy and lived texture.

The care and precision with which Naqi Ahmed Irshad compiled these cultural histories is rivaled only by the work of Qazi Abdul Wadud. While Irshad was not a formally trained researcher and thus does not always adhere to strict scientific methodologies, the richness of his material is undeniable. If his findings were systematically reorganized according to modern research standards, they would constitute a monumental contribution to the cultural history of Azimabad. It is therefore imperative that the cultural-historical outline presented in Karwān-e-Rafta be recompiled and critically edited so that the multifaceted heritage of Azimabad may be fully illuminated.

## CONCLUSION

*Karwān-e-Rafta* stands as a distinctive and indispensable work in the cultural historiography of Azimabad. By engaging critically with earlier tazkiras and memoir-based histories, Naqi Ahmed Irshad not only supplements their narratives but also corrects omissions, chronological gaps, and factual inaccuracies. His work expands the historical canvas beyond celebrated literary figures to include families, administrators, saints, and social actors whose lives shaped the cultural fabric of the city but remained largely unrecorded. The careful documentation of Azimabad's geography, fortifications, gates, shrines, tunnels, and neighborhoods situates cultural memory firmly within urban space, allowing history to be read through the city itself.

Equally significant is Irshad's historiographical self-awareness. His willingness to revise earlier assertions, acknowledge uncertainty, and incorporate new evidence reflects an ethical commitment to historical truth rather than the preservation of inherited narratives. Although *Karwān-e-Rafta* does not consistently conform to the formal methodological rigour of modern academic historiography, its evidentiary richness, genealogical depth, and reliance on lived memory grant it exceptional documentary value. In this sense, the work occupies a productive space between literary tazkira and historical archive.

Ultimately, *Karwān-e-Rafta* preserves a vanishing world—the social lineages, cultural practices, and urban memory of Azimabad that time has steadily effaced. If reorganized and critically edited in accordance with contemporary research standards, the material assembled by Irshad has the potential to become a foundational reference for future studies on the cultural, literary, and social history of Azimabad. As it stands, the book remains a vital act of cultural remembrance, ensuring that the "departed caravan" of Azimabad's past does not disappear without a trace.

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