

Positions through Contextualising

Polyphony of Urdu in Post-colonial North India*

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Abstract

Many scholars, politicians, and the lay people alike believe that Urdu in North India symbolizes a Muslim identity and culture. Based on an eight-month long ethnographic study and quantitative language data collected in Old Delhi, this article challenges this notion and shows that the symbolic meanings of Urdu have been mutating in post-colonial India. A cross-generational study involving both Muslims and Hindus shows that different generations assign different meanings to Urdu. Unlike the older generation, Muslim youth do not identify themselves with Urdu. A study of the Urdu sounds /f/, /z/, /kʰ/, /gʱ/, and /q/ in the speech of Muslim youth further demonstrates that they are losing three of these sounds. Another transformation involves the adoption of the Devanagari script to write Urdu by many Muslims. This change in the literacy practices of Muslims reinforces the shift in the symbolic meanings of Urdu. I argue that the transformation in the symbolic meanings of Urdu is reflective and constitutive of the sociopolitical changes that Muslims have undergone in the twentieth century.

Introduction

In scholarly writings, political discourse, and public conversations, the Urdu language in India is understood to be a symbol of Muslim identity and culture. Based on an ethnographic study and quantitative language data collected over an eight-month period in Old Delhi in 2005 and 2006, this article challenges this widely held notion and shows that the symbolic meanings of Urdu have been undergoing

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a major transformation in post-colonial India. Using a combination of insights and methodologies from sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology, I trace this transformation in three key areas.

First, I study the language-ideologies¹ of ordinary Muslims and Hindus belonging to three different generations—the old, the middle-aged, and the youth. I show that Urdu does not index an exclusive Muslim identity to the first generation of Muslims and Hindus born before the Partition of India in 1947.² To the middle generation born after Partition, however, Urdu becomes exclusively associated with Muslim identity. And for the generation of Muslims born in the early 1980s, Urdu has acquired yet another symbolic meaning: it indexes a poor, uneducated, and conservative Muslim identity. Consequently, young Muslims of this generation disaffiliate from the Urdu language and culture, and claim that they speak a mixed language containing elements of Hindi, English, and Punjabi.³

Secondly, I examine the use of the sounds /f/, /z/, /kʰ/, /gʱ/, and /q/, which distinguish Urdu from Hindi on the spoken level,⁴ among the three generations of Muslims and Hindus.⁵ By analysing the recorded speech of the first generation of Muslims and Hindus, I show that among them the distribution of these sounds is quite comparable. This suggests that the use of Urdu does not index an exclusively Muslim identity for the older generation. These sounds, however, largely disappear from the speech of middle generation Hindus, while Muslims of the middle generation retain them. This reflects—as well as contributes to—the formation of the ideology that Urdu symbolizes

¹ I use the term 'language-ideology' to refer to the set of beliefs and perceptions that speakers have about their language.

² Following Gyanendra Pandey, *Remembering Partition: violence, nationalism, and history in India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), I refer to the events of 1947 as 'Partition' rather than 'Independence' since the former impacted on the status of Urdu in India more than the latter.

³ This generational conflict and the transformation in the symbolic meanings that it depicts may not be generalized across all regions in India where Urdu is spoken. However, it is largely true in North India. More empirical studies are needed to understand the contemporary meanings of Urdu in other parts of India, especially Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, and Karnataka.

⁴ Abdussattar Dalvi, 'ibtedāyiyā (Introduction)', in Abdussattar Dalvi (ed.) *urdū me leśānī tahqīq (Linguistic research in Urdu)* (Bombay: Kokil & Company, 1971). See also Ismat Javed, *naī urdū qaṣīdā (Modern Urdu grammar)* (New Delhi: Taraqqī Urdu Bureau, 1981); and Gopi Chand Narang, *Urdu language and literature: critical perspectives* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1991).

⁵ I use the symbols /f/, /z/, /kʰ/, /gʱ/, and /q/ to represent the first sounds in Urdu words such as *fan* ('art'), *zulm* ('injustice'), *khush* ('happy'), and *qarz* ('loan'). Later in the article, I also use a micron over vowels to denote long vowels.

RA: lafzō kē alāwā bhī farq hai kyā?

RA: Are there differences other than those of words?

NQ: nahī aur kōi nahī. Actually, urdū zabān jō hai kisī kī mīrās tō hai nahī

NQ: No, actually, Urdu is not the property of anyone.

NQ: ke sāhab wō musalmānō kī zabān hai yā hindūō kī zabān hai yā sikhō kī zabān hai yā isāiyō kī zabān hai, samjhē. yē us zamānē kī lashkarī zabān kahlātī thī

NQ: So that, sir, this is Muslims' language, or Hindus' language, or Sikhs' language, or Christians' language, okay? This is a language of the army camp of the olden days.

PC: . . . zabān sē hī, talaffuz sē hī patā lag jātā hai ke yē urdū speaking hai

PC: You know it from the language, the pronunciation that this is Urdu-speaking.

RA: achhā tō talaffuz se patā lagtā hai? kaisē? tō kis chīz kā talaffuz ?

RA: So, you can tell from the pronunciation. How? Pronunciation of what?

PC: bhāī pronunciation kā, tallafuz means pronunciation wō jō hindī lōg bōlā kartē thē tō wō kuchh aur hī tarikē sē ke hamē tō wō samajh hī nahī ātī thī. āj kī tārix tak hamē hindī bilkul samajh nahī ātī. pure salīs hindī bōlē tō hamē bilkul nahī samajh mē āyēgi. ab jaisē kapil hai, ab wō sanskrit mē kar riyā hai apnā jō hai course magar hamē tō nahī samajh mē ātī. ham tō kahtē hai ke mādrī bhāshā tō hamāri urdū hī hai dar asal, kyōnke ham nē birth sē hī urdū dēkhī, father hamārē urdū mē hi kām kartē thē. kārōbār urdū mē hī thā.

PC: By pronunciation. Tallafuz means pronunciation. The Hindi that they used to speak was of a different kind. We would not understand that. Even until today, we don't understand Hindi at all. If someone spoke pure Hindi, we won't be able to understand it. For example, Kamal [his grandson] is doing his course in Sanskrit, but we don't understand it [his Hindi]. Let me tell you that in reality Urdu is our mother tongue, because we have seen Urdu since our childhood. Our father used to use it. All our business was conducted in Urdu.

The power of language as icon must never be underestimated. Like it or not, the Urdu script means Muslim, the Devanagari script means Hindu. The Urdu script as seen by an angry, inflamed Hindu mob summons up talismanic images from the present and the past: cow slaughter, temple-bashing, iconoclasm, crescent and star, Aurangzeb, green . . . The Hindi script conveys to an enraged Muslim mob Vishnu and Shiva and a score of many-headed gods and goddesses, cowdung, music before the mosque, dead pigs flung into mosques, Shivaji (emphasis original).¹⁵

URDU
 SYMBOL
 MUSLIM
 IDENTITY
 CULTURE
 LINGUISTIC
 LANGUAGE
 LANGUAGE - IDEOLOGIES
 CONSERVATIVE
 HINDI
 PARTITION
 MOB
 CRESCENT
 STAR
 AURANGZEB
 GREEN
 PIGS
 MOSQUE
 PATRIOTISM

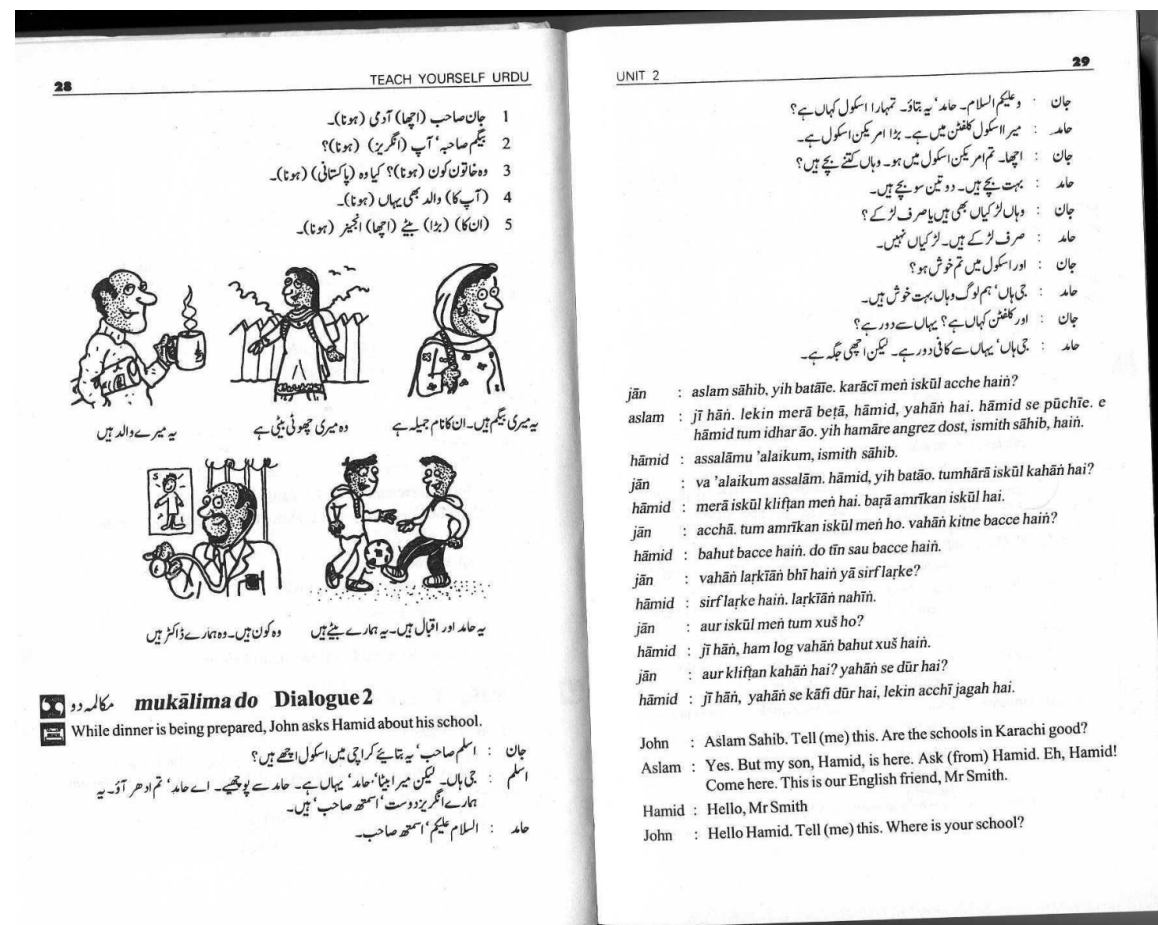
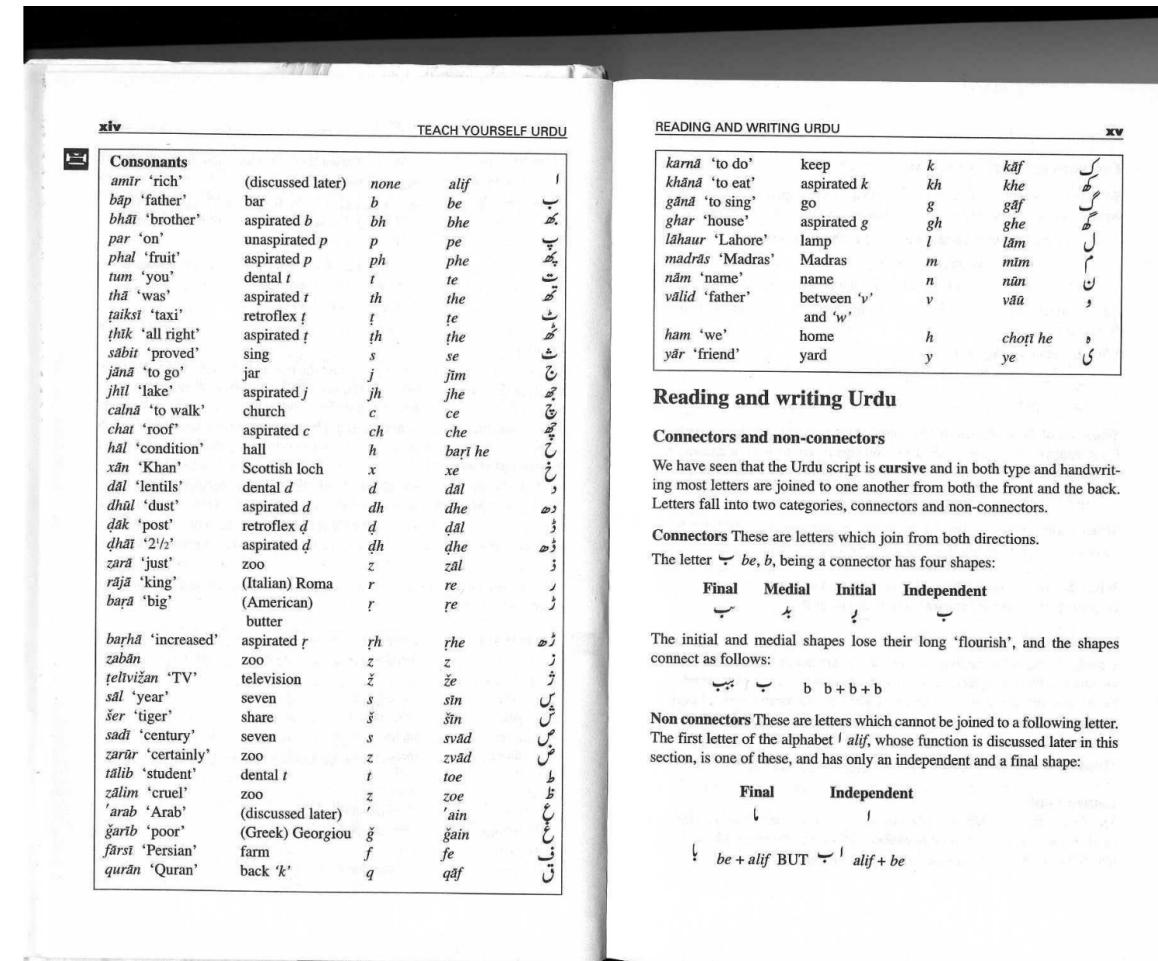
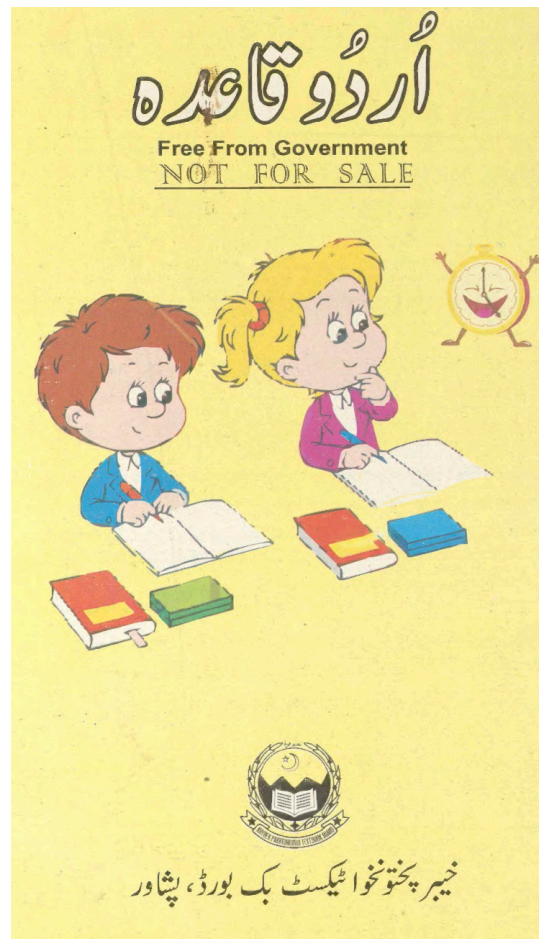
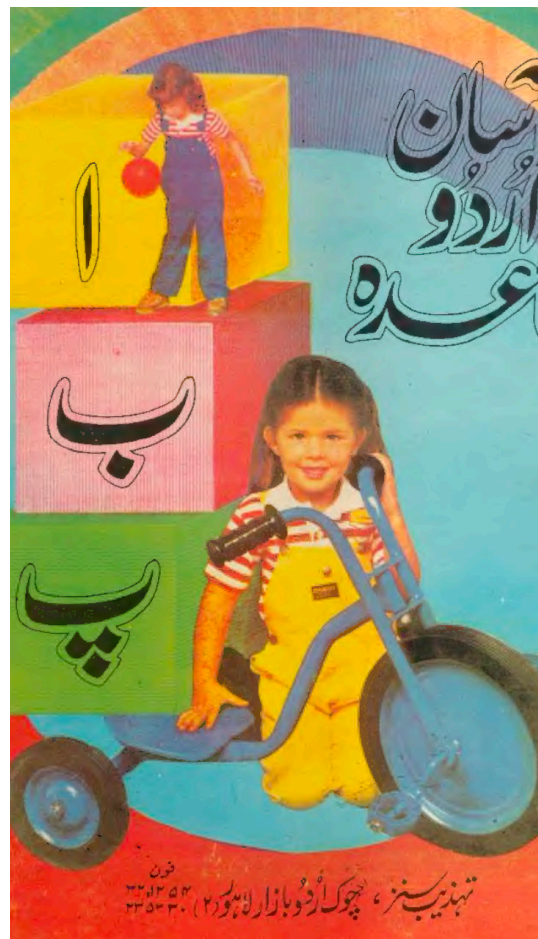
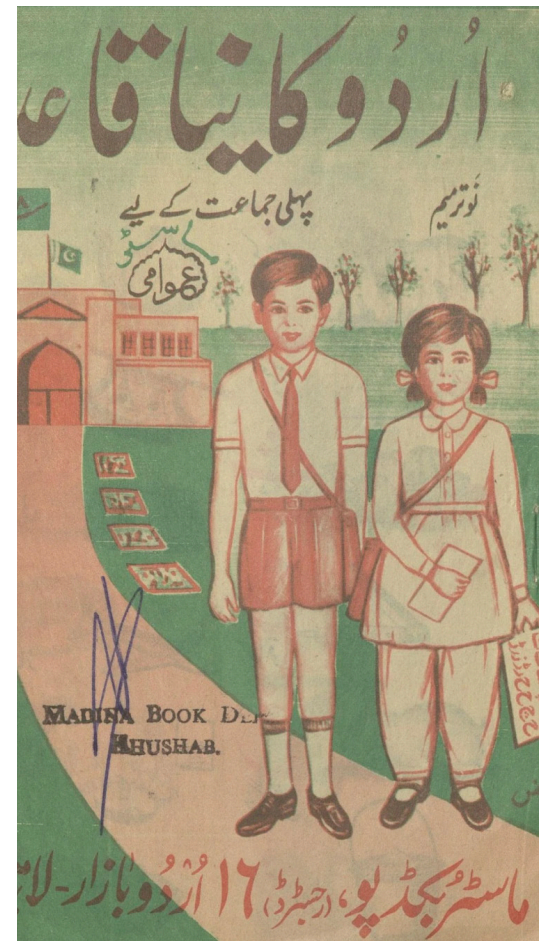
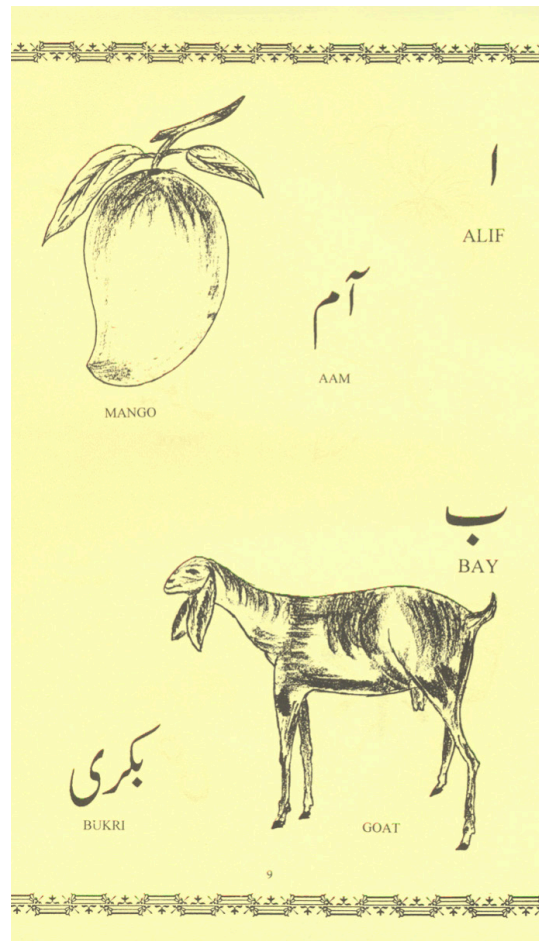
f / z / kh / gh / q
 fan (ax)
 zulm (injustice)
 khush (happy)
 qarz (loan)
 roti
 chawal
 khana }
 pina |
 par / ko (prepositions)
 tarikh (Arabic loan-word)
 talim
 islam
 zara (please)
 zakhira
 tallafuz
 zaban
 miras (?) [property]
 mushaera
 rubai (poem)
 nama
 bokhar / bukhar
 diqar / diqqar
 shin qaf (letter)
 ghazal

note to write an association

WORD	TRANSLATION	TRANSLITERATION
symbol	علامت	alamat अलामत
muslim	مسلمان	mausalman मुसलमान
identity	شخصیت شخصیت	shakhsiyat शक्ति
urdu	اردو	urdu उर्दू
language	زبان زبان	zabaan ज़बान
partition	تقسیم تقسیم	taqsīm तासीम
Hindustani	ہندوستانی ہندوستانی	Hindustani हिन्दुस्तानी
Mob	ہجوم ہجوم	Hujuum हुजूम
crecent	ہلال ہلال	hilaal حیلاال

Aurangzeb	آورنگ زیب اورنگ زیب	Aurangzeb اورنگ زیب	Alif
Pig	سور سور	Suar / Soor سور	Seen
Mosque	مسجد مسجد	Masjid مسجد	Mum
Fan / Art	فن فن	Fan فن	Fay
Injustice / Cruelty	ظلم ظلم	Zulm ظلم	Zoay
Happy	خوش خوش	khush خوش	Khay
Loan	قرص قرص	qariz قرص	Qauf
Pronunciation	تلفظ تلفظ	talaffuz تلفظ	Tay

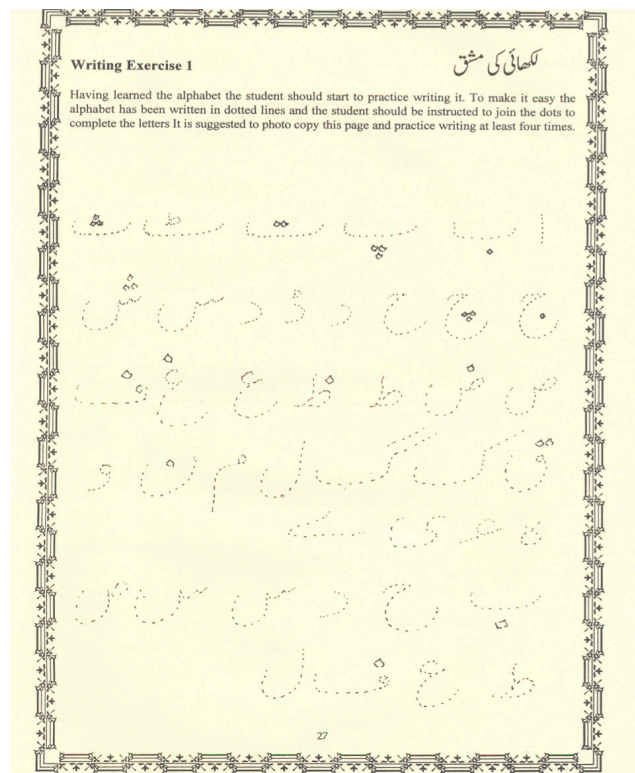
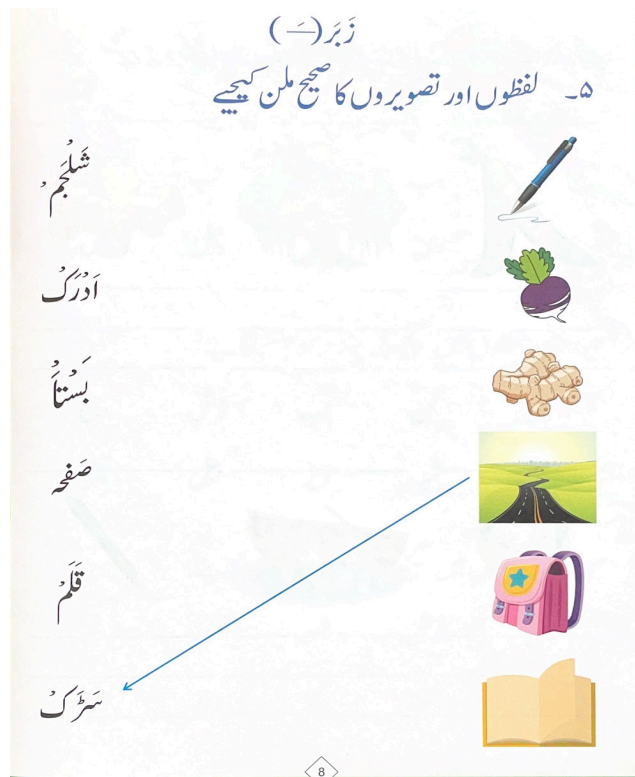
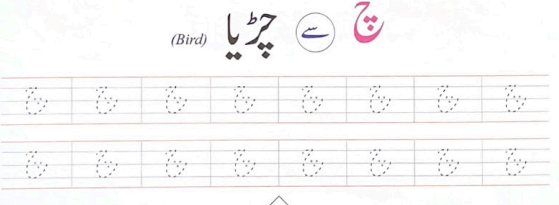
Scans: Words and Translations



Urdu Qaidas

Urdu (Teach Yourself) | David Matthews; Mohamed Kasim Dalvi

The Franco Dictionary by Rizomasr



EXERCISES

- Dotted / trace
- letters
- words
- Image + word
- Connect / Join image and word
- Break down words
- Write in blank (boxes)
- Count letters in word
- Joining letters (writing practice)
- Break up of joint letters (writing)
- word + img. → sentence
- Map

similar → Draw / trace → (letter)

double with writing

variation division with word illustration

word + image trace

connect word to image

fill in the blank

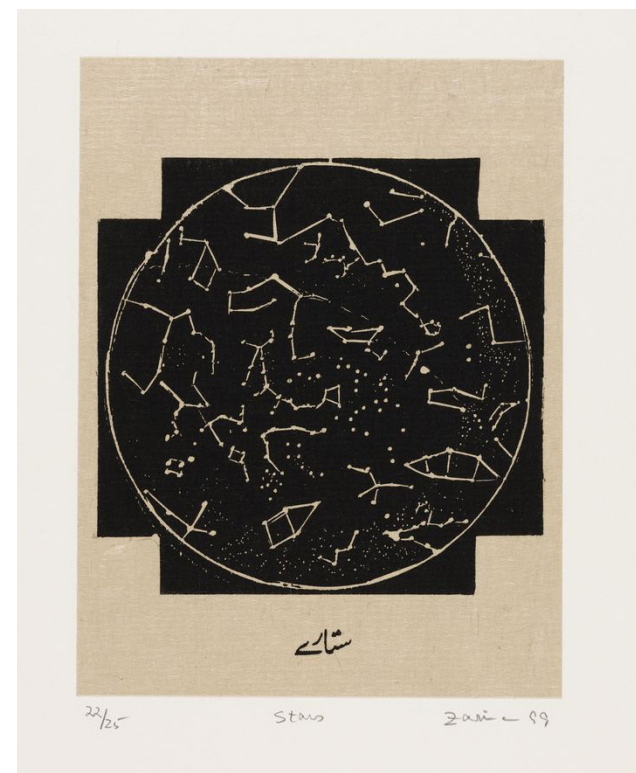
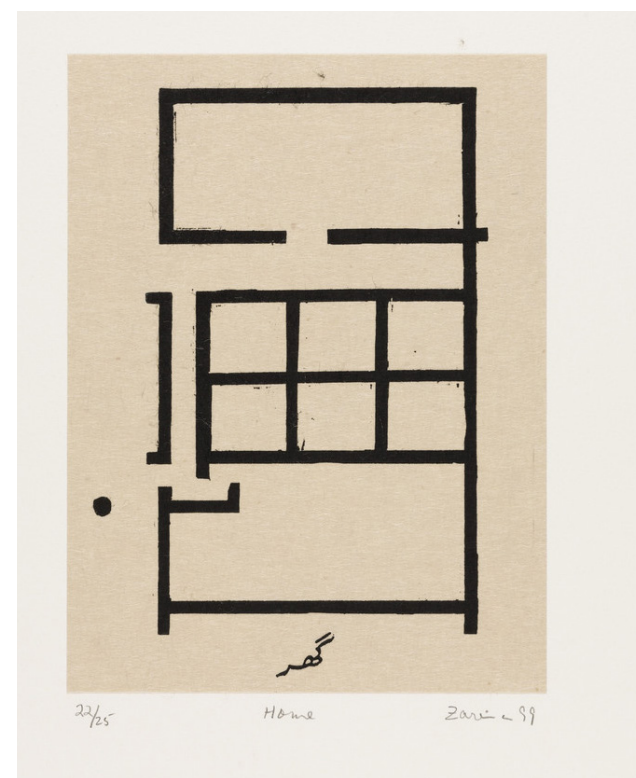
column (2)

word break down with image

پ + ط

میری پینسل ہے (meri pencil hai)

Map



① Abstract - Zaina

symbol	Muslim	Identity	Urdu
Language	Partition	Hindustani	Mob
Crescent	Aurangzeb	Pig	Mosque
Art	cruelty	Happy	Loan
Pronunciation			

Practice Exercise

In standard writing practice, people do not use zabar, zer, and peeh diacritics with alif and other letters as they represent short vowels—/a/, /i/, and /u/—which are often assumed. However, it is important to recognize them when used. Connect the word (right) with the correct letter diacritic (left).

Urdu

اردو

و + د + ر + ا

wao [u] daal [d] ray [r] alif [a]

اردو اردو

Urdu language, is a member of the Indo-Aryan group of languages. It's spoken as a first language by nearly 70 million people and as a second language by more than 100 million people, predominantly in India and Pakistan. It is officially recognized, or "scheduled," in the constitution of India.

aqalliyat
minority

اقلیت

اردو

The story of اردو in India... suggests that minority languages and scripts can become stigmatized and marginalized in politics that ignore claim to support and sustain them.

alif adrak ginger
alifzer aam mango
alifpes anaar pomegranate
alifmadd idhar here
alifzabar ullo owl

Alif Diacritics

Letter	Name	Sound
ا	alif	a
آ	alifzabar	a
إ	alifzer	i
أ	alifpes	u
آ	alifmadd	aa

A • ALIF

Alif is the first letter of the Urdu alphabet, acting as a long "aa" sound ("father") or as a "silent carrier" for short vowel sounds at the beginning of words. It does not connect to the following letter to its left.

آم mango
ادرک ginger
اُلو owl
انار pomegranate

Letters & Forms

Independent Letterforms

ع + ل + ا + م + ت

tay [h] meem [m] alif [a] laam [l] ain [a]

Positional Variations		
Letter	Position	Forms
ع ain [a]	Initial	ع
		ع ا ع
ل laam [l]	Medial	ل ل
		ل ل ل
م meem [m]	Initial	م
		م م م
ت tay [h]	Final	ت
		ت ت ت

In scholarly writings, political discourse and public conversations, the Urdu language in India is understood to be a symbol of Muslim identity and culture.

علامت علامت

A • AIN

علامت

علامت symbol

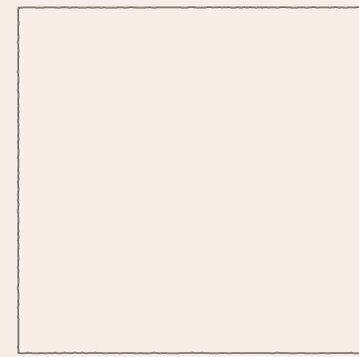
ع + ل + ا + م + ت

A • AIN

علامت

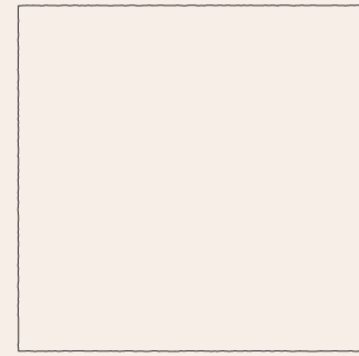
علامت identity

ع + ل + ا + م + ت



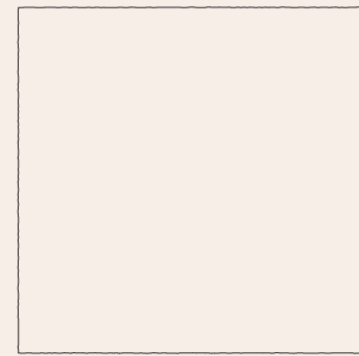
آم

aam • mango



آدرک

adrak • ginger



ألو

ullo • owl



انار

anaar
pomegranate

Alif Diacritics		
Letter	Name	Sound
ا	alif	a
آ	alifzabar	a
إ	alifzer	i
أ	alifpes	u
آ	alifmadd	aa

In standard writing practice, people do not use zabar, zer, and pesh diacritics with alif and other letters as they represent short vowels—/a/, /i/, and /u/—which are often assumed. However, it is important to recognize them when used.



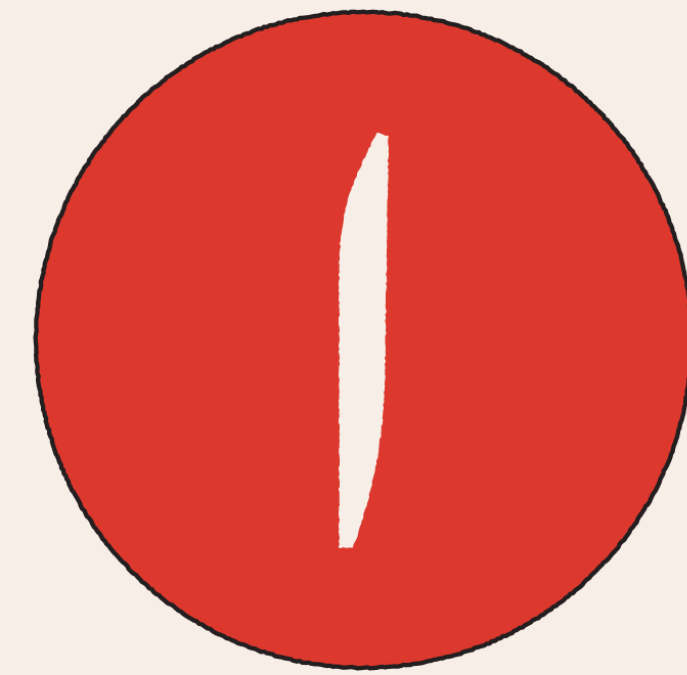
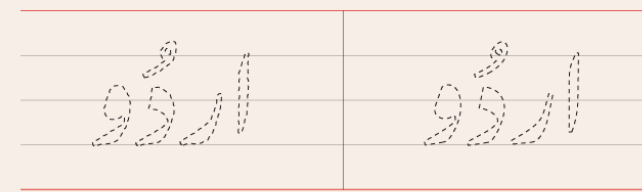
The story of **اردو** in India...suggests that minority languages and scripts can become stigmatized and marginalized in polities that *dejure* claim to support and sustain them.

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اردو

Urdu

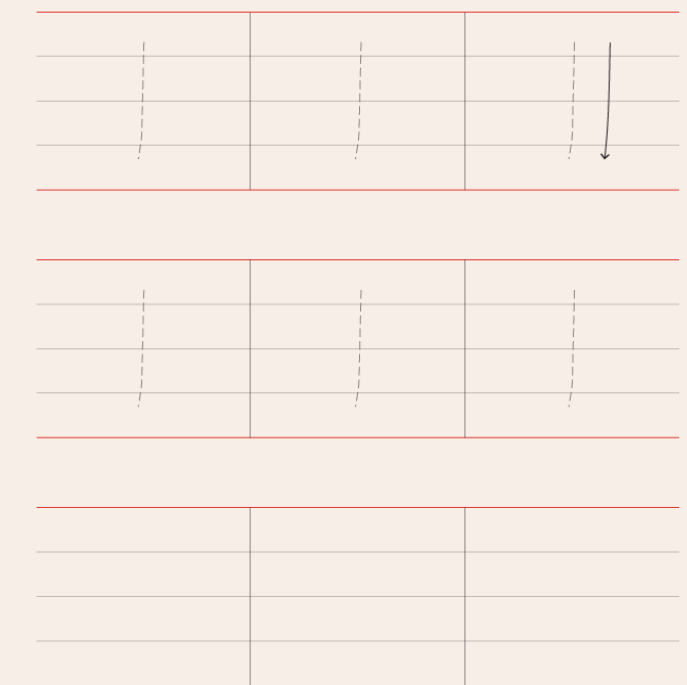
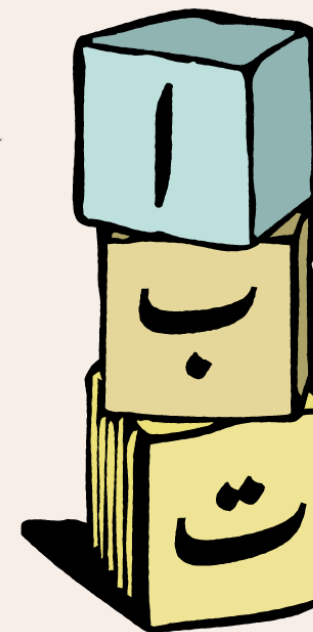
و + د + ر + ا
wao [u] daal [d] ray [r] alif [a]



A • ALIF

Alif is the first letter of the Urdu alphabet, acting as a long "aa" sound ("father") or as a "silent carrier" for short vowel sounds at the beginning of words. It does not connect to the following letter to its left.

The symbolic meanings of **اردو** have been mutating in post-colonial India... [this] transformation is reflective and constitutive of the sociopolitical changes that Muslims have undergone in the twentieth century.



Letters & Forms

Urdu has a large grapheme inventory, primarily because each letter, except nine non-connector letters, takes three distinct shapes - initial, medial, and final - relative to their neighbor.

علامت

alāmat • symbol

Independent Letterforms

ع + ل + ا + م + ت

Positional Variations

Letter	Position	Forms
ع ain [a]	Initial	ع
		ع و ع
ل laam [l]	Medial	ل
		ل ل ل
م meem [m]	Initial	م
		م م م
ت tay [t]	Final	ت
		ت ت ت

In scholarly writings, political discourse and public conversations, the Urdu language in India is understood to be a symbol of Muslim identity and culture.

علامت

علامت

alāmat
symbol

ع + ل + ا + م + ت

tay [t] meem [m] alif [a] laam [l] ain [a]

علامت علامت

For the generation of Muslims born in the early 1980s, علامت has acquired yet another symbolic meaning: it indexes a poor, uneducated, and conservative Muslim identity.



A • AIN

The letter *ain* entered the script from Arabic, where it represents a distinctive sound produced deep in the throat. This sound does not quite exist in Urdu; when *ain* appears in an Urdu word, it is either silent or pronounced as a vowel. Often, the pronunciation can be deduced based on its position in a word.

ع ع ع

ع ع ع