

# Positions through Contextualising

## Polyphony of Urdu in Post-colonial North India\*

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### Abstract

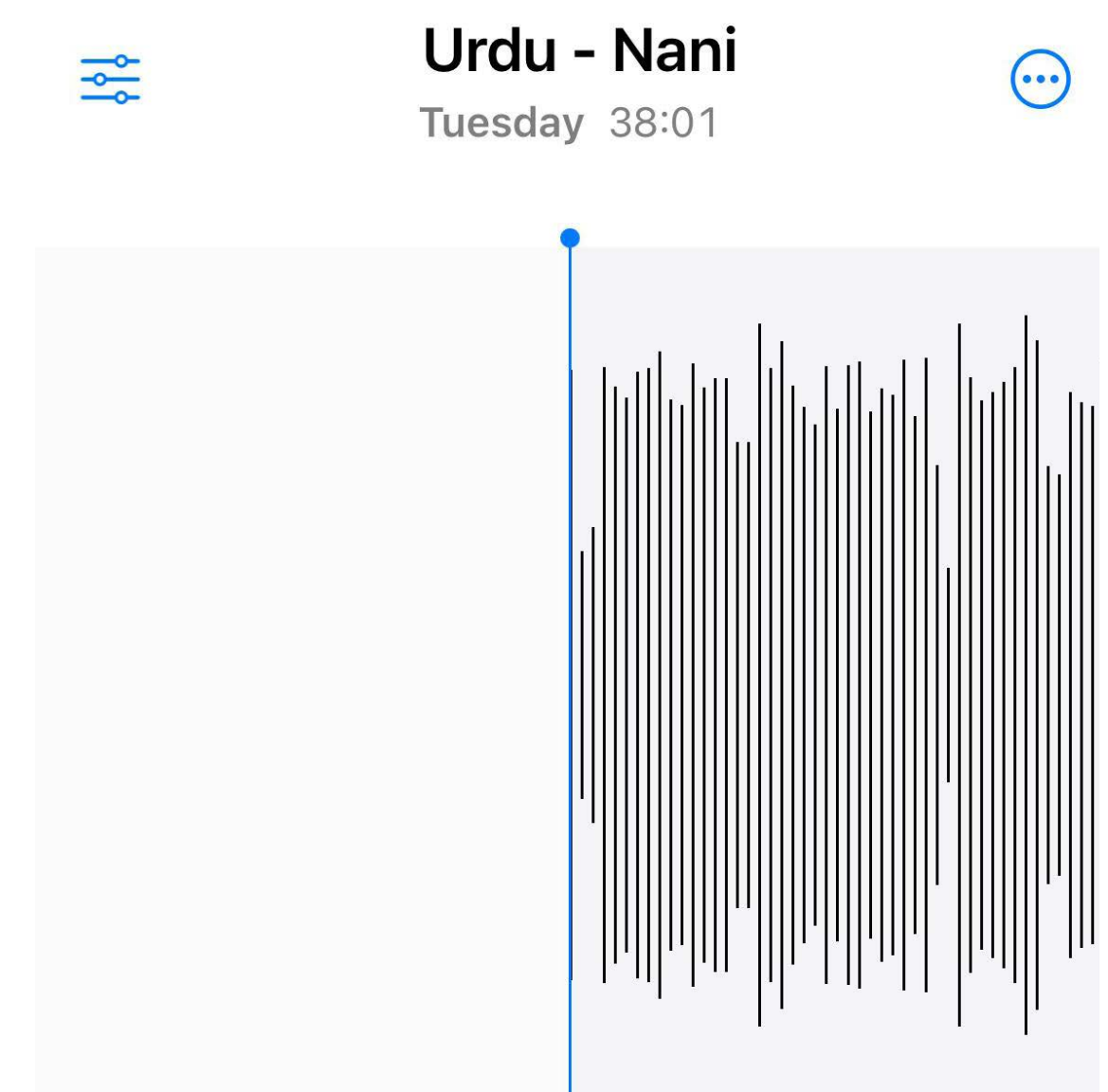
Many scholars, politicians, and the lay people alike believe that Urdu in North India symbolizes a Muslim identity and culture. Based on an eight-month long ethnographic study and quantitative language data collected in Old Delhi, this article challenges this notion and shows that the symbolic meanings 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 /ʃ/, /z/, /kb/, /gb/, 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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- generational gap  
↳ theoretical  
- context: muhamam, majlis → rituals of language  
↳ alphabets + rituals of language  
  
→ 3 generations  
→ what / how / when / where they learnt?  
• Learning, practice + knowledge  
• Different contexts / limitations of 3 women  
↳ validate the way (or not)  
↳ divide the alphabet  
  
ways of learning / inheritance  
↳ families, majlis, maulana, bollywood, prayers, poetry (?)



2018

Arabic in school - spoken + Quran → Abu Dhabi  
before 81 - nani taught at home } 5:30am - 7am  
↳ Urdu newspapers + books

class 8 onwards → regular Urdu + Quran → over 2 years  
↳ mins Arabic then Urdu (30 mins) Letters to stories + activities

↳ Alphabets  
↳ Pronunciation (Hijje) + break up

↳ longer on weekends  
↳ gifting after Quran (clothes, gifts) → stepping stone  
↳ Nohay in Urdu → had to learn (nohe, musiya)

1981-84 → Letters to nana (one page in Urdu)  
↳ once a week letters (one to each grandfather / parent)  
→ Dada knew Urdu + Persian  
↳ know more than other cousins  
↳ push from mother

Nani's household → poetry + spoken Urdu (spoken)  
All classes at home

Baba → Urdu in school (Doom school)

↳ 12 years old: early morning  
↳ learning: colourful books  
am, tea } read, write to improve

→ Urdu as spoken Hindustani → Hindi as harsh Urdu as soft

↳ Urdu as basic vs. nana  
→ Sher / Shariya (as learning Urdu) } Khamzari low capacity bad character cheat / petty

→ fill in books with full page  
↳ kept writing one word  
Normal notebooks } Nana vs. Nani's word

Ghar, Kitab, Kalam, Kursi } - jasha

→ writing + habit of writing (script)

Urdu as elitist / Shab

↳ Shortcuts to Urdu; more accessible but loses its charm → tallafuz, charm,

- not a school language  
- lack of education  
- importance of Urdu  
- Rekhta → more accessible but also spoils the language

→ upper class, privileged not to be in Hindi } without learning the hard way } from mobile

BABA

- never formally studied  
- through letter writing to dadi → write back  
↳ 1976 onwards  
- Arabic taught only  
↳ first taught Urdu letters → at home  
↳ 2 siblings + cousin (Phuthujaan) same age  
↳ as a part of learning Arabic picked up a few things  
↳ basic familiarity became a compulsion  
↳ letters as communication

- Doon school (Urdu) [3 lang policy] English, Hindi & Urdu (MT)  
- Lost in Kanhai bagh  
→ Dada wrote in English

- Urdu hasn't changed  
treatment of the nation  
Muslim language + bare mechanism  
↳ suppressing of Urdu

1850-1950 → prose in Urdu  
Persian touch → Urdu came from  
land records in Urdu (in Himachal)  
↳ required for revenue officers (N. India)  
→ still in Urdu

- Urdu primers + textbooks → alphabets + books

- Evenings (school in morning)  
↳ Not in St. Michaels GRANDPARENTS  
↳ Urdu + Arabic mostly  
↳ lit bit of Persian

Dadi → no formal education  
→ home based education  
family tradition + learning at home  
→ somebody (Muslim) + grandparents

NANI

- no formal education  
- after school (maulana)  
↳ only for 6 months  
- magazines in Urdu (Baano) - "for girls"  
↳ reading and learnt  
- Urdu letters only → writing bad  
- reading in Urdu  
→ didn't learn much from mother  
↳ more reading than writing  
→ Arabic classes / Quran classes  
↳ at age 10 → finished after on your own  
↳ had to find maulwi  
↳ learnt on her own → no understanding

Baano } girls, women  
↳ lessons  
Khilana (Toys) } children's

Biswi Zadi (20th cent.) → Urdu languages  
↳ Adult / mature - Kanpur, Muradabad  
↳ Reviews / criticism ↳ Uttar Pradesh (cities)  
- Politics, writers

- Nana buys subscription  
- School sponsored by magazine (Children's school) / magazine with pictures  
↳ regional - dialects  
↳ The perfect / correct form of Urdu

→ Urdu is vanishing } dying language  
→ Nohay in Hindi  
↳ Madana, limited to religious studies

→ BSP

Pride of Urdu words  
Don't use Urdu vocabulary  
↳ pure Hindi  
↳ spoken as Hindi / Urdu (UP, Haryana, North / Middle India)

Hydrabadi Urdu  
- head shalle (Hydrabad)

PCS officer; nani's nana → English + Urdu  
↳ state officer  
- governance (English reading, writing) } - Nohay

BPS - police service } education starting with Urdu  
↳ all three languages

→ Urdu only in 3rd gen / Men - Urdu + English  
↳ Urdu

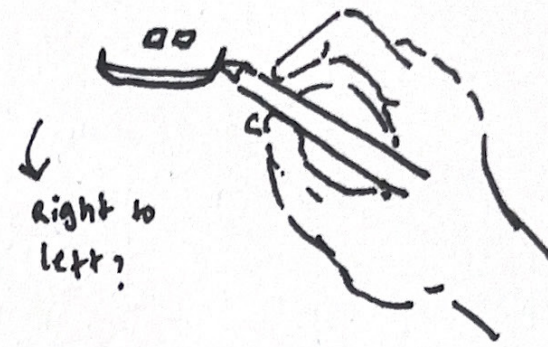
- Johnpuri (Urdu poet) → Mamu

↳ Learning book almost like a journal

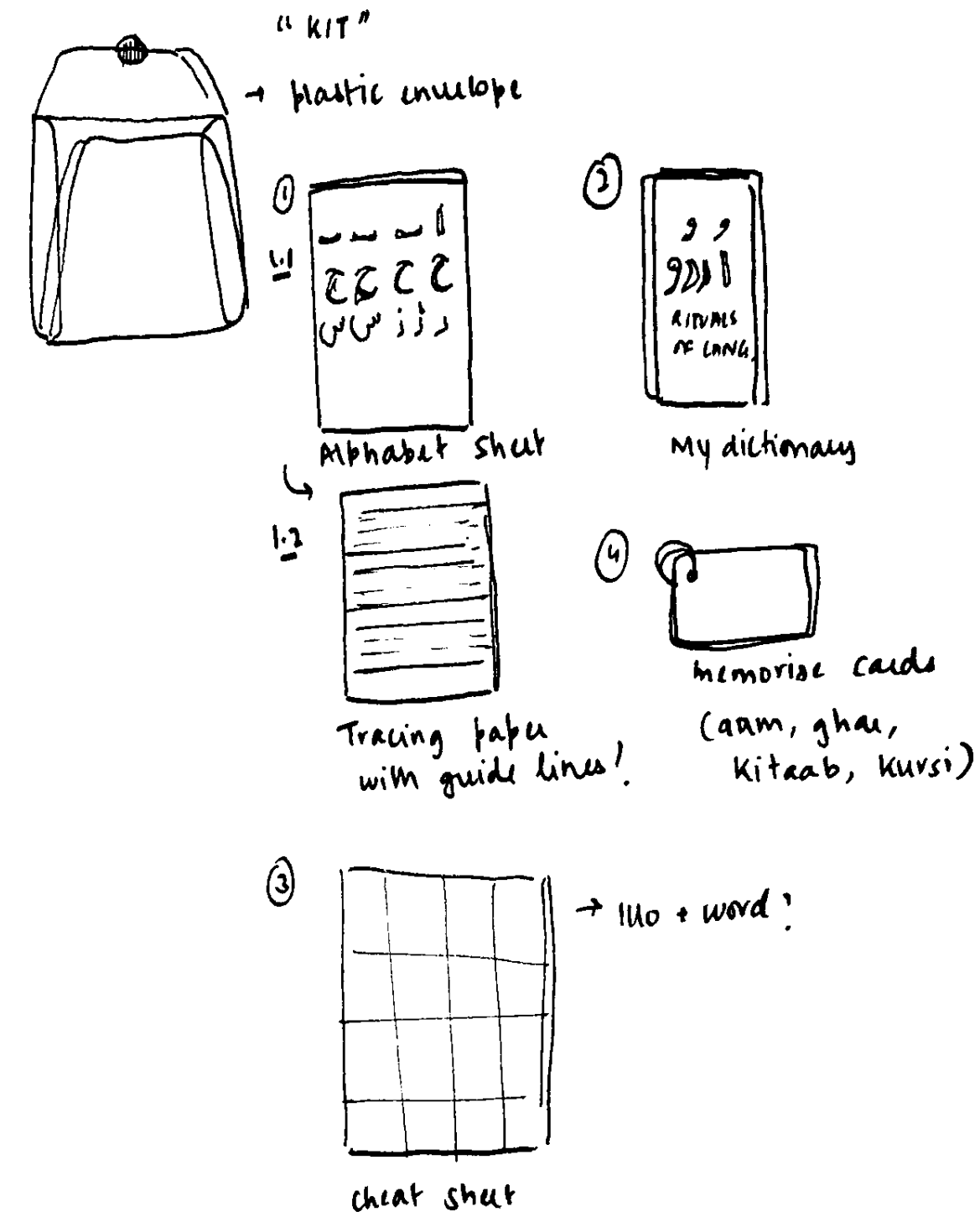
nazal  
 noha  
 wa 200/ wa 200  
 ن noon  
 و wa'o  
 0 choti he  
 د do chami he  
 ع hamza  
 ح choti ye  
 ك badi ye

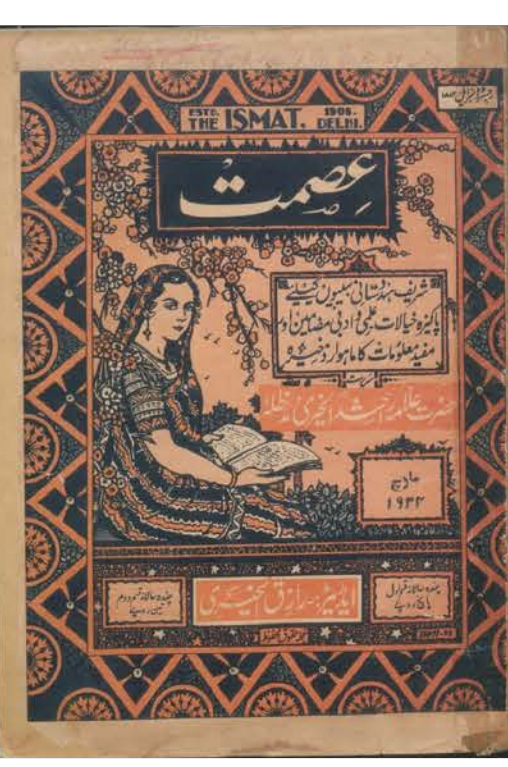
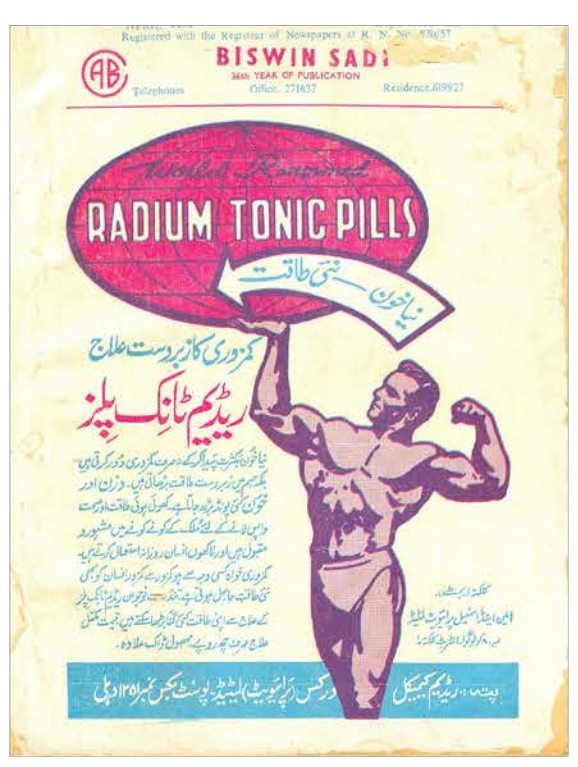
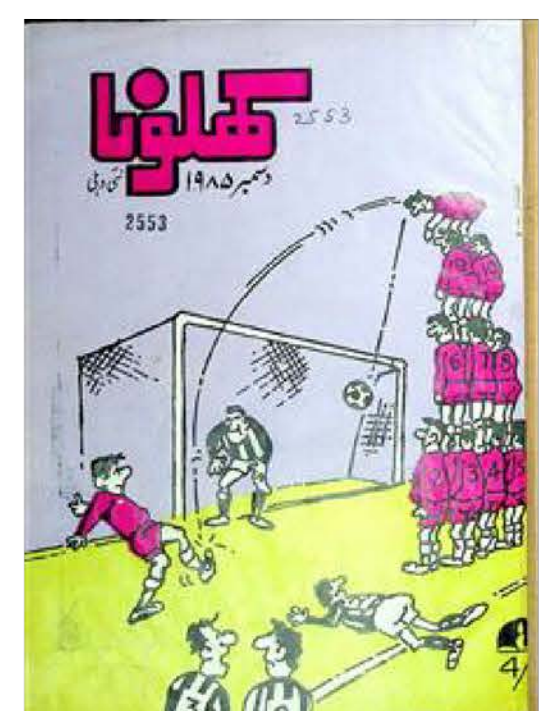
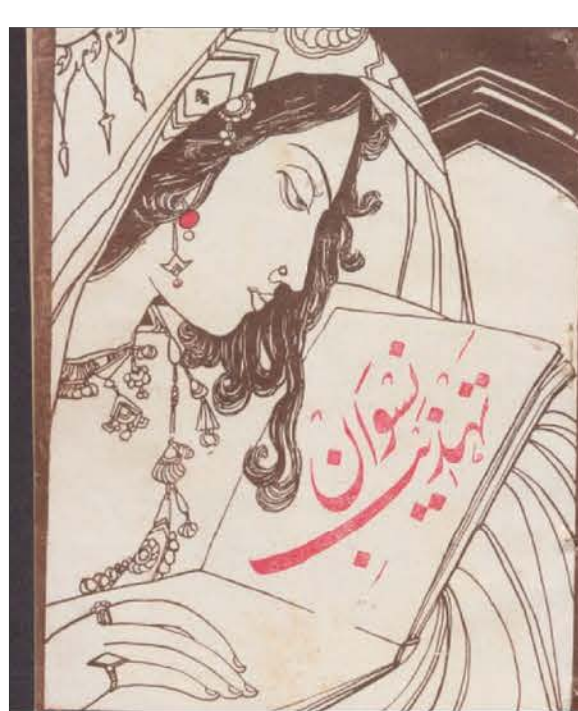
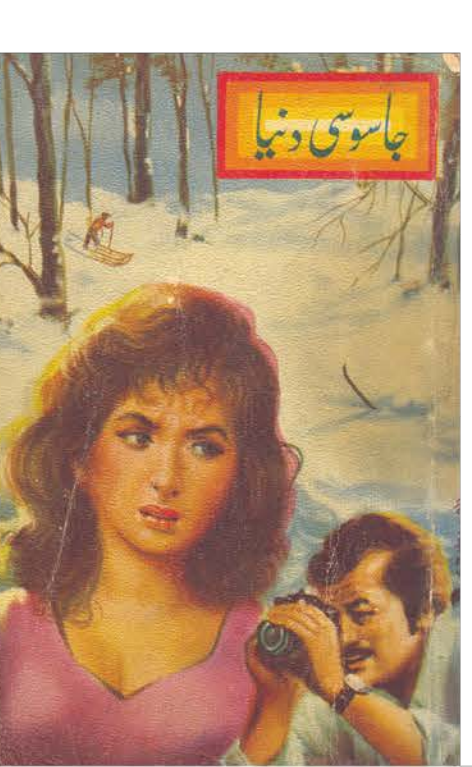
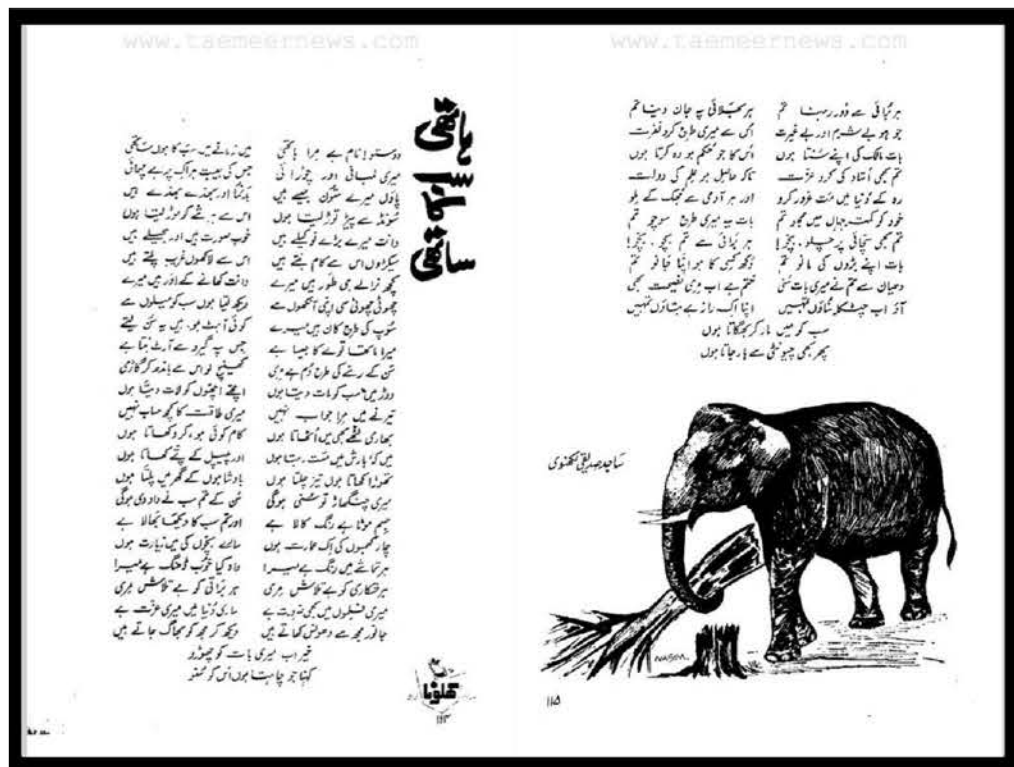
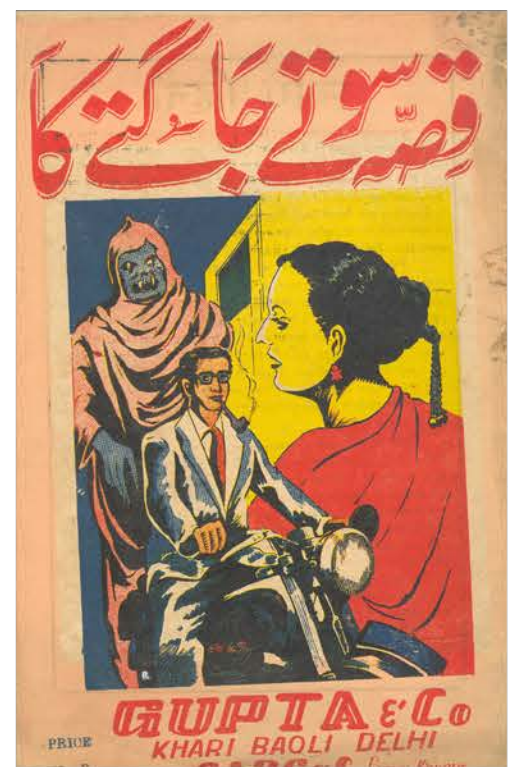
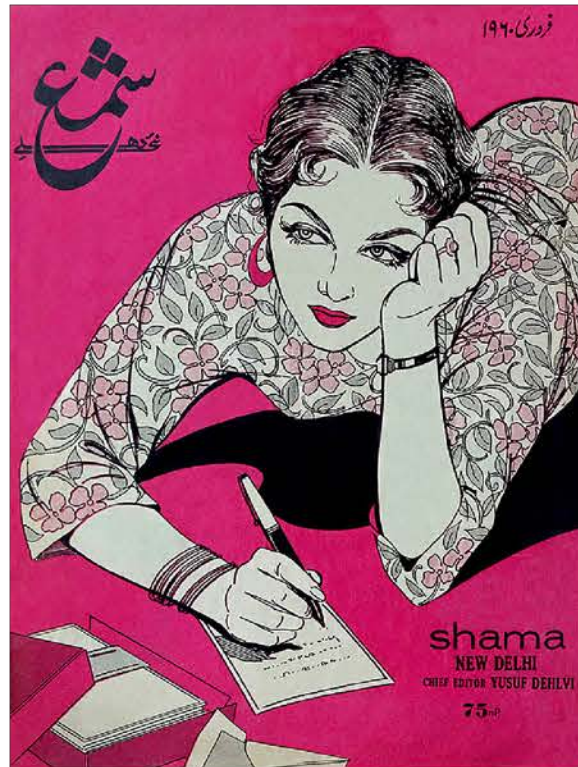
### نقشب نام

- dua karo
- rozā rakha
- adaab bolo
- bismillah



	ط to'e	دوا د dal	urdu aam adab	ا alif
zulm	ظ zo'e	دال دāl	bano bismillah sadi	ب be
lid / aqaaqah	ع ain	ز zal	paani	پ pe
ashura	غ ghain	روزا ر re	talafuz taibih	ت te
		ارر ارre	sawaab	ث re
fatcha	ف fe	زabaan ز zay	jaaba	ث se
khila'aa	ق qaf	ز zhe	chadar	ج jim
kursi kitab khajoor khat	ك kaf	سajda س sih	hadiise kissa	ح che
ghar	گ gāf	sher ش shin	hissa	ح badi he
		سabr ص su'ad	khuda hafiz	ح khe
madhosa majlis maahem majid maulana	ل lam	ض zu'ad		
	م meem			







**ماہم کی تصنیف نام**  
Maahim ki tasneef naam

**گہر کے لفظ**  
Gehr ke laph

**قاعدہ**  
Qaida

**اردو لغت**  
Urdu لغت

An Urdu dictionary shaped by spoken language, memory and family

**ماہم کی تصنیف نام**  
Maahim ki tasneef naam

**آداب**  
Adab  
Hello (with respect)

**ا**  
Alif • A

**آداب کہو**  
Adab kehoo

**ایسے نہیں کر**  
Aise nahin kar

**آداب**  
Adab  
Hello (with respect)

**آداب**  
Adab  
Hello (with respect)

**آداب**  
Adab  
Hello (with respect)

**بانو**  
Bano  
Lady or woman

**ب**  
Be • B

**بانو**  
Bano  
Lady or woman

**بانو**  
Bano  
Lady or woman

**بانو**  
Bano  
Lady or woman

**قیامت کے دن پانی کے ہر قطرے کا حساب ہوگا**  
Qiyamat ke din pani ke har qatree ka hisab hogaa

**پانی**  
Pani  
Water

**پ**  
Pe • P

**پانی**  
Pani  
Water

**تلفظ**  
Talfuz  
Pronunciation

**ت**  
Te • Soft T

**تلفظ**  
Talfuz  
Pronunciation

**تلفظ**  
Talfuz  
Pronunciation

**ثواب**  
Thawab  
Reward

**ث**  
Se • S

**ثواب**  
Thawab  
Reward

**ثواب**  
Thawab  
Reward

**حدیث کساء**  
Hadith e Kisa  
Tradition of the Cloak

**ح**  
Bah Hay • H

**حدیث کساء**  
Hadith e Kisa  
Tradition of the Cloak

**حدیث کساء**  
Hadith e Kisa  
Tradition of the Cloak

**دعا**  
Dua  
Prayer

**د**  
Dal • Soft D

**دعا**  
Dua  
Prayer

**دعا**  
Dua  
Prayer

**عید**  
Eid  
Festival

**ع**  
Ain • A

**عاشورہ**  
Ashura  
Tenth

**عید**  
Eid  
Festival

**عاشورہ**  
Ashura  
Tenth

**قاعدہ**  
Qaida  
Rule

**ق**  
Qaf • K

**قاعدہ**  
Qaida  
Rule

**قاعدہ**  
Qaida  
Rule

**مجلس خانہ**  
Majlis  
Assembly or Meeting

**م**  
Meem • M

**مجلس**  
Majlis  
Assembly or Meeting

**مجلس**  
Majlis  
Assembly or Meeting