

Hi, my name is Maaham - <P> this was probably the first word I learnt to spell in Urdu as a child. <P> But with time, I outgrew my Urdu lessons and lost the little vocabularies I had built to the registers of English and Hindi. <P>

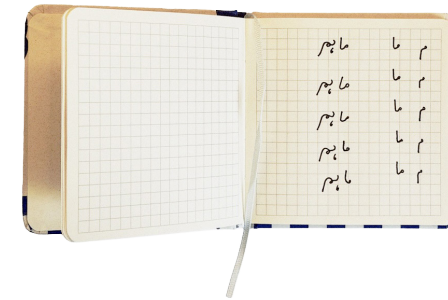
But I held on to a strange sense of pride; I could, at least, still write my name in Urdu. <P> As it turns out, I got that wrong too.

Mumma talking about spelling

Urdu is a language I have grown up surrounded by. But in most ways, it is not my language. [urdu on objects, items from home, books etc]. <P> This project is a relearning of Urdu. It is also an exploration of Urdu as an inheritance, a family history, a lost memory. <P>

I began by returning to my Urdu qaidas from childhood – looking closely at the vocabularies, illustrations and exercises they carried. <P> These books don't just teach language; they also introduce ways of speaking, behaving and belonging.

So I turned to my mother and grandmother to understand how they learned Urdu. <P>



What you've written is ain, ع; aa, hota hai na? Yours is not Mahh-ham, it's Maaham. So, that, jo neeche dikh raha hai woh, hai. Huh ke neeche jo inverted, ulta comma hai - that is huh, chota huh. Maaham. ماہم



Mumma talking of how she learnt Urdu

Nani talking about how she learnt Urdu

For them, Urdu belonged to letter writing.

<P> To the repetition and discipline of learning a script. <P>

Both talking about writing letters

For them, Urdu also belongs to religious poetry. (nauhas):

[Both talking about nohay recitation and writing of Urdu]

[Maybe nani's also]

For me, Urdu survives in fragments. A language I can recognise, but never fully inhabit.

Gloria Anzaldúa describes language as a borderland - a site where identity is constantly being negotiated. When I listen to my family speak, I notice these borders everywhere. Between Urdu and Hindi. Between script and speech. Between the “right” pronunciation and the “wrong”.

Mumma talking about urdu pronunciation

The story of Urdu in my family is also tied to larger political shifts. Urdu has, over time, become increasingly marked by religion, nationalism and class.

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DECLINE OF URDU FEARED IN INDIA

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By Bernard Weinraub Special to The New York Times
Aug. 5, 1979

The story of what I do in my family is also tied to larger political shifts.

[add visuals of public erosion of Urdu]

[Nani talking about Urdu dying?] [Urooj]

Rizwan Ahmad describes Urdu as polyphonic - shaped by many voices, histories, and contradictions at once. Trying to locate a pure or singular Urdu then becomes impossible.

And when language, be it Urdu, Hindi or Hindustaani, is a living, breathing thing - can there really be a fixed border? A fixed meaning?

This project started with a fixed enquiry: What does it mean to design with a language that feels both familiar and distant?

But by revisiting the ways in which I first learned Urdu - through my name and qaidas - I came upon larger questions of fluency, belonging and the politics of identity. What began with a relearning of my own name eventually became a way of understanding Urdu itself. A language that I am not fluent in but perhaps can still call mine.

