The Death of the Urdu Script

Can Microsoft and Twitter save the dying Urdu nastaʿlīq script from the hegemony of the Western alphabet and an overbearing Arab cousin?

A FEW YEARS AGO the Swedish store IKEA changed its font from Futura to Verdana and the Futura loyalists, fifty years faithful, created a veritable media storm. But most of us didn't care, because to us both fonts are very similar.

Now imagine if the Futura loyalists had been faithful for hundreds of years; had produced poets of Shakespeare's caliber that had written in Futura; and had institutions and schools where the stylish rendering of Futura script was mastered over the course of a lifetime, only to one day be told that not only could they no longer write in Futura, but they had to write in Braggadocio, and if they didn't like that then they could write in Chinese. Would it be justified for the Futura people to be angry then?

Well, when it comes to the digital world, this exact scenario is playing out for Urdu, a South Asian language spoken by anywhere between 100–125 million people in Pakistan and India, and one of Pakistan's two official languages. Urdu is traditionally written in a Perso-Arabic script called *nastaʿlīq*, a flowy and ornate and hanging script. But when rendered on the web and on smartphones and the entire gamut of digital devices at our disposal, Urdu is getting depicted in *naskh*, an angular and rather stodgy script that comes from Arabic. And those that don't like it can go write in Western letters.

Here's a visual comparison taken from Wikipedia.
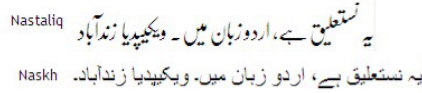
Looking at the picture, the discerning eye may immediately realize why *naskh* trumps *nastaʿlīq* on digital devices. With its straightness and angularity, *naskh* is simply easier to code, because unlike *nastaʿlīq*, it doesn't move vertically and doesn't have dots adhering to a strict pattern. And we all know how techies opt for functionality.

Utility being the mother of expansion, *naskh* is quickly phasing out

nastaʿlīq on the web. BBC-Urdu and Urdu Voice of America both use *naskh;* so does Alarabiya Urdu. And if you want to write an SMS in *nastaʿlīq*, you must use *naskh* as well. Same holds true for social media: Facebook, *naskh*; Twitter, *naskh*; blogs, *naskh*.

In fact, *naskh* is so dominant now that when the appropriately named D.E.I.T.Y.—The Department of Electronics and Information Technology of the Government of India—released an Urdu keyboard app for Windows and Android, they released twelve *naskh* fonts and only one *nastaʿlīq* font.

When I read about that, I was thoroughly deflated. New Delhi, the seat of the Indian government, is one of the long-standing hearts of the Urdu language. It is where Ghālib, the Urdu Shakespeare, was from. And yet there in Delhi, *naskh*, this pretender font, was in ascension, all because it was easier to code.

Utility had defeated tradition.

It reminded me of a couplet by Ghālib.

> *Aur bāzār sē lē āʾē , agar ṭūṭ gayā*
> *sāghar-e jam sē mirā jām-e sifāl aččhā hai*
>
> I can get another if I break it
> so a clay cup trumps a grail.

The ease of *naskh* hasn't meant that those who wanted to keep *nastaʿlīq* in circulation simply gave up. In one of the most fascinating instances of online writing, *nastaʿlīq* writers started making websites where they used specialized software to produce image files, which were then uploaded to the webpage. One of Pakistan's leading newspapers, *Jañg* (Urdu), is a very good example of how this image-based-writing works. You can't copy and paste their text. But if you wanted to save some of the text, you could download the image file. This tactic has worked quite well and has spread to the lowest level. Many an Urdu poet on Facebook, rather than typing his ghazal into the status update (because that would mean writing in *naskh* script), will instead upload an image file in *nastaʿlīq*. People even email entire books to each other, in individual images.

Constantly uploading image files to communicate may be romantic (or it can make you feel like a second-class digital citizen), but it's not practical. As a result, like the enterprising people Urdu-speakers are, when it comes to the web, most write Urdu in Western transliteration. In other words, entire SMS conversations, to websites, to blogs get written in Western letters. In Roman Urdu, if you wanted to say "Long Live Wikipedia!" you would simply write, "Wikipedia Zindabad!" It just works.

This Romanized Urdu dominates smartphones and Facebook and Twitter. Writing in Roman letters also makes it easier to switch in and out of

English. As an example, take a recent tweet by the human rights activist Sana Saleem: "If you've read my tweets, or my work, I hardly ever cuss. Sorry about that, par bus boat hogaya, buss kardo bass."

To me, as a writer, that is an astonishing piece of text. Not only are we looking at two languages collapsed into one, but the Romanized part is a language that has not yet been formalized; it is literally under construction due to the pressure exerted by the exigencies of the internet. What's even more interesting about this tweet is that in the Roman Urdu part of the tweet, Sana is actually making a veiled reference to an anti-terrorist advertisement that was popular on GEO TV, an Urdu language station. In the ad a little boy is yelling at the adults for all their violence using the words, "bass kardo bass" or "enough is enough." So by appropriating anti-terrorist tropes to bash the trolls attacking her, Sana is also acting like an ironic translator. And Urdu-speakers do this kind of thing constantly. It's pretty remarkable. Sana even rhymed the English and the Roman Urdu.

Obviously, part of the reason that Roman Urdu has taken off is because of the hegemony of the Western alphabet in our world today. The Roman alphabet is darn near universal. Indonesians and Turks recognized this long ago and forcibly converted their alphabet to Roman letters under the hands of enlightened despots. Urdu, however, is being pushed into the same position, except by the hand of Silicon Valley.

The second reason that Urdu-speakers are turning to Roman transliteration is because we—can I use that pronoun?—hate writing and reading in *naskh*. As in the above comparison to Braggadocio in English. It isn't that you can't make the letters out; but it is cognitively dissonant and interferes with the essential ease of language. The disinterest in *naskh* creates a feedback loop to Roman Urdu. And the whole thing is happening in silence.

I admit that as a "Fusion" or "ABCD"—which is what native Pakistanis pejoratively call Americans of Pakistani descent—my obsession with writing on digital devices with *nastaʿlīq* is extremely unusual. I am not an Urdu writer; I write fiction and nonfiction in English. My canon is Poe, Emerson, Wallace Stevens; not Ghālib, Iqbāl, and Faiẓ. And Urdu is not even my mother tongue. However, what is true is that Urdu is intrinsically connected to the "Pakistan" side of my Pakistani-American identity and I have every intention of fighting for its preservation.

There is also a political dimension for opting for the traditional *nastaʿlīq*. In short, *naskh* carries an "Arab" connotation because it is the preferred script for the Arabic language (ironically invented by a Persian). Due to recent geopolitics, such as the enthronement of the Saudi backed Wahhabi dictator Zia ul Haq in 1980s Pakistan, as well as the politicization of the history of Arab imperialism over India, Arab intrusion in South Asian

matters is always contested. One of the quickest ways to create an argument among Pakistanis is for one person to say the Arabic "Allāh Ḥāfiẓ" for goodbye instead of the Urdu "Khudā Ḥāfiẓ." By fighting for *nastaʿlīq* in the face of *naskh*, then, I feel that I am rejecting the cultural Arabization of South Asia.

There is one more reason why *nastaʿlīq* matters. It is, literally, calligraphy become language. Until recent decades, young boys and girls in Indian and Pakistani schools carried around a rectangular wooden board called a *takhtī*. On these, using a bamboo reed pen and an inkwell filled with a little gauze to make the dipping easier, they practiced writing every letter of the Urdu alphabet with painstaking care. Then when the lesson was over they washed the ink off the board and smoothed the surface with a bar of stucco clay and started on the next lesson. I worked on a *takhtī* when I was living in Pakistan. The earthen smell of a freshly washed and resurfaced board haunts me to this day.
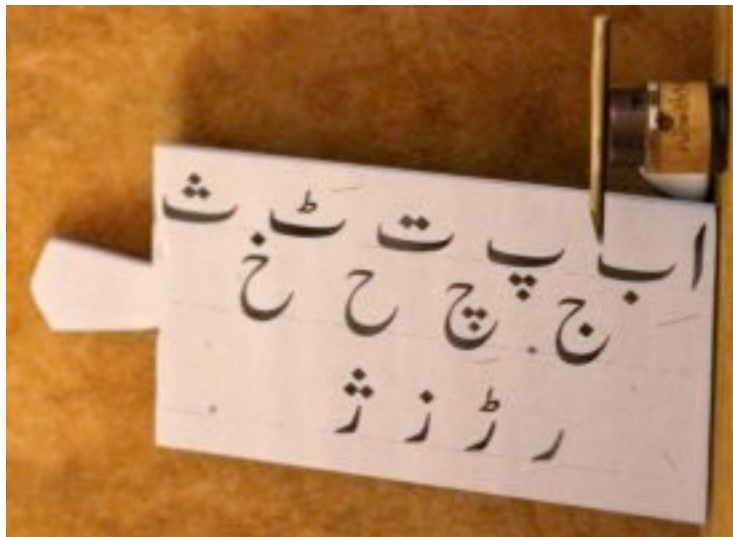
And I am not alone in the love of the *takhtī*. The Pakistani-American poet Shadab Zeest Hashmi describes the experience of producing *nastaʿlīq* on a *takhtī* like this:

> Penmanship was a dying art even in my school days, but luckily I learned to use a traditional bamboo pen at home; forming letters of the nastaliq script of Urdu in jet-black ink. Layering the hand held wooden board with white clay paste, drying it in the sun, and writing with a reed pen that needed to be filled every few minutes, was messy and frustrating. As I fumbled with

the materials, I began to acknowledge the muscles that are engaged in the physical work of writing. Forming letters became a fascinating study of lines and curves, symmetry and alignment. Soon I began to have a deeper appreciation for the calligraphic pieces hanging in the house. I noticed how well the artists conformed to rules and how gracefully they deviated, playing with form to create visual effects that influenced the meaning of the words. In learning to see patterns and variations, I was learning to extend myself, to make imprints of my inner life onto the outer reality of the page. Words had created visual fields for me—allowing endless possibilities for expressing meaning.

We may not write on wooden boards anymore, but for hundreds of years people did, and we can't let their script go to waste. Can we?

All this brings me to the weeks of hustling I did to investigate this rather arcane area in the digital world, where web development and foreign languages converge.

Because I own an iPhone, I started by contacting Apple. I asked them why their smartphones did not have an Urdu keyboard and why Urdu-speakers were forced to use the Arabic keyboard, given that Urdu has 39 letters in their alphabet and Arabic has 28. (Try writing English without a letter as ubiquitous as the E.)

Apple, obviously, did not respond. I tried over and over and got nothing. This prompted one of my British-Pakistani friends to sardonically quip that Apple was imposing Arabic-supremacism on the rest of us, given that Steve Jobs had been part-Arab. (I thought it was a good joke.)

Interestingly, at that early moment in my investigation, I hadn't yet become concerned about the distinction between *naskh* and *nasta'līq*. I was simply desperate to have some way of writing in Urdu on my phone and probably would have accepted it in any script. It was only when I kept getting stymied by Apple that I investigated this arena more and got obsessed with the *naskh* versus *nasta'līq* divide. So I suppose Apple's inscrutability had a benefit, namely, this article. (There I go, Apple fanboy apologizing for Apple.)

After rejection by Apple I called up Microsoft. Instead of limiting my question to whether the Windows Phone would have an Urdu keyboard, I went further and asked if they were going to do something about offering *nasta'līq*.

While Microsoft's press team did act like I was a human, I got caught up in some bureaucratic Byzantium where I kept writing and rewriting and recording my basic question, never to get a response.

But Microsoft wasn't a dead end. Asking and re-asking the same question made me more attuned to hitting the correct keywords, and this re-

sulted in the online discovery of the blog of a Microsoft developer named
Michael S. Kaplan. He was the first techie I had found who seemed to have
a full grasp of the fact that Urdu-speakers didn't want to read or write in
naskh. And, more than that, he was on the inside.

Kaplan's blog was where I made my first major breakthrough. It was
about Windows 8. Apparently the newest version of Windows would have
the "first widely available Unicode font to support *nastaʿlīq*."
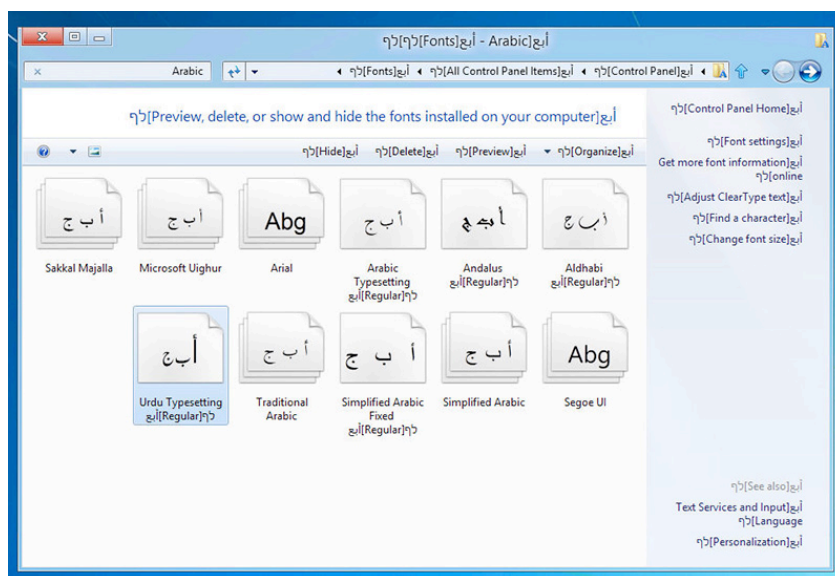
When I read that, when I saw Urdu's script being recognized as auton-
omous, it was a moment of sublimation. After my weeks of disappointments
and dead ends, here was hope! Who would have thought that Microsoft,
of all the companies in the world, would offer the first wide-scale support
for Urdu *nastaʿlīq*! It was like reaching the end of an exhausting journey to
find that there was someone there to pull some water for you out of a well.

I hope I one day get a chance to meet Michael S. Kaplan and tell him
how amazing he is.

But as game-changing as this discovery was, by now I had also real-
ized that I would have to temper my excitement. Making Urdu *nastaʿlīq*
popular on the web and in social media, where the two-pronged domina-
tion of *naskh* and Roman Urdu was so thorough, would be an immensely
difficult task, if not impossible.

I learned this when I talked to the International Development Team
at Twitter; the first time that any major tech company indulged me on this
issue at length.

Apparently when Twitter had set out to develop Urdu for their platform, they had wanted to offer *nastaʿlīq*. But then they discovered that it was not a standard font on Windows or Macs or on mobile platforms. As a result they opted for offering Urdu in Tahoma, which is essentially *naskh*. Sad trombone. In fact, Twitter's Urdu translation project spearheaded by young people out of Pakistan, is almost all in *naskh*. Do they have any idea that they are taking forward a mutated (or evolved) version of Urdu? Do they care? Is it all too late?

When I spoke with Twitter, they did sound open to the idea of offering Urdu in *nastaʿlīq* in the future, but that openness seemed predicated on more demand from Urdu-speakers. And judging by Twitter Urdu, it does not look like that demand is forthcoming. A language getting left behind by its people. Someone cue the funeral march.

This lack of interest from Urdu-speakers is a chicken-and-egg situation. Simply put, if smartphones don't offer an Urdu keyboard and tech companies don't offer *nastaʿlīq* then Urdu-speakers won't be inclined to create more demand for *nastaʿlīq*, because somewhat viable alternatives already exist, particularly Roman Urdu and *naskh*. It all bodes very badly for *nastaʿlīq*. It may never get to see the light of day on the web.

My request, then, to the myriad tech companies out there, particularly the big smartphone makers, is to please allow yourself to feel a moment of linguistic humanitarianism and i) offer us an Urdu keyboard for our smartphones with all the letters and ii) let us render Urdu in *nastaʿlīq*. If even then we fail to make Urdu a popular online language, then the onus for its death will be upon us.

We would have been unworthy of its beauty. ❑

—Ali Eteraz

[Gratefully reproduced from *Medium: Writers on Writing*. Edited by Kate Lee. Published online at *https://medium.com/writers-on-writing*. 7 October 2013. Edited for the *AUS*.]