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Letters and strokes of Perso-Arabic script used for Urdu language

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Abstract: Urdu language is native to India and Pakistan and it is written in the Perso-Arabic script. A distinctive feature of the script is that it is written from right to left. Nastaliq is the most widely used style for writing Urdu in India.

The paper not only talks about the basic differences in Naskh and Nastaliq, but also talks about why calligraphy and calligraphers are seen less today. It talks about the simple difficulties a person can face while trying to learn Nastaliq calligraphy for Urdu. The paper talks about my experience of learning calligraphy. It talks about why it was needed to design a bi-lingual calligraphy manual for the script and explains the attempt done for the compilation of the instruction manual and its contents.

Key words: *Aksharaya, Indic scripts, Perso-Arabic, Urdu, Nastaliq, Calligraphy, Instruction manual*

1. Introduction

The Urdu Language is a mixture of words taken from different languages such as Arabic, Persian, Turkish and Hindi. The Urdu language was born because of the soldiers and businessmen from different regions coming together for military camps and trading. It was a language that was born from these camps, for the common man. Earlier, Urdu didn't belong to the Islamic religion particularly. People from many different religions were seen

using the language. The script that is used to write the Urdu language is the Perso-Arabic script. It is based on the Arabic script mainly, with an addition of few letters to it.

ا ب ت ث ج ح خ د ذ ر ز س ش ص ض
ط ظ ع غ ف ق ک ل م ن ه و ے ہ

Letters taken directly from the Arabic script

پ ٹ چ ڈ ڈ ژ گ
بھ پھ تھ ٹھ جھ چھ دھ ڈھ رھ ٹھ کھ گھ لھ مھ نھ

Letters added in the Perso-Arabic script for Urdu

Figure.1 Letters of the Perso-Arabic script, used for the Urdu language.

2.1 Grammar of the script

The alphabets of the script have different forms according to their position in the word. Each alphabet has an isolated form, and an initial, medial and final form. Letters change their shape according to their position in the word. That is, according to its previous letter and the letter used after it.

آداب عبدل بحر بازار ب

Isolated Form Initial Forms Medial Form Final Form

Figure.2 Different forms of the letter 'Be'

The script has a bi-directional property because the alphabets are written from right to left, and the numbers are written from left to right.

کتابت ۱ ۲ ۳ ۴ ۵ ۶ ۷

Letters ← Numbers →

Figure.3 Bidirectional Property of the script

2.2 Nastaliq and Naskh

There are many styles used to write this script. Naskh, Riqah, Kufi, Taliq, Nastaliq, etc. Urdu is generally written in the Nastaliq style of the Perso-Arabic script. Nastaliq is one of the main calligraphic hands used in writing the Persian script, and traditionally the predominant style in Persian calligraphy. Nastaliq is amongst the most fluid calligraphy styles for the script. It is a combination of the Naskh and Taliq styles, featuring elongated horizontal strokes and exaggerated rounded forms. Naskh is very commonly used style to write the Arabic script. The Nastaliq style of writing is very cursive as compared to Naskh. It also has a little vertical look when compared to Naskh, which follows a baseline and has a horizontal straightness to it.



Figure.4 Comparison of Naskh and Nastaliq

Nastaliq style of writing is commonly seen in the small size text of magazines and newspapers, or larger text for headlines. Headlines are written in Naskh also.



Figure.5 Urdu Newspaper

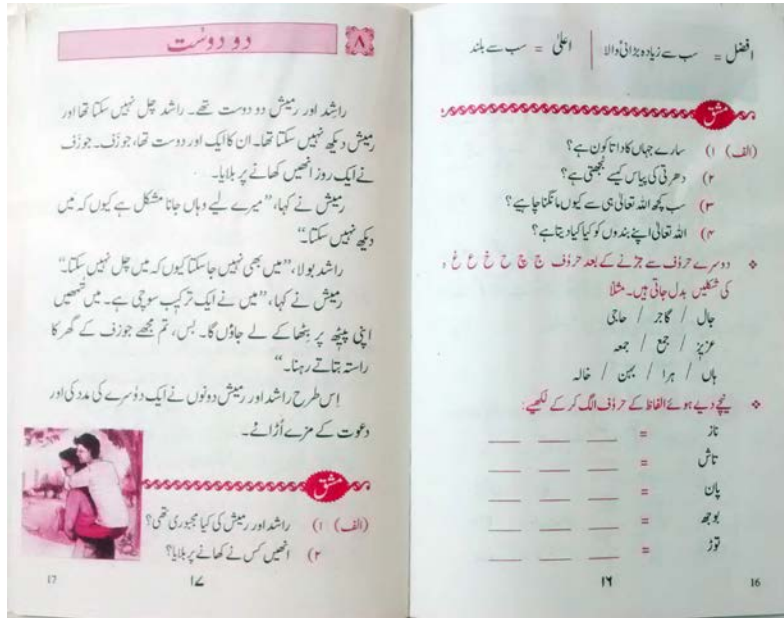


Figure.6 Urdu school book, typed in a Nastaliq font

2.3 Calligraphy

Earlier, calligraphy in the Perso-Arabic script was practiced by many people. It was, and still is a very highly respected art. The art of practicing calligraphy was passed from generation to generation. It was mostly used to write poems or religious text. Calligraphy was done not only on paper, but also stone and metal. Calligraphy can be seen on the walls of many mosques, and religious buildings. It was done on sign boards in public places, and also notice boards.

There are different styles of Nastaliq calligraphy as well. People from different regions have different styles of writing. Proportions of the letters, and way of writing them differs. They have a unique touch to it, which makes the calligraphy have a slightly different appearance. Given below is an example of the Delhi style and the Lahori style of writing Nastaliq. The Lahori way of writing is more spread out, and the height of the letter is more than that of the Delhi style.



Figure.7 Calligraphy in Delhi and Lahori style

2.4 Tools

A reed pen, or 'qalam' in Arabic, is the traditional instrument used for writing calligraphy. This is preferred over a pen with a metal tip, because the flexibility of the natural material allows for a greater range of motion while writing. Nowadays, calligraphy pens, markers and nibs along with a holder are also used for calligraphy.



Figure.8 Qalam



Figure.9 Metal nibs used for calligraphy

Calligraphy is typically written with black ink made from soot, dissolved in gum and water. In the past, the soot used was scraped from inside mosque lamps, thus imparting a spiritual blessing to the writing. Today, waterproof ink is mostly used for calligraphy.

2.5 Initial Research

The project started with collecting primers that are used in schools, and searching for calligraphy books that are available in the market. Many primers were found, but very few calligraphy books. A majority of the books were written in the Urdu language itself, and hence were difficult to understand. Newspapers and magazines, and primary school books were collected.

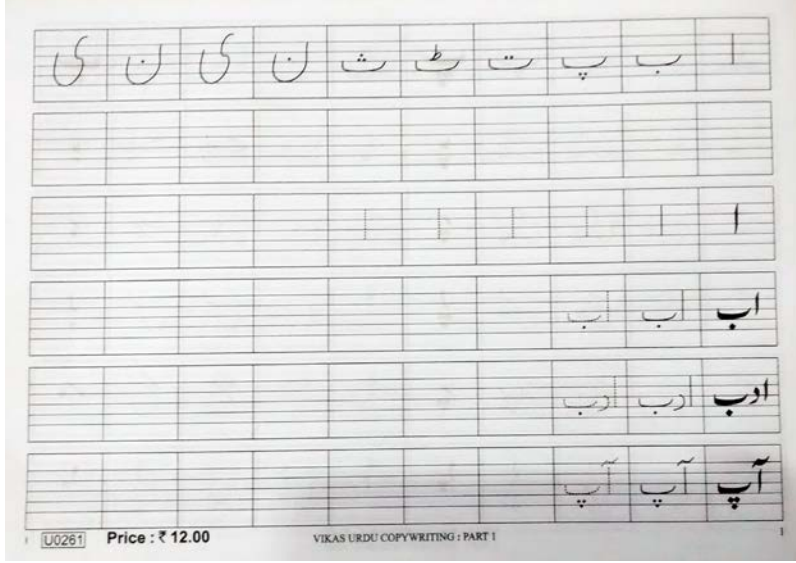


Figure.10 School book to learn how to write alphabets

Data was collected by photo documentation of hand-painted boards, notices and sign-boards. Most of these were painted many years back. It was difficult to find recently painted hand-boards. The initial research included interviewing teachers and finding a katib.



Figure.11 A hand-painted board



Figure.12 A hand-painted board



Figure.13 A hand-painted board

People who practice calligraphy are known as 'katibs'. According to a katib, it takes a minimum of ten years to perfect Urdu calligraphy. He says after those ten years of practicing calligraphy on a daily basis is when a person actually understands how much nib to dip in the ink, so as to get the perfect stroke. He says that is the amount of practice one needs to understand how much pressure he needs to put on the tool to achieve the various strokes.

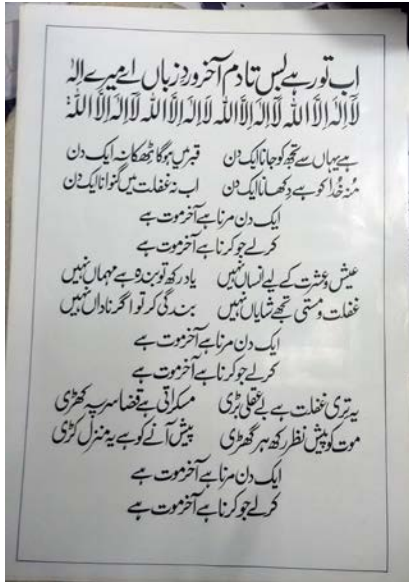


Figure.14 Calligraphy done by a Katib

Calligraphy was taught in schools earlier. It was like an art class in Islamic school where katibs would teach students calligraphy. Today, calligraphy classes are not conducted so much, due to lack of interest in students. A school in Mumbai would conduct weekly calligraphy classes. With time, the response from students started decreasing. Hence, they started paying students (for their travel) to come and attend calligraphy classes, so that the new generation can learn the art, and so that the art of calligraphy does not die. Eventually, due to low number of interested students, they stopped conducting classes.

Due to the immense patience needed to perfect the calligraphy, today not many people are seen practicing the art. People rather prefer to do other kind of work than investing so many years in mastering calligraphy.

Earlier all boards of shops were hand painted. Sign boards in public places were hand-painted. Newspapers were handwritten. Hence, there was a high demand for calligraphers, and many people learned calligraphy and practiced it. Back then, there were many jobs for katibs. They could work in newspaper firms, do sign board painting, or earn by selling their calligraphy. Slowly, hand-written newspapers were seen less as everything was done on computers. All the text was set on computers. Slowly, as time passed by, even shop-boards and shop-signs were digitally printed. Today katibs are competing with computerised calligraphy fonts which have almost wiped out the traditional hand written-calligraphy. The rise of technology has forced several katibs to change their career.



Figure.15 Digitally printed boards



Figure.16 Digitally printed shop-boards

Today, in India, only one newspaper is handwritten- The Musalman. The Musalman is the oldest Urdu-language daily newspaper published from Chennai in India. It is an evening paper with four pages, all of which are handwritten by calligraphers, before being mass-produced with a printing press.



Figure.17 The Musalman

2.6 Problems faced while learning calligraphy

Initially, I tried learning calligraphy from videos on YouTube. It was difficult to understand at what angle the qalam should be held while doing calligraphy. Although the videos mentioned certain proportions, they didn't mention proportions for all the letters. The videos showed calligraphy only for certain letters. It was difficult to understand how to draw some strokes. I wasn't able to understand how the same qalam can make a thick and thin stroke. There were doubts about which stroke should be drawn first, and the direction of the stroke. Different videos showed different proportions and styles of drawing the letter. Hence, it was very confusing to understand which proportions to follow.

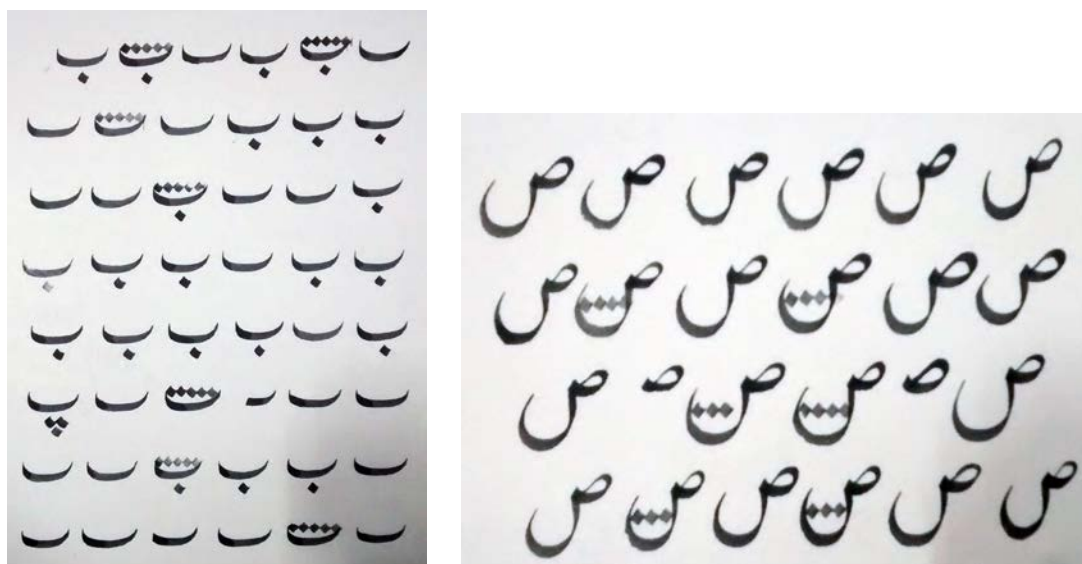


Figure.17 Initial calligraphy practice

Most of the books that teach calligraphy are for the Arabic script. These books do not include certain letters of the Perso-Arabic script like 'Pe', 'Gaaf', 'Che' and the letters made by joining 'Do chashmi hai' to other consonants. This makes it difficult to understand how these letters are drawn, and what should be the right proportion of these letters.

There are very few books available to understand the simple basics of calligraphy for letters used in Urdu. The books that are available are published many years back. A majority of these books are in the Urdu language itself. Hence, are mostly useful for the people who can read Urdu. Aijaz Rakkam is the most commonly available book for calligraphy. Since the entire book is in the Perso-Arabic script, it mainly helps those who can read the script.

People who cannot read Urdu, and have an interest to learn calligraphy, sometimes find it tough to do so. It becomes very difficult for non-Urdu speaking people to learn Urdu calligraphy, due to the difficulty in finding bi-lingual calligraphy books. Since books are in the Perso-Arabic script, it becomes difficult to understand what the book explains.

Hence, this project is an attempt to make material available through which non-Urdu readers and readers of the script can learn calligraphy. The project is about making a bi-lingual calligraphy manual which includes the basics of the script calligraphy and the other important information. The manual can also be a basic guide for type designers.

3 Contents of the Manual

3.1 Basic Strokes:

To really understand what all strokes the letter is made of, it is important to understand the basic strokes of calligraphy used for the script. Familiarity with basic strokes helps to understand the construction of letterforms. It is necessary to understand at what angle to hold the tool, and how to draw the strokes. In Nastaliq calligraphy, there is no fixed-angle of the nib. The angle of the nib changes from 45-60-90 degrees. The same stroke can start with a 60 degree angle, and end with an angle of 90 degrees approximately. Hence, it is very important to be able to turn the tool flexibly.



Figure.18 Angle of the nib changes for these letters

Another very distinctive feature of Nastaliq calligraphy is how much of the nib is touched on the surface of paper. Letters are drawn with the nib touching the surface completely, half, or drawn with the tip of the nib.

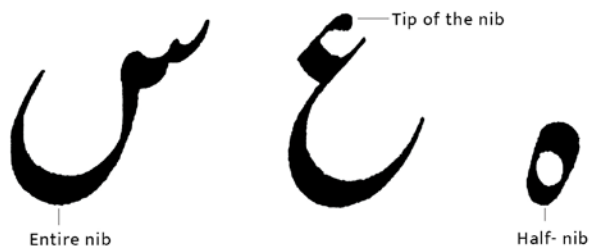


Figure.19 Entire nib, Half nib, and tip of the nib

The compilation of basic strokes was done from the beginning with the most commonly used strokes to the ones that are used less. The basic strokes have directional arrows along with them so as to understand the correct way of drawing the stroke.



Figure.20 Basic strokes for Nastaliq calligraphy

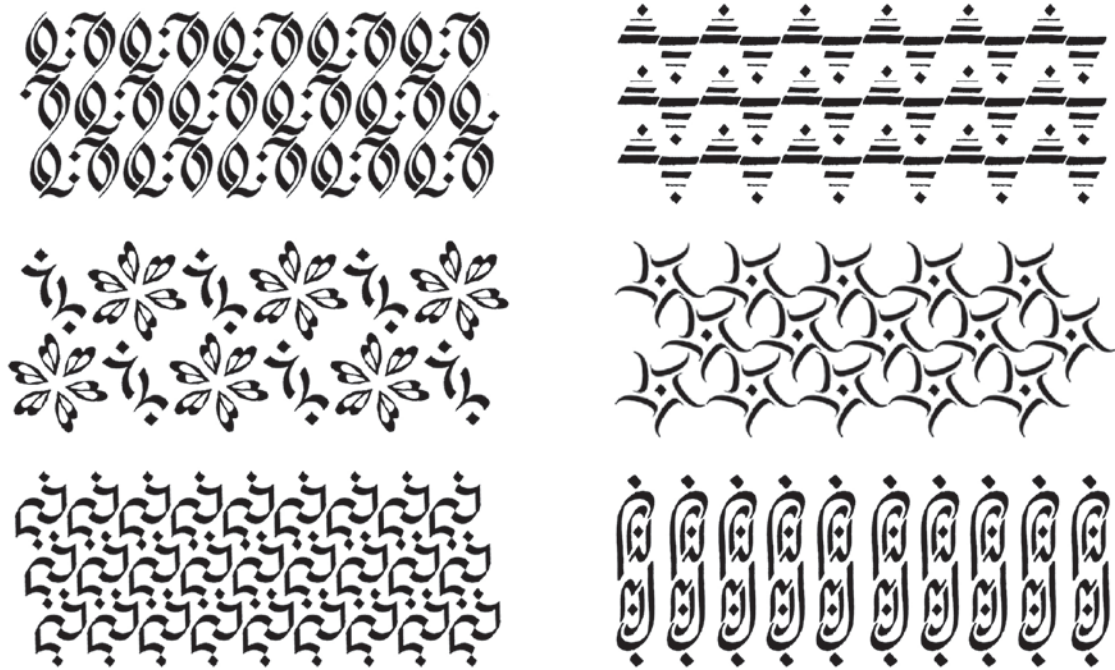


Figure.21 Patterns made from basic strokes

3.2 : Alphabets and Numbers:

After practicing the basic strokes and patterns, one gets familiar with the kind of strokes that are used for Nastaliq, and understands the correct angle of the qalam. An important detail while drawing the letters is their proportion. Both the height of the letter and its width are important to draw the perfect letter. Many school primers were looked into, to find the proportion of the letters. Guidance was taken from a Katib who has been practicing calligraphy for more than twenty-five years. The proportions were found out, and were used to draw the letters. The width and height of the letters differ according to their shape. There is no fixed width for letters of this script. The basic proportion for the height of the letters is 4 'kats'. (kat- one nukta width)



Figure.22 Basic height for the letters

Since different letters have different proportions, the manual shows all the proportions separately. The letters have directional arrows to them, so as to understand which stroke to draw first.

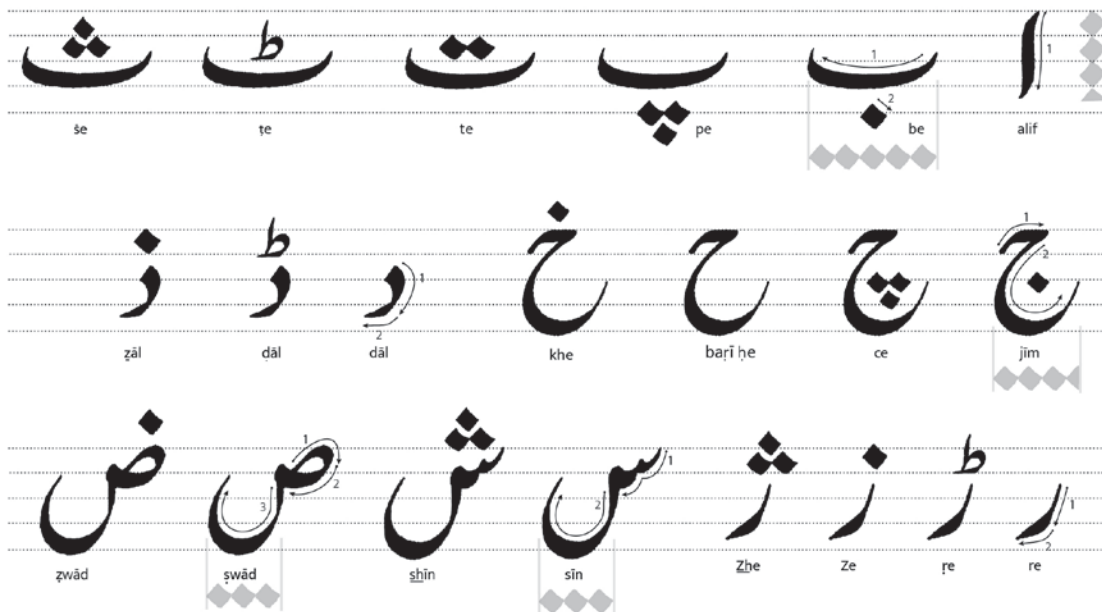


Figure.23 Alphabets with proportions and directional arrows

‘Do chashmi he’ is a variation of the Urdu letter ‘He’. It gives its sound only when joined with certain letters. It can be attached to certain letters to change their pronunciation. The ‘Makhloot-Haruf’, i.e, all the letters formed using the ‘do-chashmi he’ have been included in the manual. These alphabets aren’t used in Arabic, and hence, are not included in Arabic calligraphy books. It was a struggle to find calligraphy books which included all these letters.



Figure.24 Do- Chashmi he and the letters made by using that letter

3.3 : Kashish:

Certain alphabets of the script can be elongated. That is, their length can be increased for decoration purposes or for a visual appeal. Letters written with a Kashish look aesthetically beautiful because of their exaggerated strokes.

These letters can be elongated from seven nib widths to thirteen nib widths.

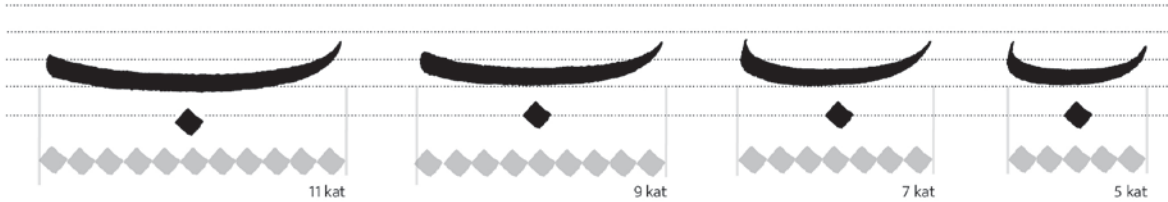


Figure.25 Letter 'Be' written with a Kashish



Figure.26 Letter 'Be' written with a Kashish in a sentence

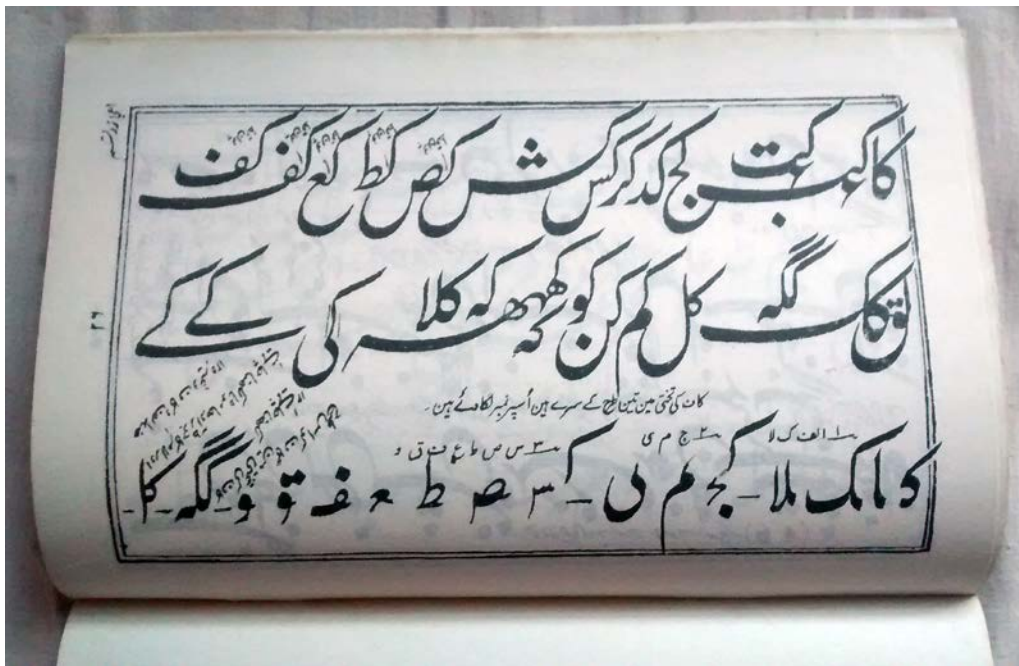


Figure.27 A page in a calligraphy book, using many Kashish

3.3 : Forms of the letter:

It is very important to know the structure of a letter, so as to draw a word. Knowing the proportion of a letter, helps understand its structure well.

Since the letters change their shape according to their position in a word, it is very important to understand how to draw the initial, medial and final forms of the letter. A single letter has many different forms. Practicing these letters helps to understand how to write an entire word properly.



Figure.28 Forms of the letter

3.4 : Conclusion:

Calligraphy is an important part not only of the Perso-Arabic script, but all other scripts. The way a script is written changes the entire look of the script. Calligraphy makes letters look more beautiful. Availability of material makes the learning process easier. This instruction manual is an attempt to make material available through which beginners can learn calligraphy. It is an attempt to encourage the young generation to learn the traditional calligraphy, and keep the art alive. I hope this manual will not only help people from an Urdu background, but will help people from other cultures as well. I hope type designers and people from similar fields can use this manual as a base for their projects.

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Aijaz Rakkam

Navneet- Vikas Urdu Copywriting Part 1

