

Salam,

There is a question that quietly follows every Urdu-speaking family that has made a home in the West.

Not the question of whether your child can order food in Urdu, or follow a conversation at a family gathering. Those are low bars, and we have mostly cleared them.

The real question is this: does your child have access to what the language actually *is*? To its depth, its weight, its full emotional range?

If the answer is no — and for most of our children, it is — then we are not preserving Urdu. We are preserving a version of it that has been thinned down to function.

This issue is about the form of Urdu literature that refused to be thinned down. The form that pushed the language to every boundary it had — and then pushed further.

THE PEAK

This issue is about Marsiya.

To understand what Marsiya did for Urdu, you have to understand where Urdu was before it. Urdu is a young language. It did not arrive fully formed with centuries of literary tradition behind it. It had to earn its depth — and it did so, in large part, through the Marsiya.

Written in a six-line stanza structure called the *musaddas*, the Marsiya was inherited from Persian and reshaped on Indian soil. Early Deccan poets first turned it toward the tragedy of Karbala. Sauda gave it its distinct structure. Mir Zamir expanded it toward something closer to epic — battle scenes, natural description, a scale that had no equivalent in Urdu before him.

But it was in 19th-century Lucknow that the Marsiya reached its *اوج* — its absolute peak. Two poets, Mir Anees and Mirza Dabeer, took the form and the language simultaneously to heights neither has reached since.

What Mir Anees did was not simply write great poetry. He expanded the vocabulary of Urdu itself. Allama Zamir Akhtar Naqvi, whose decades of scholarship on Anees remain the most detailed we have, found a deliberate, recurring architecture of imagery

running through his stanzas — specific colors, specific animals used with a symbolic precision that reveals a poet thinking in symbol as much as in story.

Iftikhar Arif, one of the most celebrated Urdu poets of our time, has observed that our finest Marsiya poets were not merely writing devotional verse — they were, without quite meaning to, building the permanent architecture of the language itself. Alongside Nazir Akbarabadi, Anees is considered one of the only poets in Urdu's history who genuinely expanded what the language could hold.

Even Altaf Husain Hali — who would go on to write the Musaddas-i-Hali, one of Urdu's most consequential poems of the following generation — found the path lit by what Anees had already done. Scholars have noted that Anees pointed the way for Hali's own musaddas, a poem mourning the decline of a civilization, in the same six-line form the Marsiya had already perfected.

The language of Marsiya is, by wide scholarly consensus, the most demanding in all of Urdu literature. No English translation has ever fully carried it. The rhythm resists. The grief — the *gham* — resists. The reverence that lives inside the grief resists. That is not a limitation of translators. That is the Urdu doing what only Urdu can do.

WITHOUT CULTURE, WE CEASE

Language is not decoration. It is structure.

When we talk about Urdu preservation in our community, we often frame it as a nice thing to do. A thing that honors the elders, that keeps something alive. But the research is considerably less gentle than that framing.

Longitudinal studies on immigrant children in the United States document with clinical precision how rapidly heritage languages atrophy across generations — and what follows when they do. The second generation does not simply lose a language. It loses the formation that the language provides. The emotional vocabulary. The felt connection to the tradition they were born into.

Urdu, in our community, is not just a heritage language. It is the language through which the Karbala narrative has been carried, refined, and transmitted for centuries. The Marsiya exists in that language. The Noha exists in that language. The full weight of our *ehsaas* — our feeling, our grief, our *sabr* — it lives in that language.

English can describe Karbala. Urdu can carry it. That is the difference between information and formation. And it is the difference we are losing.

THE RESPONSIBILITY WE SHARE

The first answer has to come from home.

It would be easy to point at systems. At schools that do not teach Urdu, at institutions that have not yet built what needs to be built. And those critiques are fair.

But if we are being candid — and at Pasdari, we are always being candid — the first responsibility sits with us. With parents. With families. With the choices we make at home, around the dinner table, in the car, at majlis.

A language does not survive in the abstract. It survives because someone, in a specific moment, chose to speak it. Chose to insist on it. Chose to believe that what it carries is worth the friction of passing it on.

Research on how Urdu has survived through centuries of upheaval is instructive. It was not institutions that kept the language alive through partition, colonial erasure, and displacement. It was mothers. Domestic spaces. The home as the last archive. That archive

is now at risk — and no podcast, no newsletter can substitute for the daily decision that only a parent can make.

COMING FROM PASDARI

At Pasdari, we have been asking what we are prepared to do — and we are getting closer to an answer. Not just an argument for why Urdu matters. Something you can actually use. Something built specifically for our community, our tradition, and the generation we are trying to reach. Something that puts the language back in the hands of our children. We will have more to share very soon.

PASDARI PODCAST · EPISODE 02

A Conversation with Allama Irtiza Abbas Naqvi

In this episode, we sit with Allama Irtiza Abbas Naqvi — a scholar whose engagement with Marsiya, with Anees, and with the Karbala literary tradition represents some of the most serious scholarship in this field today.

We talk about Urdu as a language of *ehsaas* — of feeling and emotional depth — and why that quality is not incidental to the language but constitutive of it. We explore the *wus'at* of Marsiya: its expansiveness, its ability to hold the full range of what happened at Karbala, not just as history, but as lived experience carried across generations.

We talk about art. About culture. About the uncomfortable truth that when a people lose their cultural forms, they do not simply lose entertainment or tradition — they lose the container in which their identity was held.

And we talk about what that means for us, here, now — in homes across the Bay Area and beyond, where children are growing up fluent in a world that has no room for *gham*.

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Connection through language. Bond through tradition.

Zaib Zaidi

Founder, Pasdari

