

The Hes

Three letters of the Urdu alphabet are called *he*. The original distinction between what Urdu-speakers call *choṭī he* and *barī he* is that in Arabic the two letters make different sounds. However, in Urdu, when *choṭī he* is pronounced, it is pronounced in exactly the same way as *barī he*. *Do-cashmī he* is simply a different version of *choṭī he* (the naskh version), which came to be used in Urdu to show aspiration.

I. Regular barī he and choṭī he:

1. Names

Obviously, *choṭī he* and *barī he* are so named because one is smaller while the other is bigger (even though, as you will see, the smaller one has the larger role). *Barī he* (which I've also seen referred to as *magar-mach he* or "crocodile *he*" because of its shape) is part of the family that also includes *jīm*, *ce*, and *ḵhe*, while *choṭī he* is in a class of its own.

ﺝ barī he

ڊ choṭī he

2. Versus do-cashmī he

In general, if you *hear* a word with a 'h' sound in it, and it is **preceded by a vowel** (sometimes even if it isn't preceded by a vowel), it must be either *barī he* or *choṭī he*. However *there is no way to tell which he the sound should be represented by* simply by hearing it, because normally both *hes* sound exactly the same.

Therefore, you just have to **remember** that, for instance, *ḥāl* is written with a *barī he*, while *hilnā* is written with a *choṭī he*.

However, if you ever suffer from an incurable bout of amnesia and can't remember which *he* to use, **the safest option** is *choṭī he*. This is because *barī he* is used only in words derived from Arabic (of which there are, however, quite a few), whereas *choṭī he* is used in words derived from Arabic, Persian, Sanskrit, English, etc. Therefore many more words use *choṭī he* than *barī he*.

Of course, when I write them in Roman script, I differentiate between them by putting a dot under *barī he*. Others will not be so kind.

3. As ghost letters

In the middle of words, both of these *hes* act as ghost letters. See the handout on ghost letters for details.

II. Word-final *choṭī he* and *barī he*

When used at the end of a word, *choṭī he* and *barī he* have a number of peculiarities.

1. Word-final -ah

When a *choṭī he* appears at the end of a word and is preceded by a *zabar (-ah)*, **the *he* is usually silent.** Word-final *-ah* usually represents the short vowel *-a*, and may even be pronounced *-ā* in most cases. So, for instance, the word written *pājāmah* is in fact pronounced “*pājāma*” or “*pājāmā*.” We may blame Persian for this peculiarity, which seems to have come about because the Persian language needed a way to represent word-final *-a* without having to write a *zabar* at the end of such words.

When word-final *-h* is silent, I will put it in parentheses: *pājāma(h)*.

When such words take *izāfat*, instead of the usual *zer* beneath the last letter (*he*), we put a *hamza* on top of the *he*. (See the handout on *izāfat*.)

2 Irregular letters ending in -h

There are a few very common but irregularly pronounced words ending in *choṭī he* that you must memorize. All of these are similar in that the final *-h* is unpronounced. First of all, there are the pronouns *yi(h)* and *wu(h)*, spelled with final *choṭī hes*, but pronounced as though the *choṭī he* were invisible: “*ye*” and “*wo*.” Note that the invisible *he* still acts as a ghost letter:

وہ *wu(h)* – *wo*

یہ *yi(h)* – *ye*

Similarly, we have the postposition *pi(h)*:

پیہ *pi(h)* – *pe*

However, in the word *ki(h)*, the final *-h* disappears but does not have an effect on the *-i-*, so that the word is pronounced “*ki*”:

کیہ *ki(h)* – *ki*

2. At the end of verb roots

For certain verbs whose root ends in *-h*, the *-h* at the end of the root is represented by two *choṭī hes* instead of one. For instance, the root of the verb *kahnā* is *kah*, which ostensibly has only one *h*, but when it's written in Urdu script, it looks like *kahh*:

There are three common verbs that behave in this way, so that all you should have to do is to memorize these three:

کہنا kahnā

بہنا bahnā

سہنا sahnā

کہ kah (say)

بہ bah (flow)

سہ sah (endure, suffer)

When I write these verb roots in Roman script, I will not write the final *-h* as doubled. That is, I will write *kah*, and expect you to know that it is written *kahh* in Urdu script.

Note that other verbs whose roots end in *-h* do not behave in the same way. In particular, the root of *rahnā*, *rah*, does not become *rahh*.

3. Directly preceded by a consonant

As mentioned in I.1., both of these *hes* can sometimes come directly after a consonant, and sometimes the consonant + *he* can come at the end of the word. For instance, we have the common words *wajh* (reason), *ṭarḥ* (way, manner, method), and *ṣubḥ* (morning).

Possibly for ease of pronunciation, these words are commonly pronounced differently from how they're written. Specifically, speakers put an *-a-* between the consonant and the *he*, so that *wajh* is pronounced “wajah,” *ṭarḥ* is pronounced “tarah,” and *ṣubḥ* is pronounced “subah.”

However, it is not incorrect to pronounce them as they are written, and in poetry in particular, they will almost always be pronounced as they are written in order to preserve the rhythm of the verse.

III. Do-cashmī he:

In Persian, *do-cashmī* means “two-eyed,” and “two-eyed *he*” has this name to distinguish it from its one-eyed ancestor, the *choṭī he*. Originally *do-cashmī he* simply represents a different way of writing *choṭī he*, so some (usually typeset) texts make no distinction between the two. However, I will always distinguish between them.

Do-cashmī he has only one proper function: it comes directly after an aspirable consonant (see the handout on aspirable consonants) to show that it is aspirated. For instance, *pe* is an aspirable consonant, and to show cases in which it is aspirated, we put a *do-cashmī he* directly after it with no intervening vowel, as in *phūl* or *phal* (as opposed to *pal* or *pahle*).

The combination of an aspirable consonant + a *do-cashmī he* should be thought of as a single consonant in itself, as Devanagari orthography makes clear.

Occasionally, an aspirable consonant will be directly followed by a *baṛī he* or a *choṭī he* instead of a *do-cashmī he*. See the first section of this handout for ideas about what to do if you're not sure.