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### Eloquent Parrots; Mixed Language and the Examples of Hinglish and Rekhti

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# Eloquent Parrots

Mixed language and the examples of hinglish and rekhti



Fig. 1  
The 2008 Bollywood film ‘Money Hai To Honey Hai’ reflects the current trend for Hinglish.

‘Hinglish’ has become the lingua franca among urban Indians today. Listen closely and you’ll hear Hindi and Urdu peppered with English words and phrases. Likewise, English sentences are spiked with Hindi or Urdu. In fact, many words that used to be well known in Hindi and Urdu have now disappeared from the vocabulary of native speakers, who have switched over to English equivalents. Ruth Vanita uncovers some of the roots of this mixed language phenomenon in the hybridised poetry of rekhti.

Ruth Vanita

MOST URBAN INDIANS TODAY speak variants of a new dialect, sometimes termed ‘Hinglish’. English spoken in non-formal settings tends to be spiked with many Hindi/ Urdu words, phrases and sentences, while almost all Hindi/Urdu speakers incorporate numerous English words in their speech, not just words like ‘email’, or ‘TV’ but also words like ‘sorry’, ‘tension’ and ‘minute’. Many words that used to be well known in Hindi/Urdu are now almost incomprehensible to native speakers, who have switched over to English equivalents, for example, ‘ball’ now replaces ‘gend’ both in daily speech and in cricket commentary on radio and television. Most TV dramas, comedies and even newscasts that are purportedly in Hindi are now actually in the new mixed language. When English words are used in Hindi, shades of meaning sometimes change, so that resulting formulations are

However, many rekhti poems do not contain either proverbs or exclamatory addresses. They are merely written in less Persianised Urdu than is mainstream rekhta poetry. Conversely, some rekhta poems, such as those of Jur’at, do contain these exclamations.

What then was ‘women’s language?’ Was it a code spoken by women that men did not understand? Clearly not. Most rekhti was written by men and not just by a few men privy to a secret language of women but at the height of its popularity, by numerous poets. It was recited at mushairas (poets’ gatherings), and understood by both women and men.<sup>1</sup> One analogy could be classical Sanskrit drama, where elite male characters speak Sanskrit while women characters and male servants speak Prakrit, but the male characters do understand Prakrit while the women characters understand Sanskrit.

Educated people in North India were conversant with Persian, the language of royal courts and high culture, but most educated people were multilingual and used more than one script to write Urdu and Persian just as people did with Sanskrit; this tradition continued throughout the 19th century. Many Urdu poets wrote in other languages too; for example, the last king of Avadh, Nawab Wajid Ali Shah, wrote in Avadhi, Braj, Marwari, Punjabi, Urdu, Hindi and Persian. Major poet Insha Allah Khan, who wrote under the name ‘Insha’ (Elegantly Stylish), 1756-1817, was a polyglot who wrote in several languages, including Persian, Arabic, Urdu, Turkish, Hindi and Punjabi, and composed both rekhta and rekhti poems.

Rekhti poets’ use of a female persona is closely integrated with their use of a relatively non-Persianised Urdu. Women of upper class Muslim families, especially in the urban centres, were likely to be able to speak some refined or Persianised Urdu, but they would also speak to servants, neighbours and relatives from middle class backgrounds in local languages. Fluency in local languages was required to converse with Hindu women, whether vendors, servants or friends.

Under the Islamicate, it was more common for Muslim men to marry Hindu women than for Hindu men to marry Muslim women. Muslim kings, nobles and gentry often married Hindu women. For example, the last Mughal emperor, Bahadur Shah Zafar, an accomplished poet in Urdu, Persian, Brajhasha and Punjabi, had a Hindu mother. Many Muslims, both men and women, were recent converts and maintained links with their Hindu kin.

For both Muslim and Hindu elite men who spoke the language of high culture in public, ‘women’s speech’ was the language of their private lives, of emotions and of significant imaginative domains. It was the language of the women servants, both Hindu and Muslim, who raised these men in the women’s quarters before they reached puberty; it was the language of many of their mothers and sisters, family friends and neighbours, cousins, aunts, and wives. It was the language of domesticity and the marketplace, and was often close to the mother tongues of the courtesans and male youths with whom these men might develop liaisons.

While many courtesans were accomplished women, who spoke Persianised Urdu in public, they spoke ‘women’s speech’ in private. Permitted, even expected, to speak more freely of erotic matters, they could spice up literary Urdu with jokes and obscenities that respectably married women might use among themselves but would not be expected to use in men’s presence. The mixed clientele of the kothas (homes and workplaces of courtesans) also encouraged the use of mixed speech. Rekhti poet Sa’adat Yar Khan, pen-name ‘Rangin’ (Colourful), 1755-1835, claimed he learnt the language of rekhti from khangis, married women who discreetly engaged in prostitution, and thus represented the overlap between normative households and courtesan households.

‘Women’s speech’ was closely related to the languages of villages and small towns, which were also heard in the streets of Delhi and Lucknow. Used in devotional songs, both Hindu and Muslim, and in romances, it was employed to different degrees in the standard Urdu ghazal (love poem).

English words are infiltrating Hindi sentences:

*Time kya hua hai?* = What time is it right now?  
*I have hazaar things to do.* = I have thousands of things to do.



A selection of popular Hinglish expressions based on Hindi words:

**badmash** *adjective* naughty. Also used as a noun (plural badmashes) to refer to a hooligan, an aggressive or violent person.

**changa** *adjective* fine, great.

**desi (also deshi)** *adjective* authentic, relating to the idea of national or local as opposed to foreign, e.g. desi food would refer to rice, curry, chapati, etc. Desi pastimes include watching Bollywood movies, listening to Hindi music, going to the temple/ mosque etc.

**filmi** *adjective* dramatic, characteristic of Bollywood movies.

**haramzada** *noun* a despicable, obnoxious male. Haramzadi is a female form. Both terms can be used to refer to a man/woman born of unmarried parents.

**jungli** *adjective* unruly, wild in behaviour.

**yaar** *noun* friend, used as a familiar or affectionate form of address.



Fig. 2  
The last king of  
Avadh, Nawab Wajid  
Ali Shah, wrote in  
Avadhi, Braj, Marwari,  
Punjabi, Urdu, Hindi  
and Persian.

Most of the idioms employed in rekhti and identified by Urdu critics as ‘women’s idioms’ are not at all specific to rekhti. Examples include blessings like ‘Bathe in milk and be fruitful of sons’ and curses like ‘*aag lagey*’ (burn up) or ‘*bhaad mein jaye*’ (go into the stove). These are also among the idioms that late 19th century Muslim male reformers criticised Muslim women for using. Reformers considered these usages inappropriate because they were unislamic.<sup>2</sup> These idioms are still widely used today.

**Eloquent parrots**

Because Persian was the language of high culture, most Urdu poets composed in Persian as well, and literary Urdu tended to be highly Persianised. Some major poets and many minor ones wrote rekhti as well, which, arguably, had the effect of helping make colloquial Urdu more acceptable in poetry.

Rekhti poets, drawing attention to the elegance of their language, emphasise both its non-Persian ambience and its Indic urbanity. As opposed to later critics who characterise rekhti as trivial pornographic entertainment for men, rekhti poet Mir Yar Ali ‘Jan Saheb’ (1817-1896), posits it as the symbol of Lucknow’s high culture. He laments the British massacre of Lucknow’s citizens after the 1857 rebellion, and their destruction of its sophisticated culture:

*Jan! You are reading rekhti in Lucknow  
The nightingale is singing in a ruined garden.*<sup>3</sup>

In another poem, Jan Saheb characterises his language as emblematic of Indic (Hindustani) creativity:

*Foreign aunt! You are a nightingale of Shiraz [in Persia]  
I am a parrot of Hindustan and my tongue is eloquent...  
The wretched native hill crows cry ‘caw, caw’  
I will hide my face if they can ever speak my language.*<sup>4</sup>

If the nightingale (bulbul) here stands for Persian poetry, the crow represents the supposedly rustic dialects of semi-educated Indians. Invoking the Indic symbol of the parrot, which has a long ancestry in Indian literatures as a figure of creativity, not mere imitation, this Urdu poet proudly claims that his language is sophisticated as well as specific to his native land.

Jan Saheb writes almost entirely in rekhti. Although he always writes in the female voice, he does not confine himself to conventionally female themes. He addresses a variety of topics, including politics, poetic convention and poetic rivalries.

As nationalist social and religious reform movements developed on the subcontinent in the later 19th century, the lines between Hindus and Muslims hardened. The unfortunate identification of Urdu with Muslims and Hindi with Hindus became institutionalised when, in 1947, India became independent, with Hindi as its national language, and Pakistan was formed as a Muslim state, with Urdu as its national language. While Hindi became increasingly Sanskritised and purged of Persian-based words, Urdu became increasingly Persianised and purged of Sanskrit-based words. Partly as a result of this, rekhti poetry of the early 19th century, with its unashamed hybridity, came to be denigrated and excised from the canon of Urdu poetry.

Despite the efforts of purists, however, hybrid colloquial modern Urdu/Hindi, or what used to be called Hindustani, with its infusion of words from many other languages, continued to flourish in non-academic and non-governmental domains. Bombay cinema played a central role in disseminating and developing it, as did Hindi popular fiction. The emergence of Hinglish is not, therefore, indicative of a new process but the continuation of an old one – the hybridising of language in urban milieus. It represents the fusion of father tongue and mother tongue, the language of public thought with the language of private emotions and intimacy.

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**Notes**

1. In his history of Urdu, Darya-e Latafat, poet Insha recounts an anecdote told by a poet to a courtesan, about a famous rekhti verse that men and women in Lucknow and Delhi used to recite. Quoted in Azad, Muhammad Husain. 2001. *Ab-e Hayat*, translated and edited Frances Pritchett. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
2. See Minault, Gail. 1994. ‘*Other Voices, Other Rooms: The View from the Zenana*,’ in *Women as Subjects: South Asian Histories* ed. Nita Kumar. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia.
3. S.S.M. Naqvi, S.S.M. 1983. ed. *Intikhab-e Rekhti*. Lucknow: Uttar Pradesh Urdu Akademi. All translations are by me.
4. S.S. M. Naqvi, S.S.M. 1983. ed. *Intikhab-e Rekhti*. Lucknow: Uttar Pradesh Urdu Akademi.