

Rekhti Poetry: Love between Women (Urdu)



*Introduced and translated by Saleem Kidwai,
versified by Ruth Vanita*

Rekhti is the feminine of *Rekhta*, which is what Urdu was originally called. But “Rekhti” usually refers to poetry written by male poets in the female voice and using female idiom in Lucknow in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Although the poet Rangeen is supposed to have coined the term “Rekhti,” the tradition of men writing mystic poetry in the female voice and idiom was well established in the various northern Indian languages and dialects from which Urdu emerged. Many poems attributed to Amir Khusro (see p. 129) are devotional poems in the female voice.

In the twentieth century Rekhti was labeled obscene and systematically eliminated from the Urdu canon (see pp. 191–94 for an account of this process). Rangeen’s poems, translated here, have been selected from the very small body of his work that is available. The two poems that poet Jur’at called *chaptinamas* have been excluded from editions of his collected works published in India. Critics exclude Jur’at from their account of the Rekhti poets in order to avoid citing his *chaptinamas*.

In Rekhti recitation at *mushairas* (poets’ gatherings), poets often mimicked the feminine voice to stress the female persona in the poem. Poet Insha assumed different personae while reciting,¹ and Jan Saheb (1817–1896) used a veil as a prop during *mushairas*. Several poets seem to have dressed as women at nineteenth-century *mushairas*.² Many Rekhti poets also took feminine pen names, including *Dogana*, one of the terms used in Urdu to refer to homoerotically inclined women.

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1. Muhammad Hussain Azad, *Aab-i Hayat*, (1907; Lucknow: Urdu Academy, 1997), 221.
 2. See Farhatullah Beg, *Dilli ki Aakhri Shama*, trans. *The Last Mushaira of Delhi*, (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1979).

Rekhti poetry is remarkable for its use of terms to indicate sexual activity between women as well as women given to such activity. One of these terms, *chapti*, is still in use today. *Dogana*, from the root *do* (two), refers to doubling or twoness, and is a noun that refers to lesbian activity as well as women given to such activity. *Chapti* means the activity of sticking, clinging, or rubbing together. Like *dogana*, it is used to indicate this activity between women as well as the women engaging in it. Thus, the speaker may refer to her lover as “my *dogana*” and to her own predilection for “*dogana*” as an activity. The poem’s genre, *Chaptinama*, derives from this word, as do several other words in the poem, as when the women say in the last stanza that they are famous as *chapatbaz*, or “given to the activity of *chapti*.” The notion of lesbian activity as rubbing is close to the French (and English sixteenth-century) term for a lesbian, “tribade” from Latin *tribas*, Greek *tribein*, (rubbing) as well as to the Arabic term for lesbian activity, *Sahq* (rubbing). Compare also the metaphor of friction generated by rubbing the firesticks in ancient Indian texts (see p. 15).

Shaikh Qalandar Baksh, who used the pen name “Jur’at” (Audacity) (1748–1810), was born in Delhi but moved to Lucknow looking for patronage. He lost his sight due to smallpox. A musician, known for his frivolous antics, he has been called the first Urdu erotic poet.³ He was a good friend of Insha.

Sa’adat Yar Khan, “Rangeen” (Colorful, see p. 119) (1755–1835), was a mercenary, a horse trader, and a poet. Zaidi describes him as “a gay, dissolute and handsome young man.”⁴ As a poet he found patronage in Lucknow. Rangeen was a prolific writer. Apart from his poetry, which includes long poems on weapons and on horse diseases, translations from Arabic, and religious poetry, he also wrote four works in prose, one in Persian. He organized his poems into four volumes: two of *ghazals*, one of obscene poetry and one of Rekhti.

Insha Allah Khan, “Insha” (1756–1817), was a good friend of Rangeen. He grew up in Bengal and later settled in Lucknow. A polyglot, he was known for his versatility with words and for his humor. He wrote poetry in many genres and languages. A large part of his poetry was in Rekhti. He also wrote *Darya-i Latafat*, a Persian book about the Urdu language. This is the first Urdu grammar written by an Indian. In it he argues in favor of the common Indian pronunciation of Arabic and Persian words as opposed to their pronunciation in their original lands.⁵ In another work, *Kahani Theth Hindi Mein* (Stories in Pure Hindi), he did not use any Arabic or Persian word.

3. Nurul Hasan Naqvi, ed., *Kulliyat-i Jur’at*, (Aligarh: Muslim University, 1971), 15.

4. Ali Jawad Zaidi, *A History of Urdu Literature* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), 142.

5. T. Graham Bailey, *A History of Urdu Literature*, (1928; Delhi: Sumit Publications, 1979), 54.