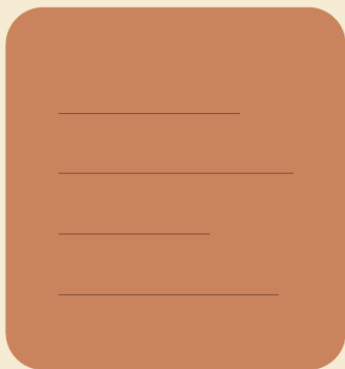




**Indian Institute
of Paremiology**

WE TURN PROVERBS INTO PICTURES

PRESERVING MEMORY AND CULTURAL HERITAGE AS WE DO



RESEARCH NOTE 01

PROVERBS ARE MORE SERIOUS THAN THEY LOOK

A first look at the research landscape

INDIAN INSTITUTE OF PAREMIOLOGY

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Indian Institute of Paremiology
Research Note 01 · September 2026



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A field hiding in plain sight

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A picture is worth a thousand words. How much of a picture can a proverb paint?

Why we looked

What began as a search for context opened onto a much larger world.

Proverbs can look like small, familiar sayings. The research shows something much larger. They are compact forms of language, memory and argument: repeated at home, adapted in public life, tested in classrooms, used in courts, collected in archives and remade online.

A proverb may contain a household, a history, a social rule, a joke, a prejudice or an entire way of seeing the world. Turning proverbs into pictures is therefore not merely decorative. It asks what each short sentence carries within it.

Paremiology crosses linguistics, folklore, anthropology, psychology, education, translation, literature, history, media studies and computational research. Its central finding is reassuring: proverbs are not dying museum pieces. They remain living language.

What the field asks

Meaning. How do context, tone and shared knowledge change the literal words?

Origins. Does a saying have one source, or emerge through repetition, migration and translation?

Structure. How do rhythm, contrast and imagery make sayings memorable?

Use. Is the speaker advising, persuading, mocking, justifying or resisting?

Change. What happens when an old saying becomes a joke, slogan, meme or anti-proverb?

Power. Which assumptions about gender, caste, disability or social order survive inside it?

The field gets wonderfully strange

The scholarship is rigorous. Its subjects can be wonderfully unexpected.

An LSD cult. A 1970 study examined how proverbial expressions helped organise belief inside an American LSD cult. The curiosity points to a serious idea: sayings can stabilise the worldview of a tightly bounded group.

A Nigerian court. Research on the Anang judicial system showed proverbs functioning as more than ornament. They could sharpen reasoning, establish authority and help make a case.

The proverb turned upside down. Anti-proverbs deliberately alter familiar sayings. Humour is part of their force, but so is critique.

Machines reading millions of words. Corpus research can trace proverb forms across books, newspapers and social media, including variants older indexes miss.

Pictures that “say” a proverb. From Bruegel’s paintings to today’s visual culture, an image can evoke a saying without printing it.

AI meets oral tradition. AI may assist collection, comparison and translation, but human speakers remain essential for context, nuance and verification.

The foundations are sound

The Institute's present direction is supported by the literature.

Our review has not uncovered a reason to retreat from the Institute's approach. It supports treating proverbs as living cultural records and presenting them with care, context and visual imagination.

A landmark bibliography identified roughly 350 proverb collections in 34 Indian languages, while noting that around 1,000 further articles and papers were outside its scope. Much exists; much is scattered; and much remains difficult for non-specialists to discover.

The Institute does not claim to own India's proverbs or become their final authority. Its role is to collect carefully, connect published sources with living memory, and keep the record open to question and correction.

Our working principles

Start with Punjabi, connect outward. Depth begins with a language community; comparison shows how sayings travel.

Record provenance. Keep wording, transliteration, translation, source, date and editorial history.

Show context. Meaning changes with speaker, audience, situation and tone.

Invite expertise. Let speakers, collectors, teachers, artists and researchers extend the record.

Preserve disagreement. Variants and competing interpretations are evidence, not clutter.

Use technology carefully. Digital tools widen access; judgement and cultural knowledge remain visible.

From an interesting shelf to a useful resource

A properly organised research section will follow.

The Institute intends to bring together selected books, articles, bibliographies, databases, journals, associations and research projects. It will not reproduce the whole field. Its purpose will be practical: reliable starting points and a way to follow new work, especially on India, Punjabi language and culture, migration, visual interpretation and digital methods.

Durable identifiers - including ISBNs where appropriate and stable catalogue records for smaller outputs - will make the Institute's work easier to cite, preserve and find.

Proverbs, research and shared work

Contribute a proverb. Tell us the words as you heard them, who used them and what they meant in that situation.

Share research with us. We welcome contact from researchers, collectors, translators, teachers, archivists, artists and students who may wish to share publications, current projects, working papers, collections or relevant leads.

Sharing work does not mean automatic endorsement or publication. It means worthwhile material can be considered fairly, recorded properly and connected with others in the field.

NOTES

Further reading

This is an introductory research note, not a claim to settle the field. The following sources informed its direction and examples.

Hrisztova-Gotthardt, H. & Aleksa Varga, M. (eds.). Introduction to Paremiology: A Comprehensive Guide to Proverb Studies. De Gruyter Open, 2014.

Mieder, W. Proverbs: A Handbook. Greenwood Press, 2004.

Doctor, R. A Bibliography of Indian Proverbs. Central Institute of Indian Languages, 2004.

Bauman, R. & McCabe, G. "Proverbs in an LSD Cult." Journal of American Folklore 83, no. 329 (1970): 317-324.

Messenger, J. C. "The Role of Proverbs in a Nigerian Judicial System." Southwestern Journal of Anthropology 15, no. 1 (1959): 64-73.

International Association of Paremiology (AIP-IAP). Proceedings of the Interdisciplinary Colloquium on Proverbs.

Proverbium. International yearbook of proverb scholarship, University of Vermont.

ProverbNet. Multilingual proverb database and linked-data research resource.

The full research section will provide fuller records and links.



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