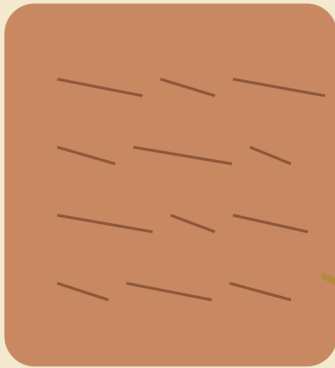




**Indian Institute
of Paremiology**

WE TURN PROVERBS INTO PICTURES

PRESERVING MEMORY AND CULTURAL HERITAGE AS WE DO



WHO INVENTED

THE FIRST PROVERB?

How old sayings travel, change
and outlive their speakers

Rajah

Chaurasi Lakh Joon

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An illustrated essay from the Indian Institute of Paremiology



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That may be the first qualification for becoming a proverb: the sentence survives, and the speaker disappears.

Who invented the first proverb?

I do not know.

Nobody knows. That is not an academic failure. It is the nature of the thing. Proverbs belonged to speech before they belonged to books. They were passed across tables, fields, workshops and generations long before anyone thought to write down who had said them first. By the time a proverb appears in the written record, it has usually already lost its author. That may be the first qualification for becoming a proverb: the sentence survives, and the speaker disappears.

Some of the earliest surviving written proverb collections come from ancient Sumer. They were copied onto clay tablets, but the tablets do not tell us who invented proverbial speech. They tell us only that human beings were collecting it very early. Surviving records are evidence of early recording, not proof of invention.

Centuries later, scholars gathered, compared and classified proverbs across languages. The modern field acquired a suitably obscure name: paremiology, the study of proverbs. Its close relation, paremiography, is the work of collecting and recording them. Archer Taylor's *The Proverb*, published by Harvard University Press in 1931, became a cornerstone of modern international

proverb scholarship. The subject now extends from old manuscripts and oral histories to large digital collections that can trace how sayings travel, change and sometimes disappear.

A proverb may begin with an individual sentence, but it becomes proverbial only through social acceptance and reuse. The first speaker may have been a farmer, a ruler, a craftsperson, a parent or a child. Repetition does the work that a signature cannot. What survives belongs increasingly to the people who carry it.

02 / ESSAY

The sayings that came back

I was not setting out to assemble a proverb collection. I was trying to make sense of a life.

I did not know any of this when I began writing. Yet when I sat down and reflected, the old sayings kept returning. They arrived without invitation because that is how they had entered me in the first place: through family, teasing, warning, memory and ordinary conversation.

In *Books, or Dancers?*, I began with the familiar English warning, 'Don't judge a book by its cover.' Once I looked beyond English, the same suspicion of appearances was waiting everywhere, but never in quite the same clothes.

In Punjabi, an elephant has one set of teeth for eating and another for display. In Hindi, the shop is grand but the food is disappointing. In Thai, gold is wrapped in a rag. In Japanese, a person is not necessarily what they appear to be. In Chinese, a person cannot be judged by appearance any more than the sea can be measured with a dipper.

The lesson travels. The image belongs to the place.

Then came Am I a Mad Jatt? My grandfather had left me no academic theory, but he had left me a structure for examining people. Do not look first at a man's money or education; look at his khandan, the people and formation from which he comes. A person must have izzat, because without standing and self-respect there is very little left. But above both sits nit, intention: recognise the person's nit. Khandan asks where you came from. Izzat asks what standing you carry. Nit asks what is driving you. I had carried those formulations for years before noticing how proverbial they had become in my own thinking.

EK TE IK GYARAH

One and one is eleven.

The written figures make the proverb visible: place one beside one and they become 11. Its force lies in solidarity. Two people acting together may achieve more than either could alone.

An image of cooperation and collective strength.

Little Punjabs

By the time I wrote *The Proverbial Sikh*, there was no point pretending this was accidental.

The proverbs had become little Punjabs. Some were wise. Some were funny. Some were cruel. Some were plainly wrong. One warned that what you have eaten and drunk is your only secure gain because whatever remains may belong to the next invader. Another observed that when the granary is full, even the fool is thought wise. Another accepted the panchayat's decision with great respect and then left the drain exactly where it was.

And, inevitably, somebody fell from a donkey and blamed the potter.

That last one may explain the Institute better than any mission statement.

A proverb is not true merely because it is old. The fact that an idea survived long enough to become proverbial tells us that it travelled; it does not make the idea wise. But survival is evidence of something. A proverb records what people noticed, feared, mocked, admired or took for granted. Its variations are not necessarily mistakes. They may be the footprints left by the proverb as it moved from one household, district, language or century to another.



Fell from the donkey, blamed the potter. A sharp picture of anger directed at the wrong person.

04 / ESSAY

Why create an Institute?

In a spirit of complete seriousness and slight mischief, we established the Indian Institute of Paremiology.

We did not invent the proverbs. We barely knew the word paremiology. We discovered that the thing we had begun doing for pleasure already had a discipline attached to it, which seemed a perfectly good reason to found an Institute.

The answer is not that proverbs are always wise. Some preserve generosity and humour; others carry hierarchy, prejudice and conclusions that no longer deserve obedience. Their value lies partly in what they reveal. A proverb shows what a community noticed often enough to remember, and what it accepted readily enough to repeat.

The Institute begins from a simple belief: ordinary language is part of the historical record. A sentence used by a grandmother in a kitchen may never enter an archive, yet it may carry an occupation, a social order, a fear, a joke or an old argument across generations. If nobody records the words, the circumstances and the variants, that record disappears quietly.

Preservation does not require reverence. We can keep a proverb without endorsing it. Recording where a saying is cruel, unequal or plainly wrong may be as important as celebrating its wit. The task is not to manufacture ancestral wisdom. It is to preserve evidence of how people thought, spoke and made sense of their world.

What the research changed

The Institute did not begin by declaring itself an authority. It began by looking.

We examined how established scholars, collections, journals and international projects approached the field. We looked at the work of the International Association of Paremiology and its long-running colloquia, the journal *Proverbium*, major handbooks, bibliographies and international classification systems. We also examined Punjabi dictionaries, folklore collections, university resources, digital archives and living sources.

The first lesson was that collecting and studying are related but different tasks. Paremiography records and organises proverbs. Paremiology examines their form, meaning, history, use and variation. A useful project needs both. A list without evidence is unreliable, while analysis without a dependable text may be analysis of the wrong words.

The second lesson was that no single test can settle whether a sentence is a proverb. Family memory, an online list or inclusion in one book may provide evidence, but none automatically proves origin, age or general use. Wording varies across districts, dialects, scripts and

households. Those differences should be recorded rather than corrected out of existence.

The third lesson concerned continuity. Established projects show that publication creates cumulative value when proceedings, papers, sources and indexes remain accessible. They also show how easily a field's record can become scattered across programmes, websites, books and private knowledge. We want to design our public record coherently from the beginning.

This research did not provide a rulebook for us to copy. It helped us see which disciplines could strengthen a modest independent project, which ambitions belonged to universities and large associations, and where an open visual collection could make a useful contribution.

06 / ESSAY

Our working philosophy

We would rather record uncertainty
than manufacture authority.

A remembered saying is recorded as remembered. A documented version is linked to its source. A literal translation is kept separate from a roughly equivalent English proverb. Different versions are allowed to coexist. Living speakers help us understand pronunciation, setting and current use; books and archives help establish what was recorded and when.

Where those forms of evidence disagree, the disagreement becomes part of the record.

The purpose is modest. We want to identify proverbs, record the words faithfully, note where they came from, preserve their variants, and distinguish an old saying from a family recollection or a new line that merely sounds proverbial. If someone wants to use a proverb, we want them to be able to find a version with a source, a translation, a context and an honest note about what remains uncertain.

The public presentation can remain light. A reader may encounter one proverb and one picture. Behind that image, however, should sit a record of the wording, variants, sources, translation, context, interpretation and visual decisions. Research and illustration are not separate projects. The archive is the engine; the picture is its public face.

We will undoubtedly make mistakes. We would rather record the uncertainty than manufacture authority. If a saying belongs to your family, village or language in a different form, tell us. If our spelling is wrong, correct us. If the meaning has shifted, show us how. The catalogue should become more reliable through disagreement, not more pompous through certainty.

A meaningful resource

Success does not require mass attention.

The ambition is not to become a central authority that decides which proverbs belong to India or what every community should believe. India's languages and proverbial traditions are far too numerous and alive for that claim. The aim is more modest and more useful: to build, patiently, a trustworthy and visually distinctive collection; to connect published sources with living memory; and to make the resulting record open enough for other people to question, correct and use.

AKHAAN - Punjab Illustrated is the first focused project. It provides a manageable place to test the method: one Punjabi proverb treated as a complete story, with its language preserved, its variants respected, its meaning considered and its visual interpretation made carefully. Later work can extend to other Indian languages and to the living connections between Punjab, Goa and Thailand without assuming relationships that the evidence has not established.

If the work helps a smaller community recognise sayings they had nearly forgotten, recover words from their families, question an inherited prejudice, or contribute a better source, it has created something meaningful. Over

time, those individual records may become a cultural resource larger than any single picture or publication.

We still cannot identify the first person who turned experience into a sentence that other people chose to repeat. Perhaps that anonymity is not a gap waiting to be filled, but the beginning of the subject. Proverbs become communal by leaving their first speaker behind.

The Institute cannot return those names. It can listen more carefully to the people still carrying the words, preserve what can be established, admit what cannot, and leave a record useful to whoever listens next.

Who invented the first proverb?

We still do not know.

But we can begin by listening to the next one.

NOTES

Further reading

This is an introductory essay, not a claim to settle the history or definition of the proverb. The following sources informed the historical and methodological orientation.

Ancient Sumer. The Oxford Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature bibliography records collections and scholarship on ancient Sumerian proverbs, including Proverbs of Ancient Sumer: The World's Earliest Proverb Collections.

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Archer Taylor. The Proverb. Harvard University Press, 1931. HathiTrust catalogue record.

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Wolfgang Mieder. 'Modern Paremiology in Retrospect and Prospect.' *Paremia* 6, 1997.

cvc.cervantes.es/lengua/paremia/pdf/006/064_mieder.pdf

Hrisztalina Hrisztova-Gotthardt and Melita Aleksa Varga, editors. Introduction to Paremiology: A Comprehensive Guide to Proverb Studies. De Gruyter Open, 2015. This 358-page volume is available through the Institute's Resources section.

Rui J. B. Soares. 'From Paremiography to Paremiology: The Role of AIP-IAP as an International and Cultural Exchange Facilitator.' *Folklore* 46, 2010.

folklore.ee/folklore/vol46/soares.pdf

International Association of Paremiology. Interdisciplinary Colloquium on Proverbs, programmes and proceedings.

colloquium-proverbs.org

Computational paremiology. Davis and colleagues use large corpora to study how proverbs change in relevance over time.

arxiv.org/abs/2107.04929

One proverb, carefully recorded

The Indian Institute of Paremiology is an independent cultural and research initiative. It collects, checks, interprets and illustrates proverbs, beginning with AKHAAN - Punjab Illustrated. Its authority will come from the quality, transparency and usefulness of its work, not from pretending to be a university or official regulator.

Each completed record aims to preserve original wording, variants, source evidence, literal and natural translations, context of use, sensitivity questions and the decisions behind the illustration.

Contribute a proverb

If you remember a proverb from your family, village, language or region, tell us the words as you heard them, who used them, when they were said and what they meant in that situation. A contribution is a beginning for research, not an automatic claim of authenticity.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rajah is the writing name of BalRaj Sandhu, a British Punjabi Sikh writer and founder of the Indian Institute of Paremiology. His work explores memory, identity, institutions and the history carried by everyday language. He publishes personal essays through The Loose Sikh Canon.

Chaurasi Lakh Joon

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