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# **The Semiotics of Kashmiri Proverbs: An Examination of the Interplay between Language, Culture, and Power**

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**Abstract:** With the significant shift in focus by historians worldwide from traditional political history to social history, the common people have assumed a central role in recent historical discourses. To put together the objective and impartial history of the people, emphasis is put on accessing and analysing the folk collective mentality. The paper will focus on the popular folk sayings like proverbs (*zarb-ul-misl*) and riddles (*pretche*) of the Kashmiri language and will highlight how these folk sayings are in themselves a repository of some particular historical context and by extension transgenerational carriers of history. A highlight will be made of how historical accounts are transmitted through these means to posterity. Thus an active archive is established in the social consciousness of a particular community through the language they share. Kashmiri being predominantly an oral language also navigates through the dynamics of remembering-forgetting. In that context revisiting and analysing the popular folk sayings allows a fresh peep into the history of the place and language.

**Keywords:** Folk sayings, Kashmir, Memory, Oral history, Proverbs, Textuality, Paremiology.

## Introduction

Proverbs have long been construed and recognized as ‘the palm oil with which words are eaten’ indeed this concise and succinct ways of putting one’s mind into words have been in

use since time immemorial. This brief but succinct ways of describing, thoughts, wants and moral, which we called proverbs not only describes our intention but such sayings encapsulate and contains collective wisdom. This wisdoms are drawn from shared experiences of a particular time, geography and culture. Regina F. Blackwell and Galit Hasan-Rokem, in their seminal work *A Companion to Folklore*, describe proverbs as “highly condensed, ready-made metaphorical expressions” infused with lived tradition and culture. They also opined that proverbs are indeed loaded with authority to authenticate the environment of the people who are covered by the proverbs. This understanding points to the dialectic nature of the dual function of proverbs, proverbs serve not only as a reservoir of wisdom and its disseminating nature but it also serve to point out and remember the historical and cultural moments from which they emerge. Despite the absence of a singular, universally accepted definition, scholars like Taylor (1975) are of the view that proverbs resonate and represents with the populace and the culture of the common man and women. Thus, opining that the very essence and usage of proverbs lies in manifesting the lives and thoughts and culture of the common people. Hence the very essence of proverbs lies in its relevance with the society and its role as cultural artifacts and documents.

Proverbs as a tool of human narrative also display and reflects a dynamic nature of mutability and plainness. The adaptability and manoeuvring nature of proverbs points to the deeply rooted characteristics of proverbs with the socio-cultural set up of the community. Thus at times, the meaning and source of the proverb are closely tied to the happenings of historical incidents and happenings, as such their meanings can be construed as having evolved and originated in response to changing social contexts. This evolution can be seen as a gradual progression of language foregrounded in the idiosyncrasy of a specific given situation. The ever changing

nature of the meaning and subject of proverbs necessitates the need for a nuanced understanding of proverbs, which is not separated and divorced from their historical and ideological footings. As noted by Wolfgang Meider, (2008), caution need to be exercised in making sweeping generalizations about a particular subjects and community based solely on proverbial expressions, since individual interpretations vary and differs widely, shaped by personal experiences and socio-cultural historical influences.

The concept of the “age of rapprochement” introduced by Peter Burke’s offers a valuable framework for understanding the shifting dynamic relationship between history and folklore. The inclusion and conscious prioritisation by historian of the lived-experiences of the masses in the latter half of the twentieth century in social documentary has brought about a marked sea change in understanding human culture. The rise of new social history, has asserted the significance of the everyday experiences of the common folks, thus challenging the traditional historiographical focus on prominent historical figures and monumental events. This shift has opened new methodologies such as “microhistory” and “historical anthropology,” which encourage and advocates for a more interdisciplinary approaches to the study of cultural artifacts, such as proverbs. Thus, paving the way for researchers and social anthropologist to include and accept the hitherto unheard off and marginal experience in the construction of historical cultural narratives. Hinge

The pivot of classic demarcation between folklore and history has always rest on the notions of subjectivity. While historians are understood to strive for an impartial representation of the past, through correct historiography, folklorists are assumed as embracing the imaginative aspects inherent in human (folk) narratives. This imaginative playfulness though, crucial is seen as unreliable since it allows for multiple retellings of the same story, each infused and soaked with unique

contextual significance. Arthur L. Campa's assertion that folklore is a "living organism" in his book "*Folklore in the American South*" (1972) emphasizes and pointed out the fluidity and mutability of cultural expressions. This mutability, according to Arthur, thrive on tradition but such fluid-intertextual nature do risk stagnation when removed from their dynamic contexts.

The relegation of folklore as a "trivial" narrative thereby rendering it to an unreliable form of narrative is now gradually rectified. Many historians have recognized the value that folk narratives hold in understanding and accessing reliable historical truths. The acknowledgement and recognition that folkloric forms such as proverbs, rather than being mere embellishments, but are deeply embedded invaluable historical and ideological frameworks have open up a varied spectrum of methodologies to understand human heritage and its cultural past. This acceptance of including Folkloric narrative as a reliable form of historical studies have brought about a consensus that the folk narrative are not just a mere trivial form but these expressions are vital comment on social events and historical situations, and their meanings and significance are based on the cultural knowledge of their audience. Thus, the intimate relationship between proverb and context ensures that even a partial articulation of a proverb can convey rich thematic significance and important social and philosophical connotation which were hitherto buried or side lined as inconsequential.

The inclusion of folklore within historical contexts has also enriches understanding of cultural occasions and proceedings. The study of folklores and proverbs have revealed many complex human intersectional realities that were otherwise remain obscured and overlooked. Henry H. Glassie in his seminal work on Mexican folk art, "The Spirit of Folk Art: The Mexican Masters" (1989) suggests that folklore and history

can coexist harmoniously, providing a multifaceted perspective and understanding on past incidences, each complementing and supplementing each other's on the provision of shedding new lights into past occurrences. Glassie further opines that, the lingering scepticism regarding the credibility of folk narratives need not persists, provided that fragments of folk history, devoid of contextual anchoring, may be perceived as absurd. This understanding highlights the importance of situating folklore within broader social structures, as articulated by Collin Lucas in his work "**The Anthropology of Folklore**" (1989) who advocates for understanding folklore as part of a cohesive web of systems that shape collective behaviour.

In light of the above considerations, it becomes clear that the study of proverbs must be conducted in connection with of social factors. With an interdisciplinary approach, scholars are provided with a wider range of tools to understand the past and their correlation with their action. This intertextual method enables scholars to draw more nuanced conclusions about cultural expressions and their implications for understanding historical dynamics. By situating and placing proverbs within the rich canvas of social history, researchers can uncover the intricate nexus and ways in which linguistic artifacts reflect, shape, and are mould by the cultural and historical landscapes from which they arise. The theoretical exploration of proverbs as cultural and historical phenomena reveals their dual nature as carriers of social knowledge and reflections of common social realities. This intertextual method furthered the inquiry into the interconnectedness of human culture. By blending folklore with historiography, a holistic understanding of the complexity and richness of human expression across time and cultures can be understood and retrieve.

Kashmir as a cultural and geographical topography boasts a folk tradition that is as ancient and as rich as any in the world, with many scholars tracing the folk tradition of the region and its roots to 2000 years. While the origins of this rich tradition are the subject of ongoing debate, some scholars suggest that the well-known ancient fables of the *Panchatantra*, which date back over 2000 years, may have originated in Kashmir. Additionally, the *Brihat Katha*, another significant collection in the oral and written tradition of India, is believed to have been compiled in Kashmir by Gunadhiya, employing the little-known language - Paisachi. This language which finds mentions in Sanskrit literature is believed to have originated somewhere in the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE which was used in the Himalayan foothill region (possibly parts of what is now **modern-day Pakistan**). These early works highlight the deep and enduring relationship between the region's landscape and its narrative heritage.

The arrival of European missionaries in the second half of the nineteenth century brought about anew enthusiasm to resuscitate the hitherto unknown rich folk culture of Kashmir. The systematically documentation these cultural expressions were revived notably by, Rev. J. Hinton Knowles. Rev. Knowles produced two seminal works: *A Dictionary of Kashmir Proverbs and Sayings* (1888) and *Folktales of Kashmir* (1893). The publication of these two works ultimately laid down the foundation for the modern study of Kashmiri Folk literature. Knowles publication not only paved the way for rekindling interest in Kashmiri folk culture, but his works also contributed to documenting the vanishing folk expression of the region. While his scholarship has faced criticism for its Orientalist perspectives and a tendency to prioritize Western literary traditions, often side-lining the intrinsic value of Indian folklore, his contributions remain vital for the preservation and documentation of Kashmiri folk literature.

Following Knowles, the work of resuscitating and documenting the Kashmiri folk literature fall on two notable figures. Both Aurel Stein and George Grierson further advanced the study of Kashmiri folklore in the early twentieth century. In the year 1923, Aurel Stein and Grierson published *Hatim's Tales: Kashmiri Stories and Songs*, this book not only showcased the richness of Kashmiri narratives but also inspired a new generation of scholars and enthusiastic laymen to engage with the region's cultural heritage. Native scholars like Noor Mohammad, Shambu Nath Bhat Hakeem, Sudarshan Kashkari, and Professor Mohi-ud-din Hajini, promptly took to shoulder the responsibility of furthering the folk expression of Kashmir. All the four writers collectively produced a variety of works encompassing folk tales, proverbs, fables, and other folkloristic works.

The cultural landscape of Kashmir is particularly notable for its intertwined history of religion, art, and folklore. The amalgamation of religion, art and folklore has played a crucial role in shaping and determining the culture of the region. This intersection have also resulted in producing a multifaceted outlook the region's picturesque past. Kalhana's *Rajtarangni*, for instance, serves as an early historical account that is enriched by the influence of legend and oral tradition. The 19th-century historian Pir Hassan also recognized the value of oral narratives, utilizing them to fill historical gaps and provide a more nuanced understanding of Kashmiri history (Fayaz 15).

Proverbs in Kashmir not only transcends expressions of wisdom but they serve as profound reflections of the collective psyche and distinct temperament of the Kashmiri people. The proverbs embody not only guiding faith and principle for everyday life but it also serves as critiques of social injustices, expressing the complex emotional landscape of a society shaped by prolonged experiences of conflict and violence. As Fayaz (31) notes, these proverbs reflect the multifaceted

dimensions of the Kashmiri psyche, revealing how deeply intertwined cultural narratives are with historical traumas.

The intimate connection between conflict and Kashmiri proverbs is particularly striking. Sayings such as *pushuk ti nai tsoluk ti nai* (you could neither resist nor run), *batI batI tI pyadI patI* (Food, food, the sepoy in pursuit), and *doad tcheli dag tchelini* (wounds heal but pain never does) encapsulate the pain and trauma inflicted by feudal lords, maharajas, their armies, and revenue collectors on the psyche of the common man and woman. These proverbs not only convey the historical grievances of the common Kashmiri people but also continue to resonate in contemporary social contexts. Even in apolitical settings, they carry with them a historical baggage that evokes a collective subconscious fear and trauma.

In Kashmiri culture, two terms for proverbs are commonly used: *kahavat* (literally, "saying") and *zarb-ul-misl* (proverb or metaphor) (Fayaz 31). This dual terminology underscores the cultural significance of proverbs as both expressions of wisdom and artistic metaphors that condense complex social realities. The continued relevance of these proverbs speaks to their enduring power as tools for communication, reflection, and social commentary.

It will be fair to assert that in the above paragraphs substantial arguments have been made which establish the idea that proverbs can be used to understand and explore the cultural, social and political history of a particular geographical location with help from other social indicators. In the following pages some of the proverbs of Kashmiri language will be discussed. The discussion of these proverbs will follow a sequential pattern. The adoption of this method is preferred because of the clarity it provides with discussion and comparative analysis vis-a-vis historical accounts and other proverbs. The discussion will include the proverb, its literal

and proverbial meaning, explanation and its relationship with history.

1. Proverb: *Agar Khán tsavyo gagar troái , tath no míjis kum yout*

Literal meaning: Agar Khán entered into a rat's hole, and there he did not even get a bran cake.

Proverbial meaning: last resort/ in extremis

Explanation: Agar Khan, one of the old pathan governors in Rajouri is remembered through the people's memory. According to Hinton Knowles, Agar Khan had the state in crisis- army rebelling, treasury empty. He is supposed to have given up his jewels and other valuables in order to assist his family and servants but couldn't part with his elephant about whom is said '*Agar Khanun hustui lustui tah lustui; lustui nah ti khustui*' - should Agar khan's elephant live, it lives; and if it does not live, then nevermind. The much-loved elephant was let free at last and probably wreaked havoc.

2. Proverb: *naage' gaade' wuchni halal ti khenni haram*

Literal meaning: the fish of spring are lawful to look at but forbidden to eat.

Proverbial meaning: when we are sure we cannot get or obtain something.

Explanation: the Naga cult worshipped snakes in ancient Kashmir. Since the snakes were often located near the springs, this made these springs and everything in them sacred. Despite the conversion of Nagas first into the Arya cult and later into Islam in the fourteenth century these springs and everything in them still retained their sacred character. In another historical event when Gulab Singh died in 1857 one priest told his son Ranbir Singh that the soul of the king has entered a fish which prompted the son of the late king to issue an order that banned the catching of fish from Amira kadel to

Habba Kadel for four years, the two famous bridges over Jehlum in Srinagar. Thus, the historicity behind the proverb is that the sacredness of the springs established this culture of forbidding the fish of the spring. Whereas the superstition about the King's soul entering the fish in the nineteenth century gave a political strength to the adherence of the practice which is so deep rooted in the cultural consciousness that even to this day Kashmiri people including muslims abstain from eating fish from the springs despite all fish being permitted in Islam and there being no political ban in order.

### 3. Proverb: *Sher Singhun Draag*

Literal meaning: Sher Singh's Famine

Proverbial meaning: refers to the famine in Sher Singh's time.

Explanation: Kashmir has witnessed countless natural disasters, floods, earthquakes, fires but famines have been so recurrent in the history of the valley that it seems that the scars of draag have been etched deep. In 1833, Kashmir was ravaged by a severe famine when Sher Singh, son of Maharaja Ranjit Singh governed the valley. In its daily utterance the proverb is used for a person who is always hungry and craving food all the time. In the months-long lockdown due to political instability when all the family members stay indoors and like munching on various foods the proverb finds a revival of sorts on the tongues of Kashmiri housewives. The resurrection of the proverb underlines the cultural memory of a particular community that resurfaces unconsciously once situations similar to the past arise. In case of lockdowns the insecurity of consuming one's ration and the difficulty in the availability or purchase of goods amounts to famine.

### 4. Proverb: *Anim sui, wawum sui, lajim sui, panasi.*

Literal meaning: I brought the nettle, sowed it, and got stung by it.

Proverbial meaning: To be responsible for one's own destruction.

Explanation: Even though the proverb is self explanatory, Hinton K Knowles narrates a story behind the origin of the proverb. A fakir planted nettle on his hand. The nettle grew on his hand for years. People began to pay him visits and give him alms. One of his pupils became envious of his fame and destroyed the nettle. This aphorism is claimed to have been used by the fakir at this time.

### 5. Proverb: *Batah gaji ruhun*

Literal meaning: Garlic upon the hearth of pandits.

Proverbial meaning: Used when someone's presence is not liked/preferred.

Explanation: Pandits in Kashmir would not touch garlic. They believe that it is 'Tamsik', which causes anger, bad thoughts etc. There are many more proverbs referring to the minority community of Kashmir, one of the interesting ones being *Batas boud doh ti phakhe/ musalmanas boud doh ti sharakh'/ rafzias boud doh ti baakh.* (On his big day, a Hindu fasts/ a muslim feasts/ and a shia weeps). This proverb highlights how the celebration of festive occasions of three different communities differ. The proverb has a latent tone of mockery to it and no matter who among the three communities uses it, the proverb has a touch of humorous self-deprecation.

## Conclusion

The discussion of the above proverbs shows that there exists a deep connection between history and proverbs. The connection is manifested through the names or references of people and places mentioned in proverbs like *Sher Singun Drag* or *Agar Khán tsavyo gagar troái , tath no míjis kum*

*yout* where the names of personages are mentioned which prompts a paremiologist or historian to look for those figures in the ancient texts. There also exist proverbs like *tsoluk ti nai pushuk ti nai* that over time through subjective playfulness or other reasons, though still full of wisdom, have become vague or always were, such that it is difficult to pin them to a definite historical period or geographical location since they do not contain names like the previous ones. The general argument as established by the paremiological tradition that proverbs are reliable sources of history in presence of other social and historical indicators as was argued by Meider and Arthur Campa. However, the two classes of proverbs mentioned above raise a serious question on what happens to proverbs in absence of historical evidence. The answer that proverbs still perform the function of imparting cultural wisdom and traditional experience to the posterity although satisfactory limits the scope of proverbs in providing knowledge. The idea will become clearer if we create a hypothetical scenario with a proverb that already has a well-documented history of origin and evolution.

Take, for instance, the proverb *naage gaade wuchni halal ti khenni haram* (the fish of spring are lawful to look at but forbidden to eat). This proverb is well-documented within historical texts, allowing us to understand the cultural rationale behind why Kashmiri people, who generally enjoy fish in their meals, refrain from consuming them from springs. The historical context provides clarity and richness to the proverb, grounding it in cultural practice.

Now, imagine a situation where we have this proverb, but no accompanying historical narrative. In such a case, we would observe an entire population engaged in a cultural practice—abstaining from eating spring fish—without any clear roots or evidential basis for this behavior. The only link to this practice would be the proverb itself, transmitted through oral tradition.

In this scenario, what role would the proverb play? Would it be relegated to mere wisdom, or could it be argued that it holds a more significant position? The proverb, in this instance, delineates dietary practices for various communities within a specific geographical location and influences their collective psyche. This influence suggests that proverbs may transcend their historical contexts, serving as phenomena to be observed rather than strictly established by historical evidence. Their substantial social and cultural impact provides a form of validity that can be compelling for historians seeking to understand the practices and beliefs of a community.

In support of this perspective, we can invoke the words of astronomer Carl Sagan, who famously asserted, "Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence." This principle resonates strongly in the context of proverbs, suggesting that the significance and impact of these sayings should not be diminished solely due to a lack of documented history. Instead, the cultural resonance and collective practices shaped by such proverbs can serve as their own form of evidence.

Thus, proverbs emerge not only as carriers of wisdom but also as vital components of cultural identity and social behaviour. They encapsulate the experiences, values, and collective memory of a community, making them invaluable to both cultural studies and historical inquiry. In conclusion, the intricate relationship between proverbs and history invites further exploration, emphasizing the importance of understanding proverbs not merely as relics of the past but as living expressions that continue to shape and define the cultural landscapes of communities.

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