

## COMMON PROVERBS PROVE MIGRATIONS

by

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### Summary

Remarkable similarity among the saying and proverbs prevalent throughout the world, shows that there have been mutual contacts between various races of mankind from ancient times. This is a novel way which establishes migration and diffusion. Following are a few examples for the readers to judge for themselves.

*Tutto il mondo e paese* is an Italian proverb which literally means that the whole world is fatherland. The same sentiment is expressed in the Sanskrit saying : *vasudhaiva Kutumakam*, that is, the entire Earth is a family. The 13<sup>th</sup> century Persian mystic poet Saadi says :

*Bani-ādam azā-iyek and  
Kih dar āfrinish ze yek gauhar and*

THE COUPLET means that Adam's sons are members of one family for they have been created from one essence. Modern scientific research also supports the unity of mankind. The Crick-Watson team, who shared the Nobel Prize in 1962, found that the structure of DNA in all human beings is identical in the form of a double helix running in opposite directions twisted together. The well-known cell-biologist, J.A.V. Butler, goes a step further and says that "all living cells from amoeba to man are one family".

APART from physical similarity, mentally also all human beings think more or less on the same lines and emotionally their hearts throb with the same feelings. These are reflected in stories, dramas, poems of all parts from the world of all times. This human identity is also evident in the proverbs prevalent in different languages and this is confirmed even by the definition of the term 'Proverb' in a number of languages. An Arab says 'A proverb is to speech what salt is to be food.' According to Spanish 'Proverbs are tiny gospels.' A Portuguese definition echoes the same idea : 'Old sayings are gospels.' In English, Lord Russell defines a proverb as 'the wisdom of many and the wit of one.' These definitions show that the origin of a proverb, in whatever language, cannot be fathered upon a single person. All proverbs are anonymous and their origin is lost in antiquity. All the proverbs may not have originated in the form they are current today. Like rolling stones in a river, many of them might have been rounded off and polished over centuries with usage. The

similarity of proverbs in different parts of the world points out two things : one, human mind thinks alike; two, there have been constant contacts among the various races and nations of the earth from times immemorial through migrations and diffusion.

ONE OF MY hobbies have been to collect proverbs of different languages. I was a student of Persian in the School of Foreign Languages. The director of the school, Dr. P.N. Banerjea, was a polyglot and knew as many as 27 languages! Once the Professor of Japanese was on two months' leave and Banerjea taught the language. When the Professor returned from leave, the students – who mostly comprised senior military officers and civil servants – insisted that they would like to learn from the previous

'Japanese' professor. The same happened whenever he took class in the Chinese or other languages. Dr. Banerjea was my neighbour and we met very often and exchanged ideas on etymology and proverbs. Fortunately, he agreed to my suggestion of writing a book, *A Polyglot Book of Proverbs*, published in 1996 by the Indian Publishing House, 93A Lenin Sarani, Calcutta. This article is intended to bring out the unity of the human race, as also a tribute to my late learned friend from whose book I have profusely drawn.

TAKE THE common English couplet for example:

Early to bed and early to rise  
Makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise.

In German they express the same idea as follows :

*Früh zu Bett, früh wieder auf  
Macht gesund und reich und weise.*

That is, Early to bed, and again early up /  
Makes healthy and wealthy and wise. In Russian they say :

*Kto rano lazhits'a i rano vstaet  
Zdrov'e, bogatsvo i um nazhivet*

He who goes early to bed and gets up early  
Earns health, wealth and wisdom.

The Arab proverb is on similar lines:

*Qum bakiran wanhad hakim  
Tasir sahihan wa ghanian wa hakim*

That is, Get up early and go to bed early  
You become healthy, wealthy and wise.

There are, surprisingly, similar sayings in Italian and Swedish. In Italian

*Presto a letto e presto alzato  
Fa l'uomo sano, ricco e fortunato*

which means Early to bed and early up  
Makes man healthy, wealthy and happy.

In Swedish they say :

*Tidigt i sang och tidigt opp  
Gor dig stark till sjal och kropp*

It conveys the same idea: Early to bed and early up/Makes thee strong in mind and body.

Did these races ever live together? If it is a mere coincidence, then it is certainly a remarkable coincidence.

One swallow does not make a summer, and there are numerous similar examples of almost identical proverbs in various languages which would rule out coincidence in all cases. Take another common proverb – A rolling stone gathers no moss. Its

equivalent proverbs in other languages are as follows :

*Greek :Lithos kylindomenos phykos on poiei (A rolling stone makes no moss)*

*German : Ein Stein der rollt setzt kein Moos an (A stone which rolls does not gather moss)*

*French :Pieere qui roule namasse pas de mousse (A stone which rolls does not gather moss)*

*Italian :Pietra mossa non fa muschio (Moved stone makes no moss)*

*Spanish:Piedra movedica nunca moho la cobija (Moss never covers moving stone)*

*Portuguese:Pedra movediza nao cria bolor (moving stone does not produce moss)*

*Latin: Saxum volutum non abducitur musco (Rolled stone is not covered by moss)*

*Russian:Kamen' kotoryi katitya ne obrastaet mokhom (stone which rolls is not grown over with moss)*

*Persian:Bar sang-i-ghalatan na ruwed nabat (Vegetation does not grow on rolling stone)*

THIS PROVERB is a simple common saying which tries to tell that one should not change place or job all the time. Perhaps it does not hold good in modern times where mobility is the mantra for success. If Toffler (*Future Shock*) is to be believed, in the USA, a man if he is 'efficient' must change his job every two years, and his place of work also. Since it may not be possible for him to take his family along, there are agents who will fix up a house and even a 'family' for him at the new place according to his preferences. He has just to plug in.

### Brevity

SOME OF the idioms or proverbs are very brief. As Shakespeare says Brevity, thy soul is wit. For example, in English they say, appearance is deceptive. The same sense is conveyed by the following proverbs in several other languages :

*Czech :Fallitur visus*

*Latin :Vanjstina Vara*

*Russian:Vidimost obmanchiva*

*Dutch :Schijn bedriegt*

*Norwegian:Skinnet bedrar*

Perfect proverbs combine three things – brevity, alliteration and rhyme as in Latin *Iuncta juvant* which means '(things) joined help' which is slightly longer in English – 'Union is strength.' Similarly a Dutch proverb says *Rust, roest* (Rest is rust), Germans say the same thing, *Wer rastet* (He who rests, rusts), in Italian and Latin also there are two-word sayings : *Traduttori, traditori* (translators are traitors) and *Praemonitus, praemunitus* (Forewarned, forearmed).

Some proverbs have three words but are identical in sense, structure as well as rhyme. The English trinomial saying 'Bear and forbear' have the following in other languages echoing the same sense :

*German : Leide und meide*

*Latin : Sustine et abstine*

*Greek : Anehou Kai apechou*

Similarly, the three-term Greek adage *cheir cheira niptei* (Hand washes hand) has its equivalent in other languages, also in three words in the following :

*Latin : Manus manum lavat*

*Czech : Ruk ruku myje*

*Polish : Reka Reke myje*

*Russian: Ruka ruku moet*

Take another example of three-word proverbs saying in English 'Practice makes perfect.'

*Danish* : *Ovelse gor mester*  
(Practice makes master)

*Dutch* : *Oefning baart kunst*  
(Practice engenders art)

*Japanese*: *Narau yori nareyo*  
(Learn by doing rather than be taught)

*Latin* : *Usus promptos facit*  
(Practice makes ready)

*Russian*: *Navyk mastera stavit*  
(Practice makes master)

*Sanskrit*: *Abhyasa sarini vidya*  
(Learning comes with practice)

*Swedish* : *Ovning gora fardighet*  
(Practice makes readiness)

It is interesting, and amusing, that the saying 'a friend in need is a friend indeed', is common in as many as 24 languages :

*Arabic* : *'Yu' arafussadiqu waqtu dhdhiqi*  
(A friend is known at the time of distress)

*Bengate*: *S ampade bandhu labh bipade parikkha*  
(Prosperity gains friends, adversity tries them)

*Chinese*: *Jen tsai hun nan chungKe chen chenpeng yui*  
(In the midst of distress one can discern a true friend)

*Czech* : *Dobr pritel v nouzi poznava*  
(A good friend is known in need)

*Danish* : *Man skall Kende sine Venner i noden*  
(One shall know one friends in need)

*Dutch* : *In de nood leert men zijn vrienden kennen*  
(One comes to know his friends in need)

*French* : *Au besoin on connait l'ami*  
(One knows the friend in need)

*German*: *Den Freund erkennt man in der Not*  
(One knows the friend in need)

*Greek* : *En tois kokois gar agathois saphestatoi philoi*  
(Friends are known in bad as well as good circumstances)

*Hindi* : *Waqt pare par janiye ko bairi ko meet*  
(At a pinch, know who is the enemy and who the friend)

*Italian* : *Al bisogno si conosce l'amico*  
(One knows the friend in need)

*Japanese*: *Jigoku de hotoke ni atta yo*  
(It is like meeting the Buddha in hell)

*Latin* : *Amicus certus in re incerta cointur*  
(A certain friend is discerned in uncertain matters)

*Norwegian*: *I noden skal en kjenne sine vaenner*  
(One shall know one's friend in need)

*Persian* : *Yar-i-nek ra roz-i-bud bayid shinakht*  
(A good friend should be known on an evil day)

*Polish* : *Prawdziwego przyjaciela poznaje sie w bedzie*  
(A true friend is known in adversity)

*Portuguese*: *Na necessidade se prova a amizade*  
(Friendship is tested in need)

*Roman* : *Prietenul bun la nevoe se cunoaste*  
(The good friend is known in adversity)

*Russian: Samji vernyi drug – eto drug v nuzhde*

(The most faithful friend is the friend in need)

*Sanskrit: Apatsu mitraim janiyat*

(A friend is to be known in adversities)

*Serbocroatian: Pravi se prijatelj u muzde poznae*

(A true friend is known in need)

*Spanish : En luengo canino y en cama angosta se conocen los amigos*

(Friends are known on a long road and on a narrow bed)

*Swedish: I noden provas vannen*

(The friend is tested in need)

*Tadzik : Dust dar ruz-i-bad shinokhto mi-shawad*

(A friend is known on an evil day)

Similarly, the proverbs 'God helps these who help themselves', and 'Habit is second nature' are very popular and are known in 20 languages each.

These examples amply establish from entirely a unique angle that the entire earth is a family. There is an inherent unity and brotherhood among all human beings belonging to various races and speaking different languages. Proverbs or sayings constitute the bedrock of mankind; colour and caste are superficial appendages. Migrations among continents and countries from the ancient past have further strengthened that unity which is often marred by envy, greed and selfishness.

#### About the Author

The author retired from Indian Information Service of Government of India (GOI) in 1976. He is a Fellow of Indian National Science Academy of GOI. He has written over a dozen well-researched books and published about 2000 articles and research papers. His book on Indian Shipping –A historical Survey earned him a Doctorate of Philosophy in History from a university of the Netherlands. He has contributed several articles to 18-volume Encyclopedia of Hinduism being published in the USA. Dr Sahai worked with the Archaeological Survey of India to set up in 1948 a comprehensive exhibition: 5000 Years of Indian Art. He is an art critic, music critic, a poet and a Public Relations expert; having taught PR in leading institutions for 18 years. His book : Public Relations – A Scientific Approach is prescribed in the curriculum of 36 Indian universities. He has travelled widely and won several awards, etc. etc. He is the Founder-President of the Upanisad Society in India.

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