

## Iranian Folklore, Proverbs and Aspiration for Development

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**Abstract:** Social scientists strongly believe that cultural norms and values shape, stimulate, direct, and influence all activities of human societies. This study attempts to provide a sociological analysis of cultural components, in particular the content of the proverbs included in Dehkhoda's Proverbs and Parables (*Amsal va Hekam*) and their role in Iran's underdevelopment. This book was chosen because it is by far the most comprehensive book in this regard with more than fifty thousand proverbs. Through a content analysis of all these proverbs using the qualitative content analysis approach, the researcher concluded that 2510 proverbs were related to development, of which 894 proverbs (35%) conveyed development-consistent concepts and 1616 others (65%) conveyed anti-development concepts. In addition, using the field study method and interviews with 40 people with relatively good knowledge of proverbs, it was shown that 276 proverbs contained development-related concepts, of which 64 proverbs (23%) conveyed development-consistent and 212 others (77%) conveyed anti-development concepts. It was concluded that a considerable number of the proverbs conveyed concepts such as fatalism, a lack of innovativeness, death, misogyny, contentment, and so on. Obviously, such a culture in the community leads to passivity of its members. Given the unquestionable role of cultural factors in human activities and that of cultural components such as proverbs in Iran's underdevelopment process, cultural planners need to pay more attention to these factors and provide appropriate solutions to reduce the negative effects of the development-impeding proverbs as well as other similar cultural components in society.

**Keywords:** Culture, Proverb, Development, Folklore, Popular sayings, Folk literature.

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### Introduction

In the present century, movement towards development has occupied the minds of all statespersons, politicians, economists and even ordinary citizens, because the development of a country not only enhances its international popularity and bargaining power in political campaigns, but also increases the levels of public welfare and social security and contributes to the fulfillment of citizens' rights. This is why most governments keep trying to get rid of underdevelopment and transform their nation into developed or modern countries. However, the question is why some countries like Japan, UAE, China, Canada and Turkey have stepped toward development and pursued their developmental goals after realizing their position, and have managed to improve their conditions within a relatively short time, while a country like Iran, which is rich in natural resources and underground mines and has an ancient civilization, has not reached the position its people deserve.

The development of a community can be influenced by various factors, including political, economic and cultural. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the victory of core countries as well as the failure of developmental models in many peripheral countries made scholars pay greater attention to the cultures of societies in the core compared to peripheral countries and regard culture as an influential factor. Many

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findings suggest that the lack of a dynamic and endogenous culture is an important cause of underdevelopment in peripheral countries. From this perspective, the political and economic underdevelopment of countries results from their cultural underdevelopment. In societies such as Iran, which have a long cultural identity and civilization, cultural factors can play a major role in the development process.

Culture shapes our social beliefs and structures. For this reason, a positive or negative approach to phenomena such as development can emanate from these beliefs. Beliefs in any society reflect people's attitudes toward the patterns and components of progress, transformation and development. From the culture of society arises a unique literature known as popular culture, including proverbs as one of its best types. Proverbs are a subset of people's culture and one of the most important elements of identity. They reflect people's culture and are thus considered a very important issue in individual and social identity. Cultural phenomena such as proverbs can reflect the beliefs and ideals of a society. Proverbs are very important for understanding the cultural layers of societies, because they arise from the lived experiences of an ethnic group or nation. Study of a nation's proverbs can well represent people's ethics, good and bad habits, thoughts, sensitivities or interests. Proverbs represent normal and abnormal behavior patterns, as well as social values and anti-values. They come from inside the society and reflect behavioral actions and values accepted by society. They reflect the continuation of the traditional spirit of community in the body of the new society, thereby playing a significant role in relation to development. Accepting the fact that societies differ in their extent and intensity of aspiration for development, with some taking negative and others more flexible attitudes, the question that arises here is to what extent Persian proverbs, which reflect the spirit, mentality, and attitude of Iranian people, are consistent with development. It should be noted that these proverbs can mirror the culture of ethnicities other than the Persian people as well, because the Persian language has always been the official language of Iran, which is home to various ethnicities. In other words, the question is to what extent the attitudes implicit in Persian proverbs are pro-development and what is their perspective towards it. This study seeks to answer this question by studying Dehkhoda's *Amsal va Hekam*, which contains about 50,000 proverbs and is thus considered the most comprehensive book in this regard. The reason for this choice is that it is actually a masterpiece of Persian literature. Dehkhoda is one of the first to pay a close attention to the public culture and compile the most comprehensive book about Persian proverbs and parables.

A proverb is a short, well-known saying referring to a story or speech with moral lessons to explain a broad concept in a few words. The longer the history of a nation's civilization, the more events it experiences and the more proverbs it has. There are also tens of thousands of proverbs in Persian that may be specific to this language or borrowed from other ethnicities. Proverbs contain stories of the lived experiences of the people from ancient past, which are used as the basis of action for future generations. They are important because they reflect the entirety of a community's culture and perspective toward various issues such as development. To clarify this point, let's focus on a famous Japanese proverb:

For want of a nail, the shoe was lost;  
For want of a shoe, the horse was lost;  
For want of a horse, the rider was lost;  
For want of a rider, the message was lost;  
For want of the message, the battle was lost;  
For want of a battle, the kingdom was lost,

And

All for the want of a horseshoe nail.

Some scholars believe that the cultural characteristics of Japan is an important factor in its pursuing the path of development. Some of these intellectual and behavioral characteristics are: respect for hierarchies, preference of national and group goals to personal interests, commitment to work and effort, loyalty to job duties, obedience of law, and attention to discipline and organization at work (Sari' al-Qalam, 1997: 103).

The connection between the above proverb and the cultural characteristics of the Japanese leads us to think that perhaps one of the causes of this country's development is cultural factors and such proverbs. Now let's consider some Persian proverbs to see what cultural messages they convey.

Ride your donkey; the price of bread is not your concern.  
If you wait, you'll make halva out of sour grape<sup>1</sup>.  
Contrivance can't prevent one's fate.  
If you don't seek scandal, try to be consistent with the community<sup>2</sup>.  
Wherever you go, the sky has the same color.  
The larger the roof, the greater the snow.

This study is important in that since societies' levels of growth and development in the contemporary era reflect their positions in international interactions, a country will lag behind in development if it does not culturally support it. Therefore, it is important to understand the barriers to development and the cultural factors that can affect this process. It is also necessary to know about the unofficial culture and its effect on development. Previous studies confirm the need to conduct research on this topic. This study is an attempt to identify the cultural components of development in folk literature with the following goals:

1. Content analysis of the proverbs contained in Dekhoda's *Amsal va Hekam* and its role in Iran's underdevelopment.
2. Quantitative and qualitative analysis and conceptualization of the proverbs for and against development in Dekhoda's *Amsal va Hekam*
3. Analysis of the position of proverbs in the modern Iranian society and its manifestation in people's beliefs after about 90 years
4. Offering practical and strategic solutions

Sociologists have identified several factors for Iran's underdevelopment so far, including lack of change in Iranian personality, lack of a logical connection among religious, Iranian and global identities, exogenous development, dependence on other powers, lack of use of the Islamic ideal culture, disregard for participatory development, acceptance of autocracy, effect of children's stories, cultural segmentation, mistrust, unbalanced development, and a lack of empathy between people and authorities. No research has attempted to analyze and explain the Persian proverbs and their role in Iran's underdevelopment and the topic of this article is a new and under-researched issue.

### **Conceptual Framework**

In this project we attempted to find a consensus among the various views of sociologists, which is the result of general cultural characteristics hindering development obtained from the historical experience of development in other countries. However, it is mainly based on Rogers' Theory of peasant subculture and its elements including 1) mutual distrust in interpersonal relations, 2) a lack of innovativeness, 3) fatalism, 4) low aspirational levels, 5) lack of deferred gratification, 6) limited time perspective, 7) familyism, 8) dependency upon government authority, 9) localiteness, and 10) a lack of empathy (Rogers, 1969). Due to the specific conditions of Iranian society, these components have become slightly localized.

The study questions are as follows:

1. Do the proverbs in Dekhoda's *Amsal va Hekam* play a role in the development of Iranian society?
2. How do Persian proverbs, as part of public culture, reflect development?
3. What is the frequency of the cultural components of development in the proverbs included in Dekhoda's *Amsal va Hekam*?

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<sup>1</sup> . Equivalent to the English proverb *patience opens all doors*.

<sup>2</sup> . Equivalent to the English proverb *while in Rome do as Romans do*.

4. Do the spoken and written proverbs have the same perspective or have they changed over time?  
The research hypotheses are as follows:

1. The proverbs included in Dehkhoda's *Amsal va Hekam* play a role in the development stages of Iranian society; in other words, they indicate the structural and functional nature of development in Iranian society.
2. Given the traditional structure of Iranian society, especially in relation to its cultural backgrounds, most of the Persian proverbs of Dehkhoda's *Amsal va Hekam* are side with preserving the status quo and hindering development.
3. There is a high frequency of components opposed to development, and the cultural components in the Persian proverbs of Dehkhoda's *Amsal va Hekam* indicate obstacles to development.
4. Spoken and written proverbs have the same perspective and are expected to have the same frequency.

### Research Methods

**Content Analysis Method:** The qualitative content analysis method, which includes taking notes and referring to documents related to the subject of the study, was used in this study. This method allows researchers to subjectively, but scientifically interpret the originality and truth of data. The objectivity of the results is guaranteed by the existence of a systematic coding process. Qualitative content analysis goes beyond merely counting words or extracting objective content from text to examine themes and patterns that may be manifest or latent in a particular text (Berg and Hansson, 2000: 357-368).

**Qualitative Content Analysis Approaches:** According to Hsieh and Shannon's (2005) theory, the approaches to content analysis can be divided into three categories:

1. **Conventional content analysis.** Categories are obtained from data simultaneously with the content analysis of the text.
2. **Directed content analysis.** The researcher bases his or her encoding plan on the existing theory or previous studies before starting the data analysis process.
3. **Summative content analysis.** The researcher looks for single words related to a particular text. This type of analysis leads the researcher to interpret the meaning of particular expressions or the specific content of words (Weber, 1990: 38).

We preferred the directed content analysis in this study, because as already described, we designed our conceptual framework through existing theories and previous studies. We had to perform the encoding process at the same time as the data extraction process and convert the words into propositions, concepts, and finally categories. We performed this three times with the help of two other experts in order to minimize the researcher's bias. Finally, through a more detailed and in-depth review, we sorted out the data and accordingly reported the results.

**Field Research Method:** Considering the purpose of the study, which was to analyze common proverbs in the Iranian society, the field research method was selected. This method is used to collect qualitative data. The researcher has to get involved personally in order to encounter the problem naturally. This method is often implemented through interview and observation techniques. The former technique was considered more appropriate in this study. Many types of interview are conducted in social research, the most common ones being unstructured, semi-structured, and structured.

We interviewed 40 people in this study and used the semi-structured interview method, as one of the most common types of interview used in social qualitative research. It is in between the two structured and unstructured extremes and is sometimes referred to as in-depth interview. All respondents are asked the same questions, but they are free to respond in whatever way they wish, in which case the researcher is responsible for decoding and classifying the responses (Lichtman, 2006; Patton, 1990).

We used three main questions in the interview:

1. Do you think proverbs can affect development?
2. If yes, please explain how?

3. Name a few of the proverbs which are related to the topic of this study and which you have used or heard recently.

### **Study Population**

The most common type of sampling in qualitative research is purposive sampling, in which the researcher actively selects the most useful sample to answer the research question(s). This type of sampling can include the structural development of variables and concepts (Marshall, 1998:523). This method is, in fact, the researcher's conscious choice of the population based on the type of required information (Azkia and Imani Jajarmi, 2011: 61). After studying and consulting with several university professors, we found that the most comprehensive book regarding Persian proverbs is Dehkhoda's *Amsal va Hekam*. Therefore, using purposive sampling, we chose this book which mirrors all aspects of Persian proverbs. Let's describe it in detail:

*Amsal va Hekam* is a four-volume book authored by Ali Akbar Dehkhoda and published in Tehran in 1931. It contains nearly 50,000 proverbs, parable, aphorisms, and miscellaneous verses. The contents are alphabetically arranged and the proverbs have been described and interpreted. It is actually the most comprehensive Persian proverb book and is a perfect collection of proverbs. It should be noted that we did not intend to analyze all of the five thousand proverbs included in this book, but to extract the proverbs related to the research topic and the components related to development using purposive sampling and then explain them.

In the interview technique, 40 interviewees were selected through purposive sampling and attempts were made to use a wide range of community members with different occupations as the sample. We tried not to select the sample from a particular social class, because all members of the community believe in and use proverbs and play a role in the development or underdevelopment of their society. The sampling continued until theoretical saturation.

### **Results of Content Analysis Method**

Of the fifty thousand proverbs included in Dehkhoda's *Amsal va Hekam*, 2510 proverbs were shown by the qualitative content analysis method to be related to the research topic. Of these, 894 proverbs were consistent with development and 1616 were inconsistent with it. We made this choice based on the conceptual framework of the study. The concepts impeding development were:

**1. Fatalism:** According to Rogers, one of the important elements of the peasant subculture is fatalism. If the members of a community believe that their destiny is predetermined or that God provides their livelihood, they will find it unnecessary to endure suffering. They will, therefore, prefer not to try in vain and simply wait for their share given by God. From the author's point of view, these proverbs arise from misunderstanding of religious teachings. This concept is conveyed by 359 proverbs, including the following (some of the proverbs contained resources and some of them did not):

What happened was not what I wanted, but what God wanted (p. 50, Quoted from Saadi).

One who founded the seven landmasses of the universe gave everyone what they deserved (p. 66, Quoted from Saadi).

We try, but aimlessly; we are already destined (p. 452, Quoted from Ferdowsi).

We'll finally get what we deserve (p. 971).

You are destined even if you make a thousand of efforts; your destiny will never change (p. 973, Quoted from Salman Savoji).

One who gives teeth will give bread too (p. 1904, Quoted from Saadi).

Art will not turn out to be useful in the event of bad luck (p. 2008).

**2. Death:** Another factor affecting the process of growth and development is people's hope for the future and seeing the results of their own efforts. Many proverbs in Dehkhoda's *Amsal va Hekam* direct people's attention to the issue of death, short life and the afterlife. Most of these proverbs warn that you will die

someday and there is no need to suffer and waste your time collecting property and wealth. The concept of death has been stated or implied in 222 proverbs, including the following:

The life that necessarily ends in death deserves no more than sleep or drunkenness (p. 58, Quoted from Majd Hamgar).

If a dead's grave is opened, you can't tell whether he is rich or poor (p. 376, Quoted from Saadi).

You will leave this world empty-handed as you were born so, you are treasure not treasure guard? (p. 620, Quoted from Asadi).

Death will come no matter you are rich or poor (p. 1532).

Artists, like the artless, are destined to death (p. 2009, Quoted from Ferdowsi).

**3. A lack of innovativeness:** Another element of the peasant subculture is a lack of innovation recognized by indicators of gerontocracy and preventing people from risk-taking. Proverbs discouraging people from risk-taking lead people toward silence, passivity, isolation, and withdrawal, but there were no proverbs conveying innovation, demanding what is rightfully yours, and courage to confront oppressors.

Gerontocracy is a hindrance to development because young people, as one of the most important contributors to the development of societies due to their risk taking and innovative thinking, do not get the chance to manifest their talents. However, many developed countries try to use the youth's knowledge and energy to improve their conditions through strict retirement laws and by attracting the elite youths of other countries. However, Iranian youths are hardly recruited and sometimes older people who are rarely productive in their fields of work resist strongly to maintain their positions so that some of them simultaneously have multiple positions and jobs, even though unproductive. This will lead to the withdrawal and isolation of the educated youths. Lack of innovation is mentioned in 205 proverbs, including the following:

An old man sees in the clay more than what a young man sees in the mirror (p. 48).

You should not step out of your kilim<sup>1</sup> (p. 145, Quoted from Maghrebi).

Work only based on the old master's prudence (p. 582, Quoted from Sanaei).

Youth is ignorance (p. 591).

You will suffer a lot while striving for superiority (p. 1142, Quoted from Masoud Sa'd).

An ant which grows to have feather will die soon (p. 1755).

A big morsel tears the throat<sup>2</sup> (p. 1988).

**4. Misogyny:** Women make up half of the population of societies, so they can be considered half of the production and development force. Whether employed or working at home and raising the next generation, women play an undeniable role in the development process. If they are labelled with inappropriate titles or assigned low-level tasks in a community, half of the driving force of development is effectively paralyzed, and this wrong culture not only becomes problematic in all aspects of social life, but also creates a strong barrier to the development and progress of societies. Let's review some examples of the 189 Persian proverbs that humiliate women:

Chador is a woman's castle (p. 604).

One who has a daughter rather than a son is an unlucky man, even though a king (p.627,Sanaei).

How well the King of the world Kai Kobad said, a bad curse be upon a good woman (p.627,Saadi).

Praise dogs instead of women; a dog is better than one hundred pious women (p. 919, Ferdowsi).

Only a man without a sister-in-law prays that his wife will live long (p. 1208).

The death of a woman has a pleasure no less than being a groom (p. 1532).

Seek faith from a dog rather than a woman (p. 1889, Jame-al-Tamsil).

**5. Low aspirational levels:** According to Rogers, one of the elements of the peasant subculture that impedes development is low levels of aspiration of the community members. The indicator of this element is the concept of contentment. Encouraging people toward contentment deters them from any

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<sup>1</sup> . Kilim refers to a flat tapestry-woven carpet or rug.

<sup>2</sup> . Equivalent to the English proverb "don't bite off more than you can chew".

future attempts to get more property and change their unfavorable material conditions, thereby hindering development. There are 168 proverbs in this regard, some of which are as follows:

Ask for water and wash your hand (Be content with little things). (p.6, Emadi Shahriari).

The large-minded are empty-handed (Saadi, p.31).

If you don't eat, you'll always have [property] (p. 230).

Dignity comes from contentment and baseness from greed, do with your dignity and do not seek baseness (p. 1099, Jame-al-Tamsil).

Keep contented and do with whatever you have (p. 1154, Onori).

Contentment makes you rich (p. 1167, Saadi).

Under the moving heaven, the contented are free while the greedy are slaves (p. 1980, Jami).

**6. Superstition:** Dekhoda's *Amsal va Hekam* contain many proverbs that seek to calm people against hardships and convince them that neither their adversity nor the happiness of other people will last. These proverbs emphasize that there is a supernatural power that will someday take people's rights and punish the wrongdoers for their actions. Therefore, it is better that people do nothing and just wait for the promised Messenger to establish justice. Superstition is considered a hindrance to development, because it deters people from trying, turns them into passive beings, and takes their right of choice and authority away. Superstitious concepts and expecting the help of supernatural beings were mentioned in 133 proverbs, including the following:

No one's light burns until morning (p. 610).

It didn't remain that way, nor will it remain this way (p.620, Hafez).

If the conditions are not agreeable, you should adapt yourself to them, life has both ups and downs (p.1811, Ferdowsi).

No one will endure hardship and suffering forever, nor will anyone enjoy comfort, joy and treasure (p. 1833, Ferdowsi).

Every downhill has an uphill<sup>1</sup> (p. 1930).

Every sadness is followed by happiness (p. 1932).

The more you laugh, the more you will cry (p. 1955, Sanaei).

**7. Excessive caution:** There are many proverbs that try to stop people from making changes and progress through positive concepts such as patience, thereby suppressing their courage and risk-taking spirit and making them passive. In addition, ignoring the importance of time, which is an element of the peasant subculture, becomes meaningful in the concept of patience. Passivity and patience were mentioned in 90 proverbs, including the following:

A brave man finally loses his head (p. 26).

A human's feet will slip into hole once (p. 29).

Wherever there are failures, patience is the key (p.47, Amir Khosrow Dehlavi).

Our bravery is patience (p. 1020).

This is your destiny and the divine decree has been written, you have no choice but to wait (p. 1161, Vis & Rāmin).

The key to all problems is patience (p. 1232).

Wait once and prevent a thousand of regrets (p.2047, Jame-al-Tamsil).

**8. Giving no value to wealth:** Property and wealth are among the valuable assets that make people work harder and move forward. Disparaging wealth will diminish people's enthusiasm for greater efforts and wealth. Such proverbs emphasize that wealth brings along great suffering, and they avoid mentioning the benefits of wealth. According to Weber's theory in his book *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, the ethical teachings of Protestant have played an active part in the social process resulting in the emergence of capitalism. The followers of this sect consider those who strive harder to obtain property to be closest to God. Conversely, the Iranian culture contains proverbs that consider obtaining wealth to contradict reason, religion, science, art, and so on. These concepts can thus discourage the

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<sup>1</sup> . Equivalent to the English proverb *every light has its shadow, every hill its valley*.

community members from trying to obtain wealth. This concept is conveyed by 69 proverbs, including the following:

Man needs reason rather than gold (p.28, Jame-al-Tamsil).

Religion and the world are two opposites (p. 850, Sanaei).

The more jewelry, the more disasters (p. 906, Amir Khosrow Dehlavi).

Guarding the property and wealth is a disaster, a beggar is a king indeed although named a beggar (p. 1831, Saadi).

The greater your art, the poorer you will be (p. 1943, Amir Khosrow Dehlavi).

The larger the roof, the greater the snow.(p. 1950)

The lighter your bag, the more comfortable (p. 1954, Nezami).

Anyone who has no donkey will have no worry (p. 1955).

Whoever has property makes no efforts, whoever makes efforts will lose his property (p. 1963, Khaghani).

**9. Dependency upon government authority:** As history shows, Iranian society has always been ruled by dictatorial and authoritarian governments, because people have always sought a savior. We have learned to wait for a savior to help us achieve our goals instead of trying to achieve them ourselves. This is why we have always relied on the power of rulers, been afraid of them, and taken pride in ourselves due to our close relationships with them, because we think that they have an extraordinary power and are even chosen by God. Rogers considers dependence on government's power to be another component of the peasant subculture. This dependence has arisen from the Iranian culture for many years. This concept is conveyed by 61 proverbs, including the following:

Be friend the headman (of the village), attack the world (p. 366).

The world is like the body and princes are like the head (p. 597, Ferdowsi).

If you can't bite a hand, kiss it, because the only choice about conquerors is pretense and flattery (p. 646).

The king is the god of the earth (p. 1008).

The king is the small god (p. 1008).

The country can be prosperous with a sultan (p. 1735, Adib Saberi).

**10. Encouraging laziness and comfort-seeking:** Many Persian proverbs encourage people to be lazy and enjoy their time. For this purpose, they include themes such as disparaging the world, idealizing poverty, and finding great pleasure in free-of-charge things. If people in a community become sluggish and lazy, there will be no hope of growth and progress in that community. This concept is conveyed by 54 proverbs, including the following:

Unasked-for water is good (p.14).

The comfort of this world lies in ignorance, its calamity in consciousness (p. 172, Mawlānā).

Although treasure is increased by suffering, all the treasure of the universe is worth no suffering (p. 203, Ferdowsi).

We had better watch tonight, let's think about tomorrow when it comes (p. 651, Nezami).

Free vinegar is sweeter than honey (p. 967).

No pain no gain, good for those who abandoned both (p. 1237, Sanaei).

Property gained without pain is sweeter than honey (p. 2013).

**11. Lack of deferred gratification:** Living in the moment and not caring about the future also hinders progress because this idea hampers people's efforts to improve their own situation. According to Rogers, ignoring the current benefits for the sake of future benefits is another element of the peasant subculture. These proverbs encourage people to enjoy themselves, eat whatever they want and forget about the future. On the other hand, only a few encourage thinking about tomorrow and collecting wealth for a better future. This concept is conveyed by 43 proverbs, including the following:

Eat whatever you have and leave nothing, why do you leave the outcome of your pain for others? (p. 397, Ferdowsi).

Anyone who avoids eating his property will regret it (p. 1967).

Whoever has property should eat (p. 2005, Ferdowsi).



**12. Lack of empathy:** Lack of empathy and efforts for a common goal in society is another element of the peasant subculture. It is clear that no society will develop without the cooperation of its members, because many jobs require their cooperation. This spirit of non-cooperation is prevalent among Iranians to the extent that some even argue that Iranians are more successful in individual sports than in group sports, because they always want to say the last word and convince others to accept their views. This concept is conveyed by 16 proverbs, including the following:

- Two cooks make the food salty or tasteless<sup>1</sup> (p. 36).
- One's loss is another's profit (p. 626, Asadi).
- Two kings can never rule in one state (p. 831, Saadi).
- A male lion always appears alone while pigs appear in pairs (p. 1046).
- One not finding the honor of seclusion found nothing indeed (p. 1217, Sanaei).
- A colleague cannot see his colleague (p. 1993).

**13. Localitiness:** One of the issues that has always threatened Iran's integrity is that its different ethnic groups seek independence from the central government. This country has failed to create a unity among them despite its abundant endeavors. This topic is beyond the scope of this study, but it can be argued that some add fuel to the flames by creating ethnic jokes or giving inappropriate labels to a particular ethnic group or religion, and others blindly repeat them. According to Rogers, localitiness, as a characteristic of a peasant subculture, can be an instance of underdevelopment. Obviously, a community whose people constantly defame one another will not only make no progress, but also will move backward. This concept is conveyed by 7 proverbs, including the following:

- Like the Wahhabis: gluttonous, thief (or hostage-taker) (p. 1498).
- Like the Hindu: thief, coward (p. 1499).
- Has he/she come from a village? (meaning that he/she is very ignorant and stupid)(p. 1724)
- Are you a Turk? (Why aren't you convinced)? (P. 1725)
- Neither Qom nor Kashan is good, damn both of them (p. 1854).
- If Lor<sup>2</sup> does not go to the market, the market will decay ( meaning that Lor is naïve) (p. 1985).
- If Lor does not come to the city, he is said to be rebellious (p. 1985).

We will now summarize the concepts hindering development in order to provide a coherent picture of the development-related concepts in Dekhoda's *Amsal va Hekam*:

Word cloud 1: Anti-development categories



<sup>1</sup> . Equivalent to the English proverb *two captains sink the ship*.

<sup>2</sup> . an Iranian people living mainly in western and south-western Iran

In the process of data collection, 894 pro-development proverbs were found. In this section, we attempted to extract concepts that were contrary to those derived from the conceptual framework.

**1. Authority:** One of the factors that makes people strive is that they consider their destiny to be under their own control. This concept is exactly contrary to Rogers' concept of fatalism, according to which everything is out of one's control and one is no more than a passive observer. This concept is conveyed by 236 proverbs, including the following:

The water that doesn't run will decay (p. 13).

Man finds money, but not vice versa (p. 21).

A living person wants bread (p. 25, Quoted from Asadi).

God blesses those who move<sup>1</sup> (p. 114).

Dying full is better than dying hungry (p. 442, Quoted from Saadi).

**2. Disapproving ignorance and promoting literacy:** increasing the level of literacy in any society, and using scholarly knowledge to advance the goals of societies also contribute to development. This is represented by the high rate of illiteracy in undeveloped countries and vice versa. This concept is conveyed by 199 proverbs, including the following:

An illiterate person is blind (p. 23).

Men gets fat by hearing<sup>2</sup> (p. 29, Mawlānā).

A knowledge-free pious man is like the donkey of the mill<sup>3</sup> (p. 496).

Do not spend a moment without learning (p. 1765, Ferdowsi).

Not a hundred ignorant heads are worth a bread (p. 1868, Nasser Khosrow).

**3. What goes around comes around:** These proverbs are in contrast with those that remind death, because not only they do not emphasize mortality and not seeing the outcome of our actions, they rather underline the belief that you will harvest in this world whatever you have already planted. This concept is conveyed by 140 proverbs, including the following:

You harvest today what you planted yesterday, don't expect a bunch of wheat from a barley grain (p.51).

It's from us that's upon us<sup>4</sup> (p.147, Nasser Khosrow).

Always consider the consequences of your actions; wheat grows from wheat and barley from barley (p. 158, Mawlānā).

The people of the world are like farmers, harvesting whatever they plant (p. 317, Ibn Yamin).

**4. Change:** One barrier to the development of society is people getting accustomed to pleasure and being afraid of risks and changes. There are 99 proverbs of this type, trying to mock the lazy or timid people using irony:

The end of seminary school is the beginning of begging (p. 20).

A sleeping donkey doesn't eat barley (p.726).

The tree of laziness has no fruit but hunger (p. 785, Jame-al-Tamsil).

Don't try to get your bread from the arm (work) of people (p. 1790, Parvin).

**5. Innovation and pragmatism:** If the members of a community merely imitate their ancestors and have no creativity or innovation in their work, that community will definitely not progress. This concept is conveyed by 77 proverbs, including the following:

Two hundred words are not worth a half of action<sup>5</sup> (p. 830, Ferdowsi).

Just murmuring the word *honey* does not sweeten the mouth<sup>6</sup> (p. 1101).

Knowledge helps when accompanied by action; otherwise, it is no more than a barrier (p. 1110, Sanaei).

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<sup>1</sup> . Equivalent to the English proverb *God helps those who help themselves*.

<sup>2</sup> . Unlike animals which get fat by eating

<sup>3</sup> . Going in circles around the mill without getting a step ahead.

<sup>4</sup> . Equivalent to the English proverb *you reap what you sow*.

<sup>5</sup> . Equivalent to the English proverb *actions speak louder than words*.

<sup>6</sup> . Equivalent to the English proverb *Talk is cheap* — *oh, and it doesn't cook rice either*.

No matter how knowledgeable you are, you are ignorant if you do not act (p. 1114, Saadi)

**6. The importance of time:** According to Everett Rogers, one of the characteristics of the peasant subculture is overlooking the importance of time. In developed societies like Japan, punctuality is one of the most important factors in work, while it is of little importance to rulers and members of societies in underdeveloped countries. For example, the Iranian government wastes long hours of people's time in long queues or people rarely attend meetings on time, claiming that it shows their greater stature. There are 44 proverbs in this regard, including the following:

Putting off your work until tomorrow is rooted in laziness (p. 1171, Abolfazl Beihaghi).

Do you know what in the world is not returnable? It's nothing but life, so seize it (p. 1919).

Seize the time (p. 1891).

**7. Disapproving poverty:** One of the components that hampers people's efforts to change their situation is the normalization of poverty or as Rogers puts it, low levels of aspiration in society. Here are 42 proverbs trying to show non-normality of poverty and elevate the aspirations of the community members, thereby encouraging them to try harder:

A hungry man has no faith (p. 25).

To sit with the poor is a waste of life (p. 347, Gaj).

Empty-handed, black-faced<sup>1</sup> (p. 807).

The poor are sitting in hell (p. 1146).

The poor are not examined by doctors; their pains are not remedied anywhere (p.1798, Parvin).

**8. Value of property and wealth:** Human beings always strive to get something that is valuable to them. Dehkhoda's *Amsal va Hekam* contains proverbs emphasizing the value of property and wealth and encouraging people to obtain property or increase their current property and wealth. This concept is conveyed by 36 proverbs, including the following:

A little gold is better than a great deal of power (p. 592, Saadi).

It is better to eat fully than to starve (p. 1001, Shahed Sadegh).

Opulence is better than poverty, because it is an attribute of Allah (p. 1130, Abu Saeed Mahneh).

Your friends are your saddlebag and bag (p. 2028, Mawlānā).

**9. Travel:** This concept contrasts with Rogers' concept of localiteness. One of the factors that encourages people toward progress is travel. A community that has relationships with other communities is more dynamic. Travels can even improve the relationships of individuals, peoples or countries and unite them. Dehkhoda's *Amsal va Hekam* contains 12 proverbs relating to this concept:

Much travel is needed to make the naïve mature (p. 440, Saadi).

Journeys train a man (p. 974, Anvari).

**10. Empathy:** An important element that makes groups successful is empathy and cooperation. Development is not possible without cooperation. The cooperation and empathy of the members of a community toward their common interests will lead to progress. This concept is emphasized in 9 proverbs:

Yes, it is possible to seize the world through unity (p. 30, Hafez).

If ants unite, they will tear up the lion's skin (p. 1754, Saadi).

One hand has no sound<sup>2</sup> (p.2042).

Word cloud 2: Development-related categories

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<sup>1</sup> . Ashamed

<sup>22</sup> . Equivalent to the English proverb *union is strength*.



The following figure shows the frequency of proverbs containing concepts that encourage and discourage development:

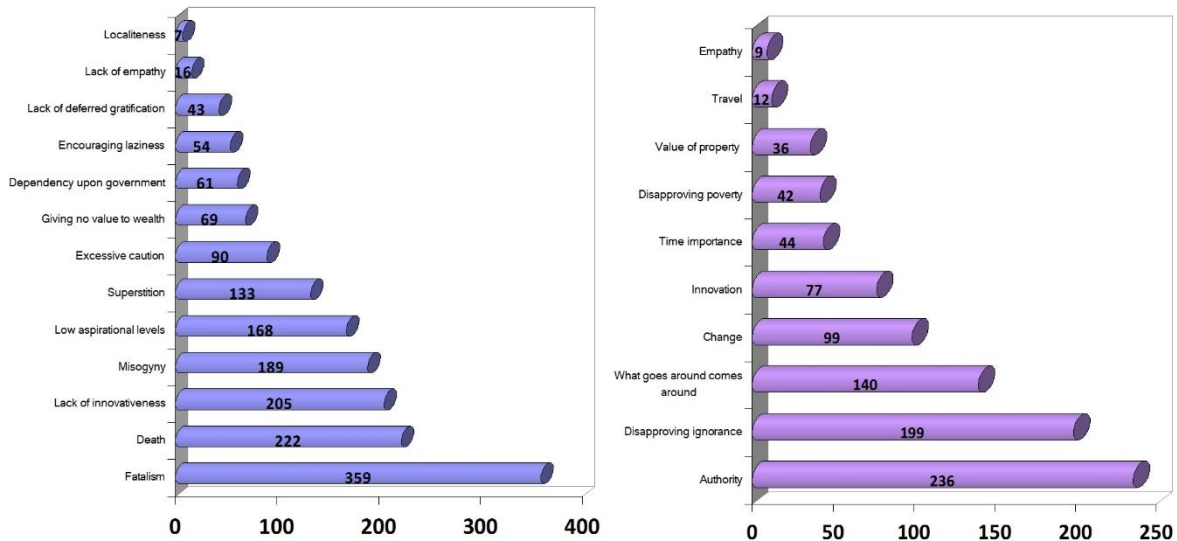


Figure (1): A comparison of the frequency of proverbs encouraging and discouraging development

### Results of the Field Study

The proverbs included in Dehkhoda's *Amsal va Hekam* date back to about 90 years ago. A fieldwork was conducted to see whether the Iranian people still believe in these proverbs or not, trying to provide a complete representation of the views of 40 people currently using or hearing them. We selected the sample from people who were well aware of proverbs and did not belong to one particular class of society. Since the general public are the main users of proverbs, maintaining diversity in sampling was important, and the work continued until theoretical saturation. In total, 276 proverbs related to the research topic were obtained in interviews with 40 people, with an average of about 7 proverbs mentioned by each person, of which 64 proverbs were related to the concepts encouraging development and 212 others were related to those discouraging development. During the interview, we asked the participants to comment on the research topic and whether they considered proverbs effective cultural elements in the performance of the community members towards development and non-development. We also asked them to recall related proverbs that they had heard or used recently. In total, 32 interviewees agreed and 8 interviewees rejected the role of proverbs in Iran's underdevelopment. A summary of the views of the former group is provided below:

- Zahra, 37, with a PhD degree in sociology, mentioned examples of proverbs that encouraged contentment, patience and misogyny: "Proverbs definitely play a role in cultural development. To prove this, we can consider the proverbs of developed countries to understand what culture they produce for their future generations and what culture the Persian proverbs have produced. How can we expect development when we repeatedly use proverbs with backwardness themes? Think about the meaning of these proverbs: 1. *Dignity comes from contentment and baseness from greed, do with your dignity and do not seek baseness* 2. *A good pious obedient woman makes a king out of a poor man* 3. *If you wait, you'll make halva out of sour grape*. The first proverb encourages contentment and a lack of need for worldly wealth, the second one considers women to be like slaves, making their husbands more successful if they are submissive, and the third one encourages patience and laziness. These repeated proverbs hinder the progress of our people and society."
- Fatemeh, a 60-year-old teacher with a bachelor's degree, emphasized the anti-ethnic nature of some Persian proverbs: "Proverbs have an undeniable role in the culture of any society and can, as a cultural factor, hinder its progress. I think, every day we hear proverbs with anti-ethnic concepts. It may affect our unity. When the people of a particular city label other ethnicities or people of other cities, it is clear that no civil society will be formed. Some such anti-ethnic proverbs are *If Lor does not go to the market, the market will decay*, and *neither Qom nor Kashan is good, damn both of them*."
- Vahid, 30, with a bachelor's degree in mechanical engineering, mentioned proverbs relating to the concept of comfort-seeking: "Proverbs have a huge impact on the backwardness of people in the community. I myself hear many proverbs that drive people towards laziness and comfort-seeking. I'm a tenant myself and always hear people say the proverb that *tenants sit in comfort*, or that *God himself will provide your livelihood*, which shape our viewpoints. That made me overvalue tenancy so that I never tried to make more money and buy a house because I thought that God would help me get one someday."
- Nadereh, a 50-year-old woman with a bachelor's degree in clinical psychology, talked about Persian proverbs that encourage silence and acceptance of oppression and said, "Proverbs have an educational aspect for community members and can undeniably enhance or hinder development. Specifically, I hear many proverbs encouraging silence and acceptance of oppression. This is evident in the suppression of women or minority opposition groups. It may be because of proverbs that we never know about our rights and always try to move forward through flattery and finding ties. In addition, we women are always in trouble both in the family and in the workplace, and always try to appear attractive to men because we have not been taught how to be independent and take our rights back. For example, proverbs such as *if you don't seek scandal, try to be consistent with the community*, *women have no business in such work*, and *a red tongue will lead to the loss of a green head* are all aimed at suppressing people in the community."
- Mina, a 28-year-old lady with a master's degree in electrical engineering, emphasized proverbs containing the concept of misogyny, "Proverbs do play a part in the fate of any society because they can build positive or negative cultures. They reflect the society and the collective wisdom of its people. For example, misogyny is very evident in Persian proverbs, perhaps because the Iranian women cannot reach their true position. Sometimes polygamy is spread in the community. There's a proverb saying *"sister-in-law is the bread beneath kebab*<sup>1</sup>, or a *woman's notoriety will not be forgotten*. Repeating these proverbs will lower women's self-esteem and prevent the cooperation of the two sexes, because men always humiliate women and consider them instruments."
- Mostafa, a 30-year-old managing director with a bachelor's degree in civil engineering, mentioned proverbs that encourage laziness, "Proverbs are anecdotes often coming from past life experiences and teaching us lessons. But in my opinion, not all proverbs have a positive cultural effect. Some encourage progress while others discourage it. Many proverbs encourage

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<sup>1</sup> . This proverb shows that one's sister-in-law is considered better than his wife. Although one has bread and kebab, he craves the bread beneath it.

laziness. For example, *the larger the roof, the greater the snow*, or *so relaxed is one who has no donkey and knows nothing about its straw and barley* encourage passivity and laziness. If all people in the community think that way, no one will make any progress, nor will the society."

- Masoumeh, 47, with a high school diploma, mentioned the positive aspect of proverbs and said that they encourage development: "The role of proverbs is to build culture in society. If all members pay attention to this aspect of proverbs, the society will develop. For example, the following proverbs encourage development: *With persistence, hardships will be easy for you*, *seek the door of independence through knowledge*, and *try to earn living through your arms (work), because results of your effort will be in your scale*<sup>1</sup>. Such proverbs can lead individuals and, consequently, the society toward progress."

### Summary and Conclusion

As shown by the members of the study population and the proverbs collected using qualitative content analysis and field study methods, the proverbs used today were similar to those studied in Dekhoda's *Amsal va Hekam* in terms of meaning and content. Their only difference was the colloquial tone of proverbs in the spoken language and that the interviewees recalled anti-development proverbs better, indicating that these proverbs are still used commonly by people in their daily conversations after nearly a century from their collection. It also showed that the written and spoken proverbs generally adopted the same stance against the phenomenon of development.

The information gathered during this study showed that we need to take a fundamental measure regarding the public culture of the society as one of the influential factors if we want to have a developed country. In the current conditions where societies are developing at a fast rate, with new discoveries and inventions every day, people in the Iranian society still believe in their destiny, looking for the best spell-writer to change their fortunes. One cannot hope for any development in a society where its proverbs are mostly about fatalism, misogyny, death, contentment, patience, superstition, and gerontocracy and these proverbs are repeated on a daily basis and transferred to the next generations through textbooks and the media. The most important solutions that can be drawn from the results of this study and the hypotheses confirmed in this article are as follows:

1. Encouraging the community members to turn to innovation and risk-taking through the socialization process and valuing those with such attributes.
2. Motivating people toward progress and positive change in their everyday lives through the media.
3. Emphasizing collective interests and promoting a nationalist approach, patriotism and equality of ethnicities through the media, the education system and economic and cultural policies of the government.
4. Paving the way for progress and success and promoting children's aspirations and goals through children's programs and stories in the media and textbooks.
5. Developing rationalism and preventing superstition in society through cultural planning.
6. Adopting rational methods to achieve equal success for all community members.
7. Promoting the belief that both sexes are equally valuable, especially concerning women, and striving to eradicate the culture of misogyny.

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<sup>1</sup> . This means that you will gain according to your efforts.

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