



*Art and Animation by Shabbir Muhammad (Visual Artist) and Soha Macktoom (Senior Research Associate, KUL)
Music Artists: Fakir Zulfikar & Sahar Fakir (produced by Lahooti Live Sessions)*

Weather Wisdom in Sindhi Literature: capturing weather as a force of imagination in Shah Jo Risalo

Atoofa Hafeez & Aqdas Fatima

The authors are anthropologists and research associates at Karachi Urban Lab

Weather stories and folklore are one avenue through which people have historically expressed their interactions with the environment. They not only capture the ways in which people interact with their environments, but also provide a force of imagination that influences understandings of the self, the universe, and broader perceptions of the human condition. In this blog, we consider stories that have been told about weather in the South Asian context. How have they shaped peoples' engagement with their environments? How have they aided sensorial experiences of weather? And, what is the relevance of such stories in today's climate-change driven context?

Among all the novelties experienced by the British as

they colonized South Asia, variable climate stood as a particularly perplexing concern. Beyond the obvious differences, the agency of weather in the South Asian context became a prominent source of anxiety. From Henry Pottinger's narrations of the "most sultry weather" of Sindh to early descriptions of South Asian weather as "abhorrent", "violent" and "hellish" (Venkat 2020) we gain a sense of the region's weather - and particularly its heat - as something that needed management.

In part, ideas of "the orient" and "the tropics", along with emerging scientific categorizations of weather created a new means of controlling environmental processes that were otherwise deemed chaotic. As meteorological sciences gained footing in the late nineteenth century, the ability to predict weather

patterns and behaviors substantially improved, making weather less eccentric than previously assumed. Colonial conversations steered away from puzzlement over the agency of weather and its impacts, towards defining it as something rather platitudinous: weather became reserved as a subject of conversation for when there was nothing left to talk about.

Despite this, weather remains an essential component of physical experiences of the environment, as well as people's expressions of emotions, in fact and in fiction. From proverbial references of *garmi* (heat) to anger and passion, to the metaphorical joy of *bahaar* (spring) and *barsaat* (rain), descriptions of weather are not only telling of peoples' perceptions of their environments, but are crucial insights into the way they may be feeling as a result of interacting with such environments.

In what follows, we use poetry from *Shah jo Risalo*, a collection by Sufi poet Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai, to explore how weather and the environment are used as forces of imagination, and how they reflect a local ethos of human-nature interactions in Sindh, a province of modern-day Pakistan. We also underscore the difference between weather and climate in relation to the environment: where the former engages with short-term experiences, the latter spans over a longer duration. As Ingold and Kurttila (2000) argue, climate is recorded and weather is experienced. We choose to focus on weather and base our understanding on Frazier's (2019) definition of weather as embodied experience and interactions with local environments.

* * *

Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai was a scholar and a saint, considered by many as the greatest poet of the 17th century. Written in the form of ballads, his poetry narrates the experience of individuals seeking God, emphasizing negotiations with the ego. The *Risalo* contains 30 thematic chapters, called *surs*, of which some illustrate the life stories of widely known and culturally significant heroines: *Suhni*, *Sasui*, *Lila*, *Momal*, *Marui*, *Nuri* and *Sorath*. Bhitai's interest and focus on nature set these tales as rich grounds for exploring human-nature interactions and how they manifest in local realities.

Since the 18th century, various manuscripts of *Risalo* have emerged with slight differences in translation and analyses. We focus on two translated versions of the *Risalo*: the revised and annotated edition by Muhammad Yakoob Agha (2009) and translations by Elsa Qazi (2009) for secondary analysis. Our particular focus, *Sur*

Sasui, is among the longest series of *surs* including *Sur Abri*, *Sur Hussaini*, *Sur Kohyar*, *Sur Mazuri* and *Sur Desi*, bearing on the story of *Sasui* and *Punhoo*. We also refer to *Sur Sarang* (the monsoon), particularly in its notation of the value of water as a symbol of fertility during times of famine.

What makes *Sur Sasui* particularly relevant for reflecting localized interactions with weather is the significance it grants to elements such as light and shade, the sun and water, heat and the wind. Such facets of environmental interaction are not only essential in character development and as a means for exploring the character's emotional states, but are also crucial in defining the story's progression, particularly its spatio-temporal placement. Atmospheric metaphors utilizing scorching winds, harsh sunlight, and pouring rain are frequently drawn in order to express the state of the beloved (the primary subject of the poet) and the intensity of their circumstances. As described in the verse:

پَرَتُو پُنھوءَ جو، جُهَرَ جِين جھالا ڏئي،
آئون تنهن آريءَ لئي، ويٺو راه، زُٺان گھئون.

“The manifestation of *Punhoo* is like a flash of lightning amidst clouds, (or it is cloudiness alternating with sunshine). I do proceed my way with tearful eyes towards the *Ari* (Allah)”

(*Sur Kohyari*, Vol.III, p. 1318)

Where weather is conventionally understood as scientific, *Risalo*'s ability to express emotional capacities through various weather elements, and its exploration of how such elements become associated with emotive states are tell-tale signs of locally grounded human-nature interactions, particularly how this dichotomy is understood. Anthropological study of weather tends to establish clear boundaries between what is social and what is ecological, often focusing on humans as subjects that actively interact with a dormant environment, i.e. the object. However, when Bhitai writes:

بئي وينارون، ڏکي ڏونگر پان ڀ،
ڪنهن کي ڪين چون، منجهن جو مچ ڀري.

“The twain, the miserable woman and the mountain, sobbed between themselves. They would not, however, inform any person of the blaze in them of their love”

(*Sur Kohyari*, Vol.III, p.1306)

And further, when he expresses:

منجهان منهنجي رُوح، جي وِجي ساڄن وسري،
ته مَر لڳي لُوهُ تَر ٻا بيهو تي مَران!

“If my heart were to forget my beloved, I would then like to die like the (proverbial) desert Babiho bird due to the scorching breeze.

Note: Babiho is a bird which subsists on dew drops. It cannot bear heat at all”

لڳي مُونِ كِي لُوهُ، وَرَهَ واٽون لائون،
رازُ جنهن سين رُوح، سو ڪوهيارو ڪيچ وِيو.

“I have been affected by the scorching wind, and I have been completely smothered by the travails of separation. The fact is that he, who is acquainted with the secrets of my mind, has gone to Kech”

(Sur Hussaini, Vol.III, p. 1349)

Bhittai not only observes the receptiveness of people to nature and vice versa, but builds an image that considers humans in nature, foregoing ideas of defining the two in terms of objectivity and subjectivity, and focusing instead on building exchange and dialogue between the two. Human-nature synergies in Bhitai’s text thus play an active role in breaking down binaries, suggesting more nuanced approaches to understanding how people position themselves in relation to nature. In Risalo’s weather stories, we find descriptions of salubrious seasonal rains, intense winds during the summers, and distressing droughts, all of which are expanded on through story arcs of characters such as Sassi and Punhoo, and how their internal states paralleled the environments they inhabited – something that Anderson (2005) described as “weather wisdom”. Sasui and Punhoo’s characters are also manifested through descriptions of light and shade, darkness and overcast clouds, and most prominently, the sun. In many verses, shade refers to darkness and light refers to sunshine. Sasui’s emotional state during her struggle to find Punhoo is articulated through the intensity of the weather which leads to the destruction of mountains and burning of trees, rendering the environment uninhabitable.

حَقِيقَتَ هِنَ حَالِ جِي، جِي ضَاهِرُ ڪِرِيَانِ ڏَرِي
لڳي مَابِ مِزُونِ ڪِي، ڏُونڱرَ پَوَن ڏَرِي
وَڃِي وَنَ بَرِي، اوڀرَ اُڀري ڪين ڪِي.

“If I were to disclose my condition a little, all beasts will be numbed, mountains broken into pieces and trees set on fire, and no vegetation shall grow”

(Sur Kohyari, Vol.III, p. 1322)

Among the most prominent themes that emerge in Risalo’s text is that of struggle and hardship, and how those are negotiated using metaphors of heat. Sasui’s character in particular epitomizes struggle, particularly in her quest to find her love Punhoo. Bhattai elaborates on her agony through descriptions of the prevailing topography of Sindh in the 17th century: the resounding echo of the arid Baloch mountains, the dry, hot, sandy air wafting in the Thar desert, and the suffocating smoke in the city of Bhombore, which he likens to hell. Sasui’s overarching emotional state throughout her contests are elaborated through her perceptions of the weather that surrounds her, one characterized by the harshness of the sun as it strains her body, blurring distinctions between internal and external perceptions:

ڏاڍي لڪَ لڪَن جِي، پَن پوي پڇاڙ،
چڙ ڪوسو وَاڙ، هريا تنهن هيٺان ڪيا.

“An extremely hot wind is blowing in the passes, and it has made the plains scorching. The ‘simoom’ wind in the mountains has weakened those who are drenched in perspiration”

(Sur Kohyari, Vol.II, p. 1332-1333)

While the journey of hardships continues, Sasui musters her strength through her connection with the weather: as her tortuous expedition continues, she fortifies herself with the thought “you have to keep moving all the time, be it bitter cold or blazing heat”. In sur Sasui, the sun is shown as a significant source of the hardship; the sun’s heat exacerbates the beloved’s experiences by making her exceedingly sweaty. From the heat released from the burning ground, to the feeling of suffocation resulting from the hot winds, for Sasui to cope with the loss of Punhoo, she must prevail through the distress she is subjected to by her environment. Her struggles of love are inseparable from her struggles with the heat. Sasui lays down in the grove and waits for the perspiration to dry up, just as she tries to remain patient in her search. On her struggle, Agha (1985) writes in his analysis of Shah jo Risalo; “Sasui feels that life without the beloved is gratuitous. Nay, it is a prison worse than hell. She must, therefore, seek reunion with her beloved Punhoo. She is undoubtedly oppressed by the love’s fire, the sun’s heat, the arduous and perilous journey”. Sasui

expresses:

ڪي ڌر تتي ماءُ! ڪي جر سنڌي سڄڻين،
هلي ۽ وا جهائي، ٻنهي جيران وڃ ۾.

"O mother! I have to push on with my search and endure two fires having been sandwiched between something of a scorching sunshine and that of heart burning love for the beloved"
(Sur Hussaini, Vol.III, p.1348)

تپي ڪندين ڪوه، ڏونگر ڏڪوڻين ڪي
تُون جي پهن پب جو، ته لڱ منهنجا لوه.

"O mountain! Even if you become hot (or harsh), you can hardly influence an already distressed person. If you are a hard rock of Pub, I too have an iron frame"
(Sur Kohyari, vol.III, p. 1303-1304)

Beyond expressing emotional states through metaphors of heat and weather, Bhitai's poetry discusses assiduously the economic implications of weather patterns, laying particular emphasis on monsoon rainfalls— a longstanding symbol of hope and prosperity in Sindh. Aside from experiential understandings, weather is established as a geographical agent, binding spaces across continents under its directional and non-directional movement.

موتي مانڊاڻن جي، واري ڪيائين وار
وڃون وسڻ آڻيون، چوڏس تي چوڏار
ڪي اڻي هليون استمبول ڏي، ڪي مڻيون مغرب پار
ڪي چمڪن چين تي، ڪي لهن سمڙ قندي سار
ڪي رمي ويئون روم تي، ڪي ڪابل ڪي قندهار
ڪي دليءَ ڪي ڏڪن، ڪي گرن مٽي گرنار.

"Warm preparations are again in progress everywhere; Again, the lightning has begun to leap with arduous flare. Some towards Istanbul to dive, some to the west repair; some over China glitter. Some of Samerquand take care; some wander to Byzantium, Kabul, some to Kandhar fare. Some lie on Delhi, Deccan, some reach Girnar, thundering there"
(Kazi, 2009)
(Sur sarang, vol.I, p. 528-529)

Bhitai especially considers the unequivocal importance of water in his descriptions of economic security:

موتي مانڊاڻن جي، جڙي ڪيائين جوڙ،
وڃون وسڻ آڻيون، ٻه ٻه ٻڌائون ٻوڙ،
آنن جا عالم ۾، لکين ٿيا ڪوڙ،
سارنگ لائي سوڙهه، سانده سهاڻو ٿيو.

"The monsoon has returned. The clouds have fittingly been formed to rain. The sky has been decorated. That is grand! In fact, a deluge has been caused. Due to its benevolence the country will have enough grain for millions of silos. All shortage of grain will disappear. There is universal joy and prosperity"
(Sur Sarang, vol.I, p. 530)

Rather than making forced attempts to define and patronize weather, these descriptions offer on the ground interactions with the environment that were commonplace in the region. In terms of everyday human experience, weather takes expression through practices, habits, routine, and conversations.

Notably, the only reference to fear in Sur Sarang is made in reference to rain, and it is from the perspective of widowed women. Widowed women's helplessness during the rain is compounded by the lack of aid and support from male guardians. Risalo's engagement with the gendered implications of monsoon rains shows the use of weather imaginations to address wider cultural norms and concerns, simultaneously complicating the season's assumed role as a driver of prosperity:

ڪڻڪن ڪانڌ چت ڪيو، جهر پسيو جهڄن،
ور ريءَ ونڊن آڏيا، پکا سي مڻسن!
اٿر ٻاهي ان جا، ته ڪنهن ڪي ڪازون ڪن؟
وارث وري تن، اڇي شال اولون ڪري.

"When widows see clouds, they become worried and gloomy and remember their consorts. May the huts, put up by them, not get drenched and leaky! If northern wind pulls down (particularly during rainfall) to whom would such resourceless women appeal for immediate aid? Would that their guardians were to look after them in emergencies!"
(Sur Sarang, vol.I, p. 516)

Our reflections on weather in Bhitai's poetry underscores the place of literature and folklore as rich and insightful repositories that address how people understand, interact with, and reference their environments. These texts engage with everyday weather and its fluctuations in ways that both elaborate on physical and sensorial experiences of atmospheric changes, but also describe

internal states of being.

How weather is spoken about has evolved drastically, not only in terms of long-lasting atmospheric changes, but also in the way that people position themselves in their environments, oscillating between conversations about its mystique and mundanity. It is curious that a strong interest in weather has only now reemerged – under discourses of fear and disasters – in the age of the Anthropocene. Revitalizing stories and narratives of weather that center around embodied experiences of atmospheric conditions might, we propose, be a starting point for reexamining our fears, and understanding where we stand now, in our weathered environments.

Acknowledgements

This blog is an output of a 3-year project, “Cool Infrastructures: Life with Heat in the Off-Grid City” funded by the United Kingdom's Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) as part of the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF). We thank Professor Nausheen H Anwar and Professor Jamie Cross for their suggestions and comments that helped improve the blog.

Reference List:

Adamson, G.C., 2012. ‘The languor of the hot weather’: everyday perspectives on weather and climate in colonial Bombay, 1819–1828. *Journal of Historical Geography*, 38(2), pp.143-154.

Anderson, K., 2005. *Predicting the weather: Victorians and the science of meteorology*. University of Chicago Press.

Agha, M. Y., 1985. *Shah-jo-Risalo Alias Ganje Latif*. 1st Edition ed. Hyderabad: Shah Abdul Latif Bhitshah Cultural Centre Committee, Hyderabad

Boia, L., 2005. *The weather in the imagination*. Reaktion Books.

Frazier, Camille., 2019. Urban Heat: Rising Temperature as Critique in India's Air-Conditioned City. *City & Society*, 31(3), pp. 441-461.

Kenny, J.T., 1995. Climate, race, and imperial authority: the symbolic landscape of the British hill station in India. *Annals of the Association of American*

Geographers, 85(4), pp.694-714.

Qazi, E., 2009. *Shah-jo-Risalo (selections)*. s.l.:Maktabah Islamic Books.

Ingold, T. and Kurttila, T., 2000. Perceiving the environment in Finnish Lapland. *Body & Society*, 6(3-4), pp.183-196.

Venkat, Bharat Jayram. 2020. “Toward an Anthropology of Heat.” *Anthropology News* website, March 12, 2020. DOI: 10.1111/AN.1370