Monsoon Feelings
A History of Emotions in the Rain

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NIYOGI BOOKS
‘The Spring of Hindustan’:

Love and War in the Monsoon in Indo-Persian Poetry

Sunil Sharma
The description of the monsoon season as ‘spring of India’ is found in the opening line of one of the oldest Indo-Persian poems to mention the rainy season. The court poet Mas’ud Sa’d Salman (d. 1121), who was connected to the Ghaznavid dynasty in their later years of rule in Lahore, celebrated the monsoon for its restorative qualities from the heat of the summer in a poem, thus finding an equivalence for the rejuvenating effect of the spring after a harsh winter:

![Figure 8: Incipit page with an illuminated title piece inscribed Kitāb-i Qīran-i Sādīn-i Amir Khvān, c. 1600–09. The Walters Art Museum.](image)

Monsoon, spring of India, saviour from the torment of summer. You brought tidings of the month of Tir, once again we escaped the heat.¹

Although the Persian month of Tir (June–July) marks the beginning of summer in the Iranian plateau, in the Indian context this period is the beginning of the rainy season, but they share the same qualities of rejuvenation and elicit similar emotions in people.

In a millennium of Indo-Persian poetry, the monsoon was a favourite image, not the least because it was specially connected to
all aspects of actual life in the Indian subcontinent, but also because of its long tradition of metaphoric association with the emotional drama of the longing, separation and union of lovers and beloveds. In the earliest Indo-Persian poems, the use of the monsoon trope is a variation on the myriad representations of nature imagery and an expansion of the conventions found in classical Persian and Arabic poetry. The basic affective states of longing and separation from the beloved and the joy of union are features common to both Indo-Persian and Indic poetry, albeit with differences in the specific imagery and gender of the speaker in an individual poem. Indo-Persian poets were highly conscious of the two poetic systems and combined them skilfully while maintaining the formal requirements of the three main Persian literary forms, *gusida*, *masnavi* and *ghazal*. What is distinctive about this body of poems is that often there is a realistic experience of the monsoon conveyed by the poet, in addition to the description of emotions and the landscape in purely poetic and aesthetic terms. In this way, there is a deeper emotional involvement of the poet in the topic of the poem, as he balances stock features with innovative elements.

**Imagery of Rain in Classical Persian Literature**

The scholar Riccardo Zipoli explains the multiple ways to understand the symbolic significance of rain in the context of classical Persian literature: through rain, the cloud contributes to renewing the earth in the Spring, with all its ornaments and fragrances; raindrops are described as pearls dropping to earth and becoming flowers. Accordingly, the image of a dark spring cloud alludes to the generosity of the prince. In Persian paregryic poetry, the role of the patron is central and he is identified with a beloved who can choose to be kind or to withhold their affection from the poet-lover. The darker the cloud, the more generous a patron could be expected to be. In addition, Zipoli writes, ‘Rain may also be interpreted as the weeping of a cloud (supposed to be unhappily in love with the garden).’ In this second meaning, rain is usually the setting for the occasion of a party in a garden where two lovers meet or a courteously gathering of friends takes place. The connection between rain and a whole spectrum of emotions that it elicits in the poet-lover was thus an established trope in classical Persian literature by the time Mas'ud Sa'd wrote his poem in Lahore. He was aware of the range of possibilities that the use of this image offered to a skilful poet, and the appreciation that a discerning patron could show. Located in the border regions of the Iranian and Indian worlds, rain had an additional significance for him: as in Indic poetic traditions, the monsoon marked the end of a period of waiting and hope for union with the beloved. His poems combine elements from both traditions, resulting in a recognisably Indo-Persian aesthetic of describing the natural elements in poems that otherwise fixed rules regarding form and metre.

**The Monsoon in Ghaznavid Indo-Persian Poetry**

In Mas'ud Sa'd's poem that was mentioned above, which is a *masnavi*, a form chiefly used for narrative or topical poetry, the poet employs metaphors drawn from martial and courtly life, i.e., a world with which he had deep familiarity, and which provided suitable occasions for the composition and performance of poems. This poem can be dated from his short stint as the Ghaznavid governor of Jalandhar in 1099, and the first eighteen lines describing the monsoon set the scene for a long narrative in which he imagines the festive

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assemblies of his patron Prince ‘Azud ud-Daula Shirzad, viceroy in India during 1099–1114/15 CE, in full swing in Lahore. He suffers pangs of separation, perhaps fearing that since he was out of sight, he would also be out of the prince’s mind, and a timely reminder of his existence—and conspicuous absence—needed to be sent. How apt then to have the setting of the monsoon as an opening to his poem, for it would translate his feelings of longing and nostalgia even when it was a time of relief and joy.

Mas‘ud Sa‘d used imagery appropriate to the station of his patron. He described the monsoon as the site of a battle: an army (lathkar) of clouds came to fight the army of summer; at the command of the winds, the rain clouds (megb) came wielding swords (tigh) to the accompaniment of the thunder of war drums. Having attacked (hamla) and routed (manhazam) the enemy, the monsoon established its supremacy and gained power over the environment. The variable rhyme scheme of the masnavi, also used for Persian epics, was perfectly suited to convey the action and movement in these lines. With the new ‘pax-monsoonica’ in effect, the salubrious effect of the season is visible and felt all around in the world, and a happy mean is attained where there is no physical discomfort from the heat and no fear of the cold. The poet described the blissful sensation in these words, ‘Under tight clothes my body is refreshed by the cool breezes’ (tan-i mā zir-i jābah-zi tang / gshit ieda xi bādha-qi khanak). The liberation from the oppressiveness of the heat was a feeling that could only be celebrated by having a refreshing drink with one’s companions, but instead of the expected revelry (‘aist o ‘ishrat), we discover that Mas‘ud Sa‘d was actually far away from his companions and the paradisical gathering (mālīs-i bishri-dīn); he acutely felt his isolation and distance from the court in Lahore. Poetry was the only consolation for his heart at this time (man digar chāra’s naddānam kard / dil hadim nāsī ‘khush tavānām kard). The happiness of the monsoon season was tempered by this stark reality, but in keeping with his role as a professional poet he ended his poem with a prayer for his patron’s welfare. The relative flexibility of the masnavi in comparison to other forms gave the poet freedom to combine several elements in his poem: the ambivalent effect of the monsoon on the poet, the details of a courtly assembly, and finally with his prayer the hope that he would soon be able to join his patron and participate in his gatherings.

A different and more typical scenario for the poet-lover was played out in an earlier poem by Mas‘ud Sa‘d, this one in the more formal panegyric ode, gaida, dedicated to the crown prince Sa‘d ud-Daula Mahmud, where the monsoon also provides the backdrop of the poet’s negotiation of his courtly duties. The lyrical exordium or nashī of such poems often involved a dramatic mini-narrative that set the mood of the poem. The weightier language, monorhyme, and metre of this poetic form, features which would have come through in the recitation of the gaida in a courtly setting, enhanced the solemnity of the scene. In this case, having just left his beloved, the poet was restless, sleep evaded him, his eyes shed watery tears, and his heart was burning with fire:

Fire and water arose from my heart and eyes.
Who has seen burning in drowning, except I, it is a wonder.
From the fire of my heart and water of my eyes, in my heart and eyes, Thought does not enter, there is no space for sleep.’

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He recalled how his beloved reacted when he was about to depart; she stormed into his presence as if ready for marital combat and threw back her veil. She wept as she said, 'Don't break our pact and leave my soul to burn' (hami giris u hami gaft ahd-i man makhzan / masuq jinam u dar raftan-i safar masavitab). This is the point of departure for the staging of a stormy love affair between the archetypal lover and beloved, who are then doomed to a prolonged period of longing with no certainty of union. But this can also mark another sort of departure: moving from the lyrical exordium that is ghazal-like in its erotic tone to the panegyric section of a gaida. Writing on classical Persian praise poetry, Julie S. Meisami notes that the lyrical exordium does not just function to capture the listener's attention:

The polythematic qasidah afford opportunities for greater subtlety and complexity, particularly in the potential furnished by parallelism between nashid and madih [panegyric] for the introduction, in the context of love, of motifs essential to understanding the panegyric proper. Thus, the tears shed by the lovers in Mas'ud Sa'd's poem prepared readers for the effects of the monsoon later on in the poem.

In this drama of lovers parting, the weeping beloved was left behind and the poet was pulled away by the powerful charisma of the patron-prince. Just as his beloved experiences the sorrow of parting, the poet has felt the separation from his patron. Most often in such poems the journey to the court, the nabih, was an arduous one through desert and wilderness, a veritable obstacle course. In this part of the qasida, 'By calling attention to the physical hardships of the journey, [the poet] urges the patron to reward him...an action (more properly, a performance, before the assembled audience) designed to ensure that good repute which the patron desires, and which the poet's verses will immortalize.' In Mas'ud Sa'd's poem, it would seem that the poet was not just undertaking a symbolic journey, but actually travelling from Jhelum to Balhara, both cities in Punjab, at the height of the monsoon season in order to present himself at the court of Prince Mahmud.

Mas'ud Sa'd described the difficulties he faced over the course of this journey. 'I spent such a night in the monsoon rain; water was up to my neck and mud up to my throat' (ha-harbakal shabi man chunin guzashna-am / ke tā ba-gardon bidāb u tā ba-khulq khalab) (see also Lunn and Schofield, this volume). We must remember that the very real and frightening experience of wading through mud in flood-like conditions was part of the 'ritualistic affirmation of a mode of life' to quote Stefan Sperl's work on the Arabic qasida that strengthened the bond of fidelity between the poet and his master. But floods also had a negative aspect to them, as explained by Annemarie Schimmel:

Another result of the rains, which also brings fertility and fragrance to gardens, can be the dangerous sayd, the flash flood that suddenly rushes over the dried-up soil and carries away everything on its path. Poets found this a good metaphor for the complete eradication of the matter-bound self and thus happily awaited (or so they claim) the dancing torrent which would shatter their doors and walls and drive them out into the desert of madness.

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The poet swore that it was unthinkable for him to leave the prince's company and begged his indulgence, otherwise 'The tree of my fortune will become dry, on the contrary, if your hand does not rain on it instead of the clouds' (darakht-i daulat-i man bi-khūšâf khūshâk shâsad / āgar nabârâd bâsat bar ā bâ-jâ-yi sabâb). The prince's generosity, thus, had the power to usurp the role of the monsoon cloud, whether it bestowed life or destroyed the world in a flood.

In order to enjoy the prince's fabled justice and liberality that transformed the world into the highest heaven, the poet's body had to undergo hardship and, as a result, the journey also brought him out of the imaginary world with the phantom beloved to the reality of courtly life with all its fringe benefits. As our poet marshalled the full repertory of rhetorical devices, his particular environment allowed him to transcend the limits of the scripted use of language and metaphors in the poetic form he chose and take a more innovative path. In both poems by Mas'ud Sa'd, the longing for the court and patron was precipitated by the change of seasons, but whereas in one case the poet experienced separation even as he enjoyed the relief of the cool weather, in the other case the happy outcome was reunion and an escape from the ravages of the monsoon.

Amir Khusrau and Separation in the Monsoon
The connection of the spring-like monsoon with a range of emotions related to love was also exploited two centuries later by another Indo-Persian court poet Amir Khusrau (d. 1325). This is the opening line of his collection of ghazals, "The cloud rains as I leave my beloved. / What can a heart do, parting from its love on a day like this" (abr mihârâd u man mishavam az yâr judâ / chân kunam dil ba-chunin rêz ezî dîldâr judâ). In this line and those that follow, the rain cloud was not merely the setting for a melancholy farewell between the poet and his lover, but it is also an active participant in the emotionally tearful drama that was played out ritually in many ghazals. Amir Khusrau took the image of the monsoon further than its more obvious place in lyrical poems.

In contrast to the sequence of emotions that was marked by separation with no hope for union, reunion preceded several sorrowful partings in a verse narrative by Amir Khusrau, in which multiple relationships of father-son, mother-son, lover-beloved, and poet-patron were affected by actual events taking place in the monsoon season. The historical confrontation between Sultan Kay Qubad (r. 1287–90) of Delhi and his estranged father Nasir ud-Din Bughra Khan, who was first governor of the province and then ruler of an independent Bengal state, took place in 1288 on the bank of the River Ghagra. Khusrau commemorated the event in his poetic work in the masnavi form, Qîrân al-Sâ'dân ('Conjunction of two auspicious conjunctions'), his first major experimental poem that combined multiple modes of poetic discourse. The complex and hybrid structure of Amir Khusrau's work followed the narrative of the sultan and his troops' procession march to the east, the face-off between father and son in Awadh, their eventual reconciliation, and the inevitable parting as both kings returned to their respective kingdoms. The action is modulated by a description of the changing seasons, as well as by material or symbolic objects associated with each stage of the court's progress on its mission:

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Praise for the ruler's capital city and architectural achievements was standard fare in panegyric poems, but Amir Khusrau skilfully combined this feature with verses on courtly accoutrements that range from edible items to luxury objects. The reader experiences the passing of time along with the change of seasons, participating in the movement and emotions of the characters in the narrative poem, whose story otherwise is rather bare.

A painting from an early seventeenth-century manuscript from Safavid Iran of Amir Khusrau's narrative poems depicts the feasting of a youthful looking father and son in a typical Persian garden setting where wine, musicians and young suqis (cupbearers) contribute to the pleasure of the revellers (Figure 9). This union is one of several in the cyclical structure of the poem. The greenery, flowers and birds in the garden will be found again, in a different manifestation, in the monsoon season, although the artist does not include that scene in this manuscript. In this respect, the idealised
scene in a spring garden that is shown here is a prelude to the more dramatic and realistic shifts that will unfold in the narrative. Another Safavid manuscript of this work, that had been located in the Uch Dargah Library, Pakistan, included a painting that shows the king on a boat on the river Ghagra in flood (Figure 10). In an ironic twist of fate, this manuscript was presumably destroyed in a monsoon flood in 1971 along with others in the library or lost thereafter. This is a particularly unfortunate loss since it included eleven paintings, the highest number in a manuscript of the Qur'an al-Sa'dain. Fortunately they are preserved in old photographs.17

Amir Khusrav ended every section in his masnavi with a ghazal to render the various emotions at each stage of the narrative into the metaphoric, and more familiar language of love. His ghazal to mark this charged moment and one that closed the section of father and son feasting together began with the line: 'It is extremely difficult to remain alone away from one's beloved; I who am speaking from the difficult situation of being left alone' (sakhī duḥnār ast tanbā māndān az dildār-i khwesh i må ke gīyām hāl-i tanbā māndān-i duḥnār-i khwesh).18 The poet-lover sheds copious tears in his desolation as he tries to come to terms with the separation from his beloved. The tears of the poet signalled the larger flood of water that the monsoon would bring. At the most dramatic point of the narrative, the potential for violent confrontation between the two armies turned into a positive encounter and feelings of mutual love and fidelity are renewed. But the joy was short-lived as the monsoon became the harbinger of another separation. Thus, when father and son finally parted on affectionate terms, each returning to his respective kingdom, sorrow was the paramount emotion, as when a lover leaves

Figure 10: The king on his boat on the flooded river Ghagra. Illustration in Amir Khusrav's Qur'an al-Sa'dain, 17C. Collection Golani House, Uch Sharif, Pakistan.
his beloved. The monsoon would bring a new cycle of longing and reunion, complicating the emotional landscape of the characters involved.

The ghazal allowed Amir Khusrau to segue into a description of the monsoon season (sifat-i mausum-i banun), which better conveyed his emotional state than the direct address to the reader as the poet-lover in the ghazal. He described the scene using a combination of images:

When the sun moved into Cancer, the sun’s spring/eyes filled with water. Clouds covered everything above, vegetation set up its troops on the plains. Water poured over the earth, which made its dust settle. The flood of clouds passed so rapidly that the chains of wind did not get a glimpse. 19

When the skies opened up and the rain started pouring down, it mimicked the forceful retreat of the army in all its force. The movement of the troops was like the flood, their drums were like thunder, and even the bows of the archers were semantically linked to the rainbow (gaus-i qasab). Whereas the troops and the monsoon displayed the masculine qualities of power, some aspects of nature were feminised: the clouds caused the sky to become veiled (parda-nashin) and cover its face, while the rivulets that begin flowing were the silvery limbs of the beloved. With this lyrical turn, the bagh

was ready for a majlis to be held, despite the destruction caused by the heavy rains: ‘In every town the buildings were under water; the grain storehouses were ruined’ (mānda ba-har shahr ‘imārat dar āb / muhtarūn rā shud khāna kharāb). The magical transformation that the monsoon brought about in his environment also allowed Amir Khusrau to introduce an ethnographic mode of description into his poem as he enumerated the varieties of vegetation, birds (sparrow, water fowl, peacocks), and fruits (grapes, bananas, watermelons, and the best product of Hindustan: mangoes) now on display (see also Lunn and Schofield, this volume). This was a technique that he perfected in his later historical mānasīs as well, introducing the flora and fauna among the multifarious aspects of Indian civilisation, to the larger Persophone world.

In the midst of all the monsoon bustle, as the king who was described as the pearl-scattering cloud making towards the sea (abr-i durr-ajhān-i shāh-i daryā-nīsī) began his return to Delhi, his men became weary of water everywhere (ṣuāmada laškar hama az āb tang). At this point, there was an unexpected turn in the narrative. Amir Khusrau’s patron, Khan-i Jahan Hatim Khan, was appointed governor of the province of Awadh, where the poet was also ordered to remain. This brought on a great deal of anxiety for him since he had been longing to see his mother who was back in Delhi. He found the exile (ghurbat) difficult to bear and was overcome by sorrow (gham). But a letter to his generous patron remedied the situation and he was allowed permission to go to Delhi, where he spent two days with his mother before presenting himself at court with an appropriate panegyric for the king. It was at this point that the sultan asked Khusrau to compose a poem commemorating the

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meeting with his father. Now equipped with the knowledge of how this poem came to be composed, the reader is brought full circle to the beginning of the narrative, and with this also ends the cycle of seasons. Thus, although the monsoon represented the season of reunions and partings, a time of sweet-sorrow, for Amir Khusrau this ‘spring of Hindustan’ also brought out all that was best and unique about his Indian environment, compared with the metaphoric qualities of Persian gardens. His mind and body reacted to the transformation that took place in nature, and through maintaining his positive frame of mind, he was indeed able to attain union with a loved one, his mother, even if that meant parting from his patron. Whereas the season of spring was most suitable for the enactment of the lives of the royal characters, the monsoon brought dramatic changes in his personal life, chief of which was a reunion with his loved ones.

**The Monsoon in Later Indo-Persian Poetry**

The monsoon continued to fascinate Indo-Persian poets and authors in the centuries after Amir Khusrau as it became a distinctly Indo-Persian image and theme. The first Mughal emperor, Babur (r. 1526–30), in his memoirs composed in Chaghatai Turkish, which were then translated into Persian, noted the salubrious effects of the monsoon, “The weather is unusually good when the rain ceases, so good in fact that it could not be more temperate or pleasing.” This was a prosaic way of stating what earlier poets had cleverly worked into their poems. Court poets continued the earlier practice of including a description of the *barshakal* in the opening sections of *qasidas*, but again, it was in the *masnavi* that we encounter novel ways of weaving the topic into a longer narrative.

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Figure 11: The rain has ceased and nature awakens. Follo from the Baburnama depicting palm squirrels, a peacock and a pair of pied cackoos, early 16C. *The Walters Art Museum.*
Especially with Mughal Persian poets who often drew on specifically Indian themes and imagery to produce a poetry that was uniquely Indo-Persian, the monsoon frequently appeared in poetic texts. An apt example of this was a poem in masnavi form, called *Masār-i Gul* (Manifestation of the rose) or *Sifat-i Bengal* (Description of Bengal), composed by Munir Lahori (d. 1644), a poet from the time of the emperor Shah Jahan (r. 1628–58), on the enchanting topography of the province of Bengal. Munir had accompanied his patron, a newly appointed governor, Saif Khan, to Bengal on a boat trip down the Ganga. When he arrived there, it was the monsoon season and the poet included a short section on the monsoon (barshakal) which, according to him, lasted for six months in this region. He used the phrases *fate-i aabr* (bounty of the cloud) twice to describe the effect of the monsoon on the physical environment. The accompanying thunder was likened to the sound of the *rabab*, recalling a courtly assembly. Munir was amazed by the amount of water everywhere: 'The earth, sea, air, are all equally clouds. When you see up and down, it's all water' (zamin daryā havā yakhshar sahāb ait i chu bini zir u bala jumla ab ait). He describes how there was such a flood of water everywhere that people were playing with it and making their nests in the trees like birds:


The boats that people used appeared like wooden horses traversing the waters to him (ba-jus kashri ke ba ābr baṣtad kār / be dida asp-i echīnīn-i ā-br aṣfār). Munir revelled in the experience of

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the use of new imagery and topics, Amir Khusrau sought to create
equivalences, through the sound and movement of the army and rain
clouds, the flora and fauna, with the metaphoric and physical reality
of the monsoon season. He did not equate the monsoon with spring,
the Persian and Indic cultural elements being separate in his mind,
nor did he use the word *barshakal* for the monsoon season, rather
he chose the more general word for rain, *baran*. His *masnavi*
dealt not just with love and praise of the sultan, but the violent business
of war and hostility between father and son, as well as his own deep
attachment to his mother. With Amir Khusrau the imagery of the
monsoon entered into the repertoire of Indo-Persian poetry and took
on a specific significance as the essential experience of Hindustan when
the diversity of its topography and natural world was on display. The
poet’s emotional response to the environment around him influenced
the aesthetics of his poetic expression. His constant search for cultural
equivalences led him on a lifetime’s journey of translation between the
Perso-Islamic and Indic worlds, in which the poem *Qiran al-Sā’dān*
was just a first step. In the early modern age, Mughal Persian poets,
as we saw in the case of Munir Lahori, continued to be infused by the
spirit of curiosity about the land of wonders that was India, but they
were also regionally specific about the effects of the heavy rains, even as
they celebrated the vastness of the empire.

The polysemous nature of classical Indo-Persian poetry allowed poets
to exploit the trope of longing and separation and transcend the usual
roles assigned to the longing poet-lover and the longed-for beloved.
The courtly poems discussed in this paper were not composed to be sung;
apart from Ma‘ūd Sa‘d’s *gazīda* which was written for a specific
occasion and would have been recited once before his patron, if the poet

was lucky, the *masnavis* were meant to be read and enjoyed primarily
for the polished language and imagery. Many readers of the verses by
Amir Khusrau and Munir Lahori, however, would have their pleasure
enhanced by personal experiences of the annual monsoon season,
whether through staying at home or travelling through the countryside.
This feature of Indo-Persian poetry would have complemented other
Indic practices connected to the rains, whether celebrated in poems or in
actual life: the celebration of the female heroine, *virahini*, who pines and
burns in agony for her absent lover even as the monsoon clouds arrive,
or the Jain view of the *chaumata* (four months) as a time for withdrawal
and asceticism. Experiencing the *barshakal* in the Indo-Persian world
was both an aesthetic and sensory experience that heightened the range
of emotions already present in Persianate texts. Right at the tail-end of
the Indo-Persian tradition, the poet Asadullah Khan Ghalib (d. 1869)
used the word in a *ghazal*:

*How does one pass the dark monsoon night?
Alas, my eyes have become accustomed to counting the stars.*

Even as the monsoon remained a metaphor for separation and sorrow
by this time, the poet seemed to revel in its solitariness, but with all the
despair it was the hope of seeing his beloved again that kept him on course.

Endnotes:
(Islahān: Kamāl, 1986), 787. For the cultural background and poetry of this

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247.
24. Ibid., 181.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid.
27. Inspired by the Indo-Persian poetic tradition, classical Urdu poets such as Mir (d. 1810) and Sauda (d. 1781) wrote satires on the damage caused by rain to his house, while Nazir Akbarabadi (d. 1830) praised the spring-like quality of the season.

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