

As I sit down to write a monsoon story without cloud bands – some mucus, confrontation and sadness

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Abstract

In this brief essay, I chat about some of the anxieties of writing about monsoon airs. New Delhi, as my material interlocutor, provides me with a wealth of stories, ideas and observations. For this issue for Hyphen, I informally stitch together some hyphenated arguments and feelings associated with mucus, confrontation and depression, and their temporal affiliations in the articulation of an air of the monsoon. Observations arise out of my research fieldwork during the winter months of 2018 entangled with work from summer 2018, collaborating in the versioning and dreaming of a methodology.

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Yamuna Ghat, December 2018. Image by Harshavardhan Bhat

Mucus as some kind of methodology

Places stay with you, even after you depart. You stay in places. You move to places. And places find ways to move with you. My research fieldwork in Delhi has taught me many things. One of those things is that certain matters stick with you (literally) and change (materially) as you leave – clinging on, evolving, changing, mixing and becoming. The winter airs of Delhi, in their toxic form, both for breathing non-humans and humans, offer through my mucus an analytic of transdisciplinary transformation. The air, read through the mucus of my body's metabolism and histamine interactivity, clings on to the field (the city of Delhi) as a material that is inherently vital, living and fluidly cellular. Leaving Delhi, I enter a series of stages, typically travelling through cough, wet cough, and a gradual exit of phlegm through my nose and mouth. In transit to Delhi, air travel makes me conscious of the power that this thick liquidity has over the region around my eyes and nose, as pain ruptures in synchronisation with changes in cabin pressure as the aircraft descends

to land.

Like Delhi's air, which changes texture, density and colour (amongst other things) through the year and during the day, phlegm makes a journey, as it plays its part, in my bodily system and gradually changes characteristics too. As part of this process, I have learnt to cough with care, wipe with care, sneeze with care and interact with wash basins with care. I observe the airs of Delhi and their particular becomings, slowly leave in parts out into the water supply network. As the inner tunnels of my wind system become sensitive to the dances of new-aerosols, ruptures perform a solitary event – as repetition. Respiration is solidarity.

Researching and writing about a city in/with the airs of the monsoon demands a conscious un-othering of the air. This means that the airs of the monsoon are not just seasonal forms that change an experience of time but airs that form 'us' and every possible composition that forms the living. As some spoken theories of Kali Yuga (time of the demon, Kali) inform me, time itself has changed – and therefore the air. It isn't necessarily a choice, because life lives within, together with and because of the air. It's a becoming-with (Haraway, 2003; Wright, 2014) in some sense, becoming-inside-of, becoming-because-of-the-air. As Neimanis and Walker (2013) observe, "we are thick with climatic intra-actions" (p.558) and the weather etches bodies and bodies make and carry the weather too. The air as the grand living site of all disposability is the active interpretation of most methodologies and methods of development (i.e. the discipline and what follows). For example, most air pollution policies require that the city comprehend air as a jurisdictional space with boundaries. Of course, boundaries politically drawn in the air allow for the performance of power, control and regulation. However, I wonder if methodologies for the study of the air were not subject to the framework of territorial maps, then what kind of airs would we see – inhabiting a world of their own transformation? If Delhi manages to escape in a million other ways outside the bounds of Delhi as we know it, where and how does Delhi crawl, swirl and become entangled as matter that is constantly alive? Stories of the air help us recognise that the site is a transdisciplinary figure, offering for the widest range of analytic possibilities.

Back in London, as the Piccadilly line from Heathrow terminal 4 rattled to Finsbury Park, I felt the airs of Delhi doing their bidding again as my sinus took my hearing through the stages of breath and fold. Mucus methodologies and the management of mucus interacting worlds teaches me that toxicity privileges some more than others. Othering the air as the waste site of growth and economic-life in India in the twenty-first century, forces breath-life to become sinus aware. Srigyan (2016) points out that everybody does not get to breathe the same air in Delhi. For humans, architectures determined by capitalism, class, caste, gender and other socio-political-economic energies determine materials and technologies that envelop some and exclude others. As different forms of expertise propose cuts in how, why and where air should be identified and managed, I find that the airs of the monsoon, for example, find themselves flourishing and exchanging far beyond the perceived season of the monsoon. Storying with the monsoon, allows for atmosphere and air to enter a very kind of storytelling. The airs of the monsoon materialise methodology.

Really? You've come to Delhi to see the monsoon?

A response that I have repeatedly received from middle and upper-class folk living in Delhi when I tell them that I am researching New Delhi in/under/with the airs of the monsoon is the awkward gesture of a question mark. To paraphrase their response: "Really? You've come to Delhi to see the monsoon?" The monsoon as a rain figure transforms itself as a lived knowledge in and with the matters of the ground. So, for motorists

stuck on the highway between Delhi and Gurgaon on weeks where the clouds overwhelm them with generosity, the monsoon becomes a flood figure and the highway becomes a river. In an otherwise dry Delhi, their response continues: “It hardly rains here, Harsh. What about air pollution? That seems like a topic relevant to the air...” For a city that has been called a seasonal gas chamber by its own government and Supreme Court, anxieties of toxicity tread well as an analytic of understanding the air. People told me that the monsoons ‘in fact’ wash away pollutants from the air. It’s a cleaner of anthropogenic emissions, a ‘service provider’ for the toxic air, they say. As we now know from the research legacy of the work on atmospheric brown clouds in the subcontinent (UNEP, 2008; Ramanathan et al, 2002) by V Ramanathan’s team and others: anthropogenic aerosols and the winter haze disrupt monsoonal metabolism in unpredictable ways. Here I was, at a friend’s place, watching his child puff an inhaler to breathe. What assaults his breath is also what assaults monsoonal life. As the air conditioner operated in filtering and sucking out moisture from the air, one notices that even an elite interior performs a fantasy of monsoonal expulsion – against humidity, against wetness, against life – all for a transformed breath, for a different kind of life.

This winter, the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change proposed cloud seeding exercises to create rain in the New Delhi National Capital Region (NCR) to bring down rates of pollution. The still foggy air of winter in the Delhi region and the patchy distributed scarce cloud bands above it, did not interestingly, offer the scientists and technocrats the conditions for rain to be invented in a display of planes, salts and clouds. As it turned out, they needed clouds to cloud seed. I wondered, if they were successful, what kinds of rains would these be? The rain after all was never just the rain. There were stories of good rains, bad rains, heavy rains, joyful rains, violent rains, rains of the snakes, rains that elephants love, rains that some plants love and other hate. There were many different kinds of rains, as the air itself, its matter and condition were different, in different times and at different speeds. In a conversation with a leading scientist at one of India’s eminent agencies pertaining to weather concerns, he casually remarked that cloud seeding after all was “scientifically proven” and if done in the right conditions can produce “adequate results”, although more experimentation and research was required to improve “precision”.

The monsoon, after all, is often just read as a movement of energy and material. The so-called inter-tropical convergence zone that meets lower pressures in the Indian subcontinent in the summer feeds off the south-east trade winds that carry with them a tremendous amount of moisture. The spin of the earth, enacting the Coriolis force, performs a movement of air, carrying the oceans into the sky, deflecting and drifting finally towards the Himalayas. The air meets Delhi from both the east and the west as an energy of dust, water and other matters, which encompasses a cloudy ground above our ground, one that is bluer than the other. It creates a divide between the sky and the earth. All that is life, draws from the air of the monsoon. Can you hear the sound of this force?

And here they continue to ask: “Really? You’ve come to Delhi to see the monsoon?” Please leave the air-conditioned car. The monsoon is in the stickiness.

I remember a scene from last summer: a vegetable seller selling greens, left her produce open to the air as it started to drizzle. She told me that it was okay because it was raining from the past few days and the rain wasn’t dirty. It would keep the greens fresh. A theory of filtration and time brackets seemed to operate. The first rains were meant to be toxic, I was told by an aunty who advised against me wandering around when it rained. Outside the methodological bracket of toxicity, I found myself in the corridors of liquid dynamics and

meteorology, where folks told me that the monsoon could be perceived as a mathematical problem, a problem of liquid metabolism – upon and in different kinds of masses. It was a movement, a flow, and a phenomenon of complexity, which can be analysed in scales. Dense numerical datasets that fed into parallel computing machines produced speculative lines of present and future, in turn based on speculative data columns of the past negotiated by careful modelling. I was told that the air had a history and its predictability was no different from the prediction of financial markets and the general economy.

Listening to stories of communities bathing in mud, worshipping the deity of thunder by submerging in water and preparing for monsoon clouds, I was confronted by the intersectionality of several different histories meeting this force. Each culture had its own science of this air, its behaviour and their becoming-with-this-monsoon. As I opened the bottle of mitti attar (the essential oil of the soil) at a leading perfumery in Delhi, I was struck by how beautiful it was and how I could not stop thinking of the first rain on grounds covered by construction dust. That wasn't the way it was described on the bottle and the perfumer assured me that they had kept to the original recipe from ancient times. This was the perfume of the first rains. He showed me a cheaper synthetic variant, to demonstrate that there were others on the market but not of the same quality. With the scent of sandalwood oil, wet mud and mild floral notes in the air, I was told that it was a popular summer perfume. It obviously did not smell like construction dust, but the monsoon had a way to manufacture airs in a plurality of possible flows, with anything that interacts with it.

I walked around the central market that day enjoying the range of smells it had to offer. Perceiving the world through a monsoon lens, it becomes very hard to spot produce that does not have contemporary monsoonal origins. The monsoon was unlikely to be theorised as a site as it's a highly distributed one, but if one was to detach and attach, with monsoonal materialities, constantly in movement, monsoonal figures come alive and these attachment sites (Haraway, 2018) distribute, sticky. Monsoonal attachments can be empowering. They hold potential for political work because these attachments help expose the wider logics of how the monsoon cultivates the living. Even Indian finance ministers (and presidents, governors and academics) have followed the tradition of acknowledging the monsoon as the true finance minister of India.

The Ghat will accept your depression.

Writing about the airs of the monsoons is a very peculiar kind of privilege. With regard to Delhi, it pushed me in developing a heightened sense of love for a city that I did not like very much. It encouraged me to look again, ask again, and think again about matters that I would otherwise have ignored. As the temperature, carbon and toxic condition of life worlds across spaces accentuate and change, the monsoon as a thermodynamic, physical, biochemical and ecological being also changes in the way it relates to the life world it has sustained. In describing airs literally, such as the air you are in by the Ghats of the Yamuna in New Delhi where open cremations take place, everything comes together. A woman shared with me her woes of possibly losing her house in the Ghats because of a court battle. A little boy clears the sludge for boats to park. College students with DSLR cameras, accompanied by a local boatman, throw crumbs into the water to attract migratory seagulls to circulate around them. Bodies' burn at the Ghats. Ash rises in the air. Every few minutes you can see the Delhi metro pass by on the bridge. The river, like oil, reflects the evening sun through the Delhi haze. Some plastics float.

The lifting away of life by the monsoon through its changing behaviour – sometimes extreme dryness, and at other times extreme wetness – confronts us (Narain et al, 2017). The disappearance of water from our

mountains and the killing of our rivers confronts non-human and human communities across the subcontinent to negotiate ways of finding water and re-dealing with it, as dry air takes it away. Breathing in the Ghats, one is keenly reintroduced to the fact that the air is material and as bodies' burn, other bodies breathe those matters. A monsoon air methodology, amongst other things, gives the researcher an insight into how the air is writing its own stories. Following those disciplines invested in the matter of these airs takes the research to different places where we get to see how monsoon airs mingle with, and create, new conditions and circumstances. Navigating the hazy air, Siberian seagulls circle in celebration of being fed industrial crumbs by the Ghats of the Yamuna – they take us through a different story of a winter air mingling with a monsoon air. The richness of keeping analysis slightly suspended above the ground exposes the work to possibilities of a politics of monsoon air: a methodological reframing of air matters by the monsoon. The monsoon read through this political figuration is more-than-cloud, more-than-water and is definitely more-than-a-fluid-measure. The air enacts its politics for 'us' to see. Methodology in some sense, is indeed inherited.

The monsoon becomes more than a volumetric measure. By thinking with its aerial entangled complexity, it becomes more-than-a-season. It becomes a force that ends up doing so much more than what we give it credit for. Like the "seven-hundred-year-old rain" that swirls through the "bottomless chasm..." saving "the village from a terrible flood" in the Nagaland inspired novel *Son of the Thundercloud* (Kire, 2016), the air, older than all of us, has been in a long conversation with the ocean and the ground and is thus older than methodology itself.

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