

Editors' Forum    **Theorizing the Contemporary**

# Malhar

FROM THE SERIES: [An Anthropogenic Table of Elements](#)



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I invite the reader to journey with Malhar—a seemingly embodied anthropogenic negotiation with the clouds of the monsoon. In this entry for the *Anthropogenic Table of Elements*, I put forward the Hindustani raga of Malhar which is a family composed of sonic monsoonal melodies to help us think about the monsoon in a time of transformation. Malhar, as a sonic anthropogenic element, brings to attention the complex transformation of materiality and time with the monsoon. In thinking with the transformation of the monsoon, Malhar helps us have a unique conversation on the anthropogenic entanglement of the shifting materialities of the monsoon: dust entangled with wetness, dense clouds that give no rain, bursts accompanied by silence, and toxicity that manipulates the future of aerosols that become clouds.

The monsoon is a seasonal change in the direction of wind that conspires a wetness (da Cunha 2018) between the ocean, sky, and ground. For the Indian subcontinent, the monsoon conditions life and the ability for life to exist as we know it. It wouldn't be a grand claim to say that life in the subcontinent is in fact designed by the monsoon (Bremner 2017). The monsoon is air, water, sky, sound, force, and so much more. In thinking with the monsoon as more-than-rain and as a shifting figure in/of time, Malhar helps me think about anthropogenic sonic entanglements—i.e., what is desired, what the air conspired, and what eventually becomes of it.

It is said that the musician Tansen of Akbar's court fell ill due to a performance of raga Dipak, which is associated with fire and heat. The court had to find performers of the ancient raga Megh (raga of clouds and thunder) to bring down the temperature. According to stories, Tansen would go on to develop what is today known as Miyan ki Malhar, which is arguably the most popular raga known to call on the clouds of the monsoon. Stories of raga Megh Malhar and the many monsoon Malhars, of which there are over thirty, are understood to produce atmospheres and call on the monsoon, if done properly. Typically performed before and during the rainy season, Malhar tunes in a monsoonal expectation and atmosphere (Leante 2018).

In the summer of 2018, winds of up to [132 km/hr](#) accompanied by hail, dust, thunder, and lightning raided large areas of the northwest of the Indian subcontinent. Linked with the high summer temperatures in the region, which encourages monsoonal circulation, these winds of dust are not uncommon. In recent years however, the dust has been getting fiercer and denser and has been spreading across pre-monsoonal and monsoonal time categories. The India Meteorological Department declared the onset of the monsoon through the south

Indian state of Kerala on May 29, 2018, as it slowly moved up north with apparent breaks and delays. For Delhi, a city that is experiencing rapid desertification, these dust storms are a serious concern. My host last summer lamented at the loss of plants on his terrace because of the storm. The storm “killed them,” he said.

Delhi, where I’ve been completing my doctoral fieldwork researching and talking to people about monsoon air, has plenty of stories to offer us about anthropogenic elements. The government, in the winter of 2019, set out to cloud seed the winter skies to encourage rain and bring temporary relief from its toxic pollution. Their plan was foiled as they soon realized that the clouds over Delhi in winter were not suitable for a cloud seeding exercise. In a conversation about the changing weather, a passionate listener of the raga suggested to me that there might have been a time when the air did listen to Megh Malhar. Time seems to have changed and its clouds have too.

So how does an anthropogenic sound speculatively interact with a becoming in/of the air? You see, while some Malhars are a call from the human to the air, some are complex negotiations for the world to protect the human from the rage of the skies. Megh Malhar, for example, embodies a story of Krishna protecting a village from the wrath of Indra (deity of lightning and thunder) by lifting a mountain over them (Uberoi 2015), shielding them from the storm. Malhar, it seems to me, is a way of staying in tune with entangled disturbances, like the dust, the rain, the toxicity, and the storm. It’s a sound that intensifies for emergence, while being enveloped within it.

Like the dust storm that takes over a monsoonal time—due to climate change, urbanization, atmospheric toxicity, and the deforestation of arid monsoon forests—categories of anthropogenic elements fall together in fostering new worlds of anthropogenic experience. As I’ve heard again and again from people in Delhi in discussions about the dust and toxic air: “What else can we do but breathe?”

Malhar, then, as an entry into the anthropogenic table of elements is an offering of a different kind in this time of trouble. Malhar holds decolonial potential not to undo anthropogenic trouble (because it can’t) but to find ways to negotiate these times and reattach with air’s materiality so essential to life. Figuring and producing Malhar as an anthropogenic element speaks to the trouble of changing times because we don’t really know if it works or not within it. But it still offers an opportunity to elementally attune with the air, to gain sight of figures that complicate the present and the forms of materiality circling within it.

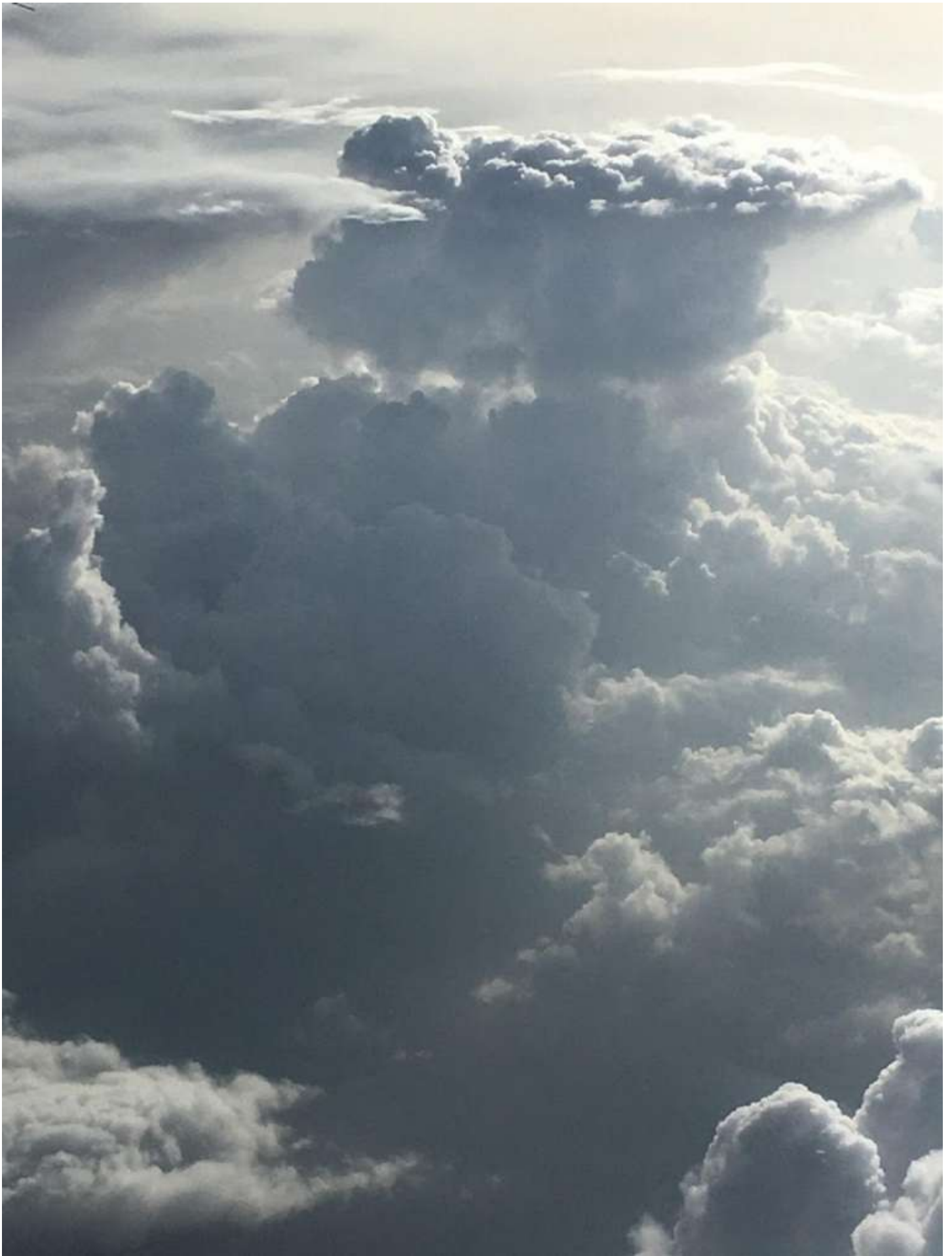


Figure 1. Monsoon Clouds, July 31, 2018. Photo by Harshavardhan Bhat.



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