



BRILL

Iran and the Caucasus 24 (2020) 408-418



Two Passing Clouds: The Rainy Season of Mīrzā Bīdil and Amānat Rāy's Persian Version of *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 10.20

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Abstract

This paper deals with a chapter of Amānat Rāy's Persian verse translation of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, completed in Delhi in 1732-33, and a section of the *Ṭūr-i ma'rīfat* by his poetic and philosophical mentor Mīrzā 'Abd al-Qādir Bīdil (1644-1720), a *mathnawī* describing the monsoon in a hilly region of present day Rajasthan. The aim of our brief analysis is to introduce a debate on the poetics of *physis* in early modern Persian literary culture, in the context of a wider project on Bīdil and nature. Through a guided reading of the two authors' description of the cloud (*abr*), its interactions with the Sanskrit literary practices and conventions, and the diverse intertextual ties, we show how the connected analogical and metaphorical procedures employed create two complementary ways of dealing with the phenomenology of (natural) existence.

Keywords

Bīdil, Amānat Rāy, *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, *Ṭūr-i ma'rīfat*, Phenomenology

The *Jihwa-yi zāt* "Epiphany of the Essence" is a complete Persian poetic rendering, in the shape of a *mathnawī* interspersed with *ghazals* and *rubā'īs*, of the tenth book (*skandha*) of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, completed in 1732-33 in Delhi by the Vaiṣṇava poet Amānat Rāy (d. after 1751). As I have shown, the whole work by Amānat is marked by a close stylistic and conceptual relationship with the poetic and philosophical tongue of Mīrzā 'Abd al-Qādir Bīdil (1644-1720).¹ In the context of a wider project on Bīdil and the world of nature,² I will focus here very briefly on Amānat's

¹ For a detailed discussion of Amānat and the *Jihwa-yi zāt*, see Pellò 2018.

² Already in the 1960s Alessandro Bausani, among others, had observed the centrality of nature in Bīdil's poetics (Bausani 1965). Our ongoing project includes a study on Bīdil's

remake of the twentieth chapter (*adhyāya*) of *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 10, describing the rainy season and autumn in Vṛndāvana, and the depiction of the monsoon clouds of Bairat in Bīdil's poem *Ṭūr-i ma'rifat*, completed around 1688. The aim of this concise reading is mostly that of introducing a discussion on the poetics of *physis* in Persianate early modernity, in a context of superimposing poetics where the cloud (*abr*) of the classical Persian spring takes the shape of the cloud (*megha*) of the classical Sanskrit monsoon, and *vice versa*.³

Amānat utilizes thirty-three *bayts*, including a *ghazal* of seven lines, to render the forty-nine *ślokas* of *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 10.20.⁴ The Persian remake of the chapter is thus a considerably shortened version (less than 0.7 *bayts* for every *śloka*), bearing in mind that the general ratio between the *Jilwa-yi zāt* and the Sanskrit *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* is more or less four *bayt* per *śloka* (see Pellò 2018: 76). Amānat focuses here exclusively on one element of the original poetic landscape: the cloud. The chapter is explicitly introduced as a “description of the cloud (*ṣifat-i abr*)”, which is compared to the crying “eye of the lover” (*dīda-yi 'āshiq*), contextually conjuring the *gopīs* (*gūpiyān*) who “cry for the separation (*hijr*) from Kṛṣṇa (*Kirishn*)” (Amānat manuscript: f. 82a). After a very Bīdilian depiction of language (*sukhan*) as a bubble (*ḥabāb*), which makes meaning (*ma'nā*) visible by sprinkling a veil of water on its otherwise void face,⁵ the cloud of the monsoon appears:

The days of Tamūz came to an end
from every side appeared a black cloud (*siyah abr-i*).
From the beginning of the monsoon season (*hawā-yi barshakālī*)
water started to flow (*rawān shud āb*) like a limpid verse.

philosophia naturalis (tentatively “Microcosmography: Bīdil, nature and the mirroring self in the *Chahār 'unṣur*”) and one on the poetic dimensions of water in the *Ṭūr-i ma'rifat* (tentatively “Bīdil's bubble: on the phenomenology of water in the *Ṭūr-i ma'rifat*”), both forthcoming in 2021.

³ The *topos* of the cloud is already represented in the “naturalistic” *nasibs* of the Ghaznavid period (on which de Fouchécour 1969 is still fundamental). A superimposition with the Indic conventions of seasonal poetry can be observed in Indo-Persian literature as early as the 11th c., e.g., in Mas'ūd-i Sa'd Salmān (see Sharma 2000: 116-123 and *passim*). On the Mughal “pastoral”, see the beautiful analysis by Sunil Sharma (2017: 126-166).

⁴ I refer to *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 1996 [1971].

⁵ Some related observation on Bīdil, language and referentiality can be found in Pellò 2017.

The earth, all covered by seductive greenery,
 inspired a growing passion, like the visage of pubescent boys (*nawkhaṭān*).
 From every cord of each streak of cloud (*tār-i rag-i abr*)
 came out a song (*surūd-i*), like an impetuous river

(Amānat manuscript: f. 82a-82b).

The end of the Syrian month of Tamūz, used to signify the peak of the heat of the dry season and resuming all the references to the “thirst of the land” of the Sanskrit text (*ślokas* 5 and 7), announces the arrival of the wet monsoon weather (*hawā-yi barshakālī* < Hindi *barsh-kāl*). The raining cloud is canonically dark-blue (cf. Sansk. *nīla* in *śloka* 4) and resounding with the “songs” (*surūd*) of thunders (cf. Sansk. *saṁvidyutstanayitnubih* “along with lightnings and thunders” in *śloka* 4). In the following line, the beauty of the absent Kṛṣṇa (here called Nandlāl, “child of Nanda”) is mirrored by the darkish beauty of the greenery, which talks about him with its “tongue” (*zabān*), introducing the awaited tears of the longing clouds:

Like the body of the lovers (*jism-i āshiqān*), the pearl-dropping cloud
 couldn't stop shedding tears (*nabūd az girya fāriḡh*), suffering for the beloved.
 Now it poured a flood of tears (*saylāb-i ashk*) from the eyes,
 now it caused the turmoil of an apocalypse (*shūr-i maḡshar*) with its wailing.
 The rainbow (*qaws-i gardūn*) appeared over the horizons,
 to kidnap hearts, curved like the eyebrows of the idols

(Amānat manuscript: f. 82b).

In the context of a general personification of the skyscape, the tears of the clouds, a declared metaphor for the painful desire of the lovers (the wetness of the crying clouds clearly alludes to the erotic body, *jism*, of the *gopīs*) are juxtaposed to the coquettish beauty of the rainbow. Unlike the crying cloud, the rainbow appears as well in the Sanskrit *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, as the bow (*dhanuḡh*) of lord Indra (*śloka* 18); the power of the latter's immaterial qualities is here substituted by the overwhelming beauty of the curved eyebrow of the cosmic “idol” (*but*), a centuries-old image of Persian poetry brilliantly modulated by Amānat to negotiate Kṛṣṇaite devotion within the Persian conventions.⁶ After two *bayts* devoted to the

⁶ The theme of the idol (*but*) is, indeed, born along with Persian literary culture in proto-Islamic Central Asia, see Melikian-Chirvani 1974. As far as our discussion is concerned, see Pellò 2018: 96-99.

personified flowing waters of streams and waterfalls, the text directly connects the cloud with Kṛṣṇa:

Lightnings, around that black cloud (*bar abr-i siyahfām*)
had the same colour of the *gopīs* around Hari Śyāma

(Amānat manuscript: f. f. 82b).

Kṛṣṇa, mentioned here with the epithet Hari Śyāma (*harisiyām*), the “dark-complexioned lord”, is compared, conventionally, to the black cloud for the dark tone of his skin, and the fair cowherd girls to the luminous flashes surrounding it. The analogical procedure is developed in the subsequent four lines, where Kṛṣṇa is directly identified with a cloud. His appearance in the forest of Vṛndāvana (cf. *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 10.20:26-31) is depicted by Amānat as the manifestation of a “pearl dropping” (*guhārbār*) “cloud whose rain is grace” (*saḥāb-i makramatbār*) in front of which the other clouds lost their breath (*pīsh-ash saḥāb natawānist dam zad*). The world is thus covered by the shadow of his benevolence and falls in love with him (again called Nandlāl in the text), singing a *ghazal*:

It is the season of clouds and the air is a wine-seller today:
those who get rid of themselves (*az kh^{ad} birawad*) are the smartest, today.

Wherever the eyes look there’s not even a sea but a world of water (*‘ālam-i āb*)
and every streak of cloud is spouting like a fountain, today.

The black cloud in the sky, when the lightnings flash
is like a dark skinned body (*siyahcharda tan*) wearing an ermine, today.

Like my eyes, the spring cloud cries so much
that the storm of the Apocalypse (*sayl-i tūfān-i qiyāmat*) is roaring today.

Similar to the black cloud, there is no peace at all
for those who, like the curls of the idols, are wanderers (*khānabardūsh*) today.

I want to drink a drop of the water of life from his lips:
a beautiful song (*nāla-yi chābuk*) reaches my ears from afar, today.

The tumult of the clouds, o Amānat, announces a union (*waṣl*):
from the invisible (*ghayb*), listen, comes a message today

(Amānat manuscript: ff. 82b-83a).

The song of the people of Vṛndāvana celebrates the beauty and generosity of Kṛṣṇa the black cloud, this time surrounded by flashes like a dark body by a white fur coat. The suggestion is the very classical Sufi one of abandoning the rational construction of the self to get lost in the indistinct ocean of love, well represented by the “world of water” (*‘ālam-i āb*) of

the flooded landscape. The chapter will then conclude with the arrival of the clear weather of the autumn, blessed by the freshness offered by the monsoon clouds: the sky appears again like a “mirror from beneath the rust” (*barāmad āyīna az zīr-i zangār*) and the moon at last shines among the stars, “like Kṛṣṇa among the members of the Yadu dynasty (*Jādūn*)” (the last image is a literal translation of *śloka* 44).

More or less forty-five years before the completion of the *Jilwa-yi zāt*, Bidil had composed the *mathnawī* known as *Ṭūr-i maʿrifat* “The Sinai of Knowledge”. Written on the occasion of a visit of the poet in the hilly region around Bairat (present day Rajasthan) during the rainy season, the work is a quite singular experiment in Persian literature: a poetic travel account of 1228 *bayts* completely focused on the description of nature during the monsoon season.⁷ More in detail, the text revolves around the observation of various natural phenomena: the landscape of Bairat, the rain, the cloud, the drop, the bubble, the rainbow, the spark, the twilight, the mountains, the mine and its wells, the cold and hot springs, the night, the friends, the garden and the jasmines.⁸ To these subjects are devoted twenty-six short chapters. The poem ends with two chapters consecrated to a few philosophical considerations, and a last laudatory section in the name of the dedicatee Shukr Allāh Khān.

The *Ṭūr-i maʿrifat* can be described, from the point of view of this study, as an uninterrupted flow of analogical images, a luxuriant textual territoire of interconnected *tamthīls*,⁹ so to say. Nature, a fundamental producer of meaning in the whole poetic world of Bidil, is here consistently unveiled by imagination (I think here of Pierre Hadot’s thoughtful inquiry (see Hadot 2006: 17-89)), through an extensive exploration of its metamorphic phenomenology. While hidden meanings and correspond-

⁷ Some information about the *Ṭūr-i maʿrifat* can be found in Abdul Ghani 1960:194-205 and Ḥabīb 1988-9: 92-96; scanty introductory observations also in Ḥabīb 2002a and 2002b. Asir 1977 is a useful but incomplete Persian commentary.

⁸ The poem has been translated in Italian by Riccardo Zipoli (Bidel 2018).

⁹ Often translated as “similitude”, Bidil’s *tamthīl* is a process of “visualization” or even better of *mise-en-scène* of a concept (a psychological event, a cognition, etc.) through the discovery of its mirrored presence in the external world, i.e. the world of natural phenomena, without posing any dualist relationship of preeminence between “interiority” and “exteriority”.

ences are continuously “discovered”, Bidil warns, in his introduction, of the intrinsic value of the phenomena themselves, to be observed with a non-dualist, immanentistic approach: nature is not seen as a symbol, or worse an allegory, or some “transcendental” reality, but a continuous articulation of substantial identities within the multiplicity of manifestation, which includes the representational world of human “interiority” (the “mirror”, *āyīna*).¹⁰ Against this background, as it has been already observed, a special attention is reserved to the element of water (*āb*)¹¹ and its diverse shapes, among which the cloud (*abr*) occupies a dominant position, with a dedicated section of forty-five lines. The description begins with these lines:

It is not a cloud, it is a mirror for the coquetry (*āyīna-yi nāz*) of wine and roses
it is the temple of spring, with a hundred crypts (*shabistān*) of locks and curls.

But its curls, at every single blow of wind,
can bring into existence (*tawānad kard ijād*) thousands of hearts.

An eye similar to a cup of madness (*junūnpaymāna*), ready to cry (*giryaāhang*),
in the darkness of intoxication, a broken bottle in the hand.

A sky whose harvest is a spillage of planets,
a crypt hiding lanterns under its garments (*zīr-i dāman*)

(Bidil 1964: 11).

An accumulation of Deleuzian folds,¹² so to say, dominates the landscape. The complicated, reddish, convoluted perturbation of the cloudy sky is the mirror (*āyīna*) of the intimate perturbation of the observer, and *vice versa*. The form/colour is the meaning itself, in the coexistence of different orders of magnitude: drops of rain are “planets” and “hearts”, the cloud’s coils, its dark “curls and locks”, are the vaulted crypts of a temple (*bahār* < Skr. *vihāra*-, but also “spring”), whose space of meditation is illuminated by the “lanterns” of lightnings and flashes. Immediately after, Bidil explores the restless contours of the monsoon clouds by focusing on the image of Majnūn, the desperate lover, whose black and dishevelled hair are said to be the material source of the cloud itself, through the rhetorical figure of the *husn-i ta’lil* “fantastic etiology”:

¹⁰ See the long discussion in Bidil 1964:1-6.

¹¹ A few quantitative observations can be found in Zipoli 2005: 128-131. *Abr*, in particular, occurs 30 times in the text.

¹² I am thinking of Deleuze 1988.

[The cloud] is the smoke of melancholia (*sawdā'ī*) brought to the sky
by the summits of the hair (*bulandihā-yi mūy*) of Majnūn's head.

(Bidil 1964: 11)

The analogical parallelism between Majnūn and the cloud will continue in the following five lines, where the nimbus becomes Majnūn himself (*hamān dīwāna-yi zhūlidamūy-st*). The last two lines of the "Majnūn" section, in particular, show very well the functioning of the above-described discovery of *physis* through imagination:

When because of loneliness the smoke of its brain (*dūd-i dimāgh-ash*)
takes the shape of the blacknesses of its mark (*siyāhīhā-yi dāgh-ash*),
willing or not (*kh^wāhī nakh^wāhī*), the humid eye washes away,
with a wave of tears, the blackness from the mark.

(Bidil 1964: 11)

The two physical phenomena of tears and rain are due to the same reason, an accumulation of tense energy, and they have the same effect of "clearing" dark thoughts and black skies. Bidil highlights, in particular, the involuntary nature of these events (*kh^wāhī nakh^wāhī*), pointing to a subtle physiological observation. Brain and cloud show, to use a term dear to early modern natural thought, a reciprocal "sympathy" due to their comparable shape, and so do the cloud and the eye, both "producers" of drops notwithstanding will. Another complex metamorphosis is described in the immediately subsequent group of four lines, where the clouds become elephants, according to a *topos* of *kāvya* poetry (but the image is not at all unknown in classical Persian as well¹³):

It is not a cloud, it is an elephant in musth (*mastīnash'afil-i*),
a Nile river deluging the sky with its waves.

An elephant who, since the beginning of musth,
twists its flooding trunk (*khartūm-i sayl-ash*) around the mountains.

An elephant who, in the grip of frenzy (*fitnamāyil*),
pushes the skies on the coast, like sea foam.

Sweating is the proof of the elephant's drunkenness,
stormy waves (*tamawwujhā*) are the sign of the Nile's turmoil.

(Bidil 1964: 11)

¹³ An example of early usage, for instance, can be found in a famous *qaṣīda* by Farrukhī Sīstānī (d. 1037-8), to whom Bidil seems, indeed, to directly reply here (see Farrukhī Sīstānī 1970: 1).

Natural phenomena are compared and analysed through a series of re-shapings, transmutations and transfigurations. The worlds of the organic and the inorganic, here represented respectively by the elephant and the cloud/river, show no break of continuity, according to Bīdil's theory of nature expressed in his philosophical autobiography, the *Chahār 'unṣur* "Four Elements".¹⁴ Not only shapes and colours, then, but also dynamics and statuses show the substantial identity among phenomena: the violent turmoil of the monsoon cloud is *equal* to the violent restlessness of the elephant in *musth*, both resulting in thick drops of water (the rain and particular sweat of the elephant known as temporin) and floods (the overflowing of rivers and the spraying of water by the elephant's trunk). Following the same analogical procedures to depict his elaborated metaphorical landscape, Bīdil will continue to overlap the cloud and the connected phenomena on top of a diverse set of textual objects and situations: from the spots on the leopard skin that become fish scales to the immersion of deep-sea divers in a "world of water" (*'ālam-i āb*) to the bubbles (*ḥabāb*) of the wandering round eyes of the fugitive gazelle. The last image, in particular, brings into discussion the decisive semiotic and conceptual tool of the mirror, which, says Bīdil, literally "washes away dryness from the reflected image (*timthāl*), when it gets covered by humidity": existence of the phenomonic world is an image observed in a mirror, revived by the substance of water.¹⁵ In an exemplary sequence, the sky and the earth indeed mirror and revive each other:

With that vapor (*dūd*) that raised from the nature of earth (*ṭab'-i zamīn*)
air has traced the drawing (*ṭarḥ*) of another earth.

There, love pours the seeds of existence (*tukhm-i ijād*)
and establishes the foundations of the greenery of the horizons.

(Bīdil 1964: 12)

Aqueous vapor is a "smoke" (*dūd*) produced by the physical nature (*ṭab'*) of the element earth; from its rugged specular "drawings", the clouds, drops descend on the earth, this time being the "seeds" of existence and life (*ijād*, technically "bringing to existence" or "existentialisation").

¹⁴ A detailed discussion on this subject is Ḥabīb 1988-1989, especially pp. 106-126.

¹⁵ Prashant Keshavmurthy has masterfully discussed an episode in Bīdil's autobiography exploring the complex relationship with the "mirrored image" (Keshavmurthy 2016).

The water cycle is here observed with the inquiring eye of *taḥqīq* (“verification”); what matters is, indeed, the power and depth of the revealing gaze.¹⁶ In the conclusive lines of the chapter, Bīdil returns on this crucial point:

Reflection (*ta’ammul*) is a harvest enhancing concentration (*jam’iyyatārā*):
astonishment (*taḥayyur*) is the result of the cultivation of vision (*tamāshā*).
If this is a cloud, you should become water (*bāyad āb gardī*);
if this is a curl, you should become a fold (*yaksar tāb gardī*).

(Bīdil 1964: 12)

For Bīdil the cloud is, just like any other cognitive phenomenon, an occasion (*furṣat*, to use his philosophical lexicon) for recognizing the fundamental identity of the observer with the observed object: the seers should discover and polish their nature of mirrors, in a context coloured by transitional Sufi-Vedantic overtones.

What is, then, the relationship among the two passing clouds of Amānat and his ancient master Bīdil? The two texts deal with their object from very different points of view: a phenomenological one in Bīdil, who is interested in a new research on the revealing aspects of nature (clouds included) and a devotional one in Amānat, whose aim is to look at the nimbuses of the monsoon in the perspective of their identification with the beauty and erotic power of Kṛṣṇa. Moreover, Bīdil’s text is part of a poetic project entirely devoted to the natural landscape, while Amānat’s is only an occasional section within the rendering of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. However, even in these sketchy notes, a few points suggesting further comparative analysis can be made. First of all, of course, Amānat repeatedly draws on the lexicon and imagery of the *Ṭūr-i ma’rifat*: the “bubble” *ḥabāb* of Amānat’s opening line is indeed, for instance, a further conjugation of an image which not only is present in Bīdil’s description of the cloud (*e.g.* in the passage about the eyes of the gazelles), but to which Bīdil consecrates a 22-lines section of *Ṭūr-i ma’rifat* itself (Bīdil 1964: 13-14); similar observation can be made, just to name a few further examples,

¹⁶ The entanglement of observation (*negāh*, *tamāshā*, *chashm*) and *taḥqīq* is clearly expressed in two occasions in the introductory section (Bīdil 1964: 2, 5); the whole poem is, indeed, defined, in the opening, as a “*taḥqīq* of a black land showing the signs of Potency (*taḥqīq-i sawād-i qudratāyāt*)” (Bīdil 1964: 1).

of the “streak of cloud” (*tār-i rag*), the “eye” (*chashm*), the “mirror” (*āyīna*), the “flood” (*sayl/saylāb*), the “world of water” (*‘ālam-i āb*) etc. We can even identify an articulate *jawāb* by Amānat to a line of Bīdil: the rhyme and the refrain of Amānat’s *ghazal* (*-ūsh-ast imrūz*) directly replies to a *bayt* of the concluding part of Bīdil’s description of the cloud.¹⁷ We may easily multiply such examples; more important, however, is to suggest, in conclusion, that Amānat’s Kṛṣṇa-cloud is somehow already pre-codified in Bīdil’s rainy nimbus. Just like, as we have shown elsewhere, Bīdil himself could directly use Majnūn and Laylá to dub, with no need of explanation, the love romance of Kṛṣṇa and the *gopīs* while describing Mathura (see Pellò 2014: 35-36), Amānat can indeed read Bīdil’s dark cloud directly as Kṛṣṇa. Or, even more interestingly, it is Bīdil himself who already implies the dark-skinned *avatāra* in the thousand folds of his analogical analysis of the cloud. After all, the “river Nile” (*daryā-yi nīl-i*) alludes as well to a “darkish blue ocean” (*daryā-yi nīlī*), the same colour of Amānat’s cloud-Kṛṣṇa, in a trans-aesthetic landscape where the elephant-cloud conjures at the same time the *Ṛtusamhāra* as well as the Ghaznavid *qaṣīdas*, the black eyes of the gazelles are a *continuum* with those of the *gopīs*, and so on. Amānat, however, seems to reverse the direction of Bīdil’s research method, showing once more a remarkable degree of autonomy. The master from Patna celebrates the phenomenical multifoldness (*kathrat*) of the cloud as an occasion (*furṣat*) to observe the dynamics of the development of *wujūd* (the “modulation of Being”, to use Sajjad Rizvi’s clever translation of the Sadrian concept of *tashkīk al-wujūd*¹⁸), proceeding in the direction of the colourless dimension of oneness (*waḥdat*). Using the same conceptual protocols and language of his teacher, the Vaiṣṇava translator focuses, with the devotional approach of a *bhakta*, upon the colourful epiphany of the nimbus of Kṛṣṇa as the decisive event, by following the same path but in the opposite direction: the itinerary of his cloud, just like that of the *avatāra*, travels from the qualityless dimension of the *nirguṇa* to the *saguṇa* dimension of names, forms and desire.

¹⁷ *ki hāṣīlhā dar āghūsh-ast imrūz/sahāb-i fayz guljūsh-ast imrūz* “There are harvests in an embrace today/the cloud of grace is an effervescence of flowers today (Bīdil 1964: 12).

¹⁸ I think primarily of Rizvi 2009.

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