



Figure 1. The wetness of Sindhu Darya Drawing with nila, *indigofera tinctoria*, pigment on paper.
Photo by Author

Hyphen No.2: Emergence (2025)

ISSN: 3066-151X

DOI: 10.59236/hyphen213

This article is licensed under CC-BY 4.0 International.

Copyright © 2025 Hira Rasool

THINKING AND MAKING WITH THE POETICS OF SINDHU DARYA:

A Discourse of Remembering

By Hira Rasool

ABSTRACT:

To forget, can be inadvertent or a deliberate act. Forgetting is also a consequence of a separation, a growing distance. In Urdu language, the word forget translates to *bhool*. The same word is also used to acknowledge an oversight. Sindhu Darya, the Sanskrit appellation for the River Indus which flows through Pakistan, rears ecologies along the sacred geography it constitutes. The metaphorical terrain that lay between land and water, has enabled and enriched the lives of the inhabitants of Sindhu Darya with valuable knowledge and making traditions since antiquity. However, the 19th and 20th century British colonial occupation of the Indian subcontinent, instituted a separation of land and water through violent practices of cartography, engineering and law-making. This instigated a forgetting of ritual practices, traditions and knowledge systems that exhibit a deep knowing of land and water, by being with, and thinking through land and water. As a response, this paper sets an inquiry into the moods and the spirit of Sindhu Darya in the context of Sindh, Pakistan, through engaging in a practice of remembering. The research presents a critical reflection of land-water occupation along the sacred geography of the river, and unpacks the consequences of imposed modernity upon the natural and built environments today. The process of recollecting and tracing the watery origins of the river leads to the (re)emergence of situated thought and being. A language of remembering; visual, colloquial and scholarly, that acknowledges and honors the temporal nature of land-water ecologies, emerges as an act of resistance through this study.

A WATERY TERRAIN:

Sindhu Darya, the Sanskrit appellation for the River Indus, originates in the mountains of the Himalayas, in the Tibetan region of China. From the mighty mountains in the north of Pakistan, to the dry and arid regions in the south, Sindhu Darya structures the lands and nurtures ecologies along its course (Fig. 1). The sentient river in the Indian subcontinent has drawn various settlements to its banks, where ancient civilizations originated and flourished. To the unpredictable spirits of the waters, these civilizations also surrendered. The five tributaries of the river: Chenab, Ravi, Sutlej, Beas and Jhelum come together in the province of Punjab. Punj translates to five and ab is water - this meeting of the rivers is celebrated and manifested in the name of the province, Punjab. The land of five rivers. The river continues to flow and stretches into the desert landscape of Sindh, to which Sindhu Darya lends its name. Here, the dense and muddy river makes its way through the sandy soil and emerges into the Indus River Delta, a rich and complex land-water ecology, where the waters meet the Arabian Sea.

In the context of Sindh, a place where harsh weather conditions parch the sandy desert plains (Fig. 2 & Fig. 3), Sindhu Darya, since antiquity has brought *khusshali*, joy and abundance, to the people. The inhabitants of this region refer to the darya, the river, as *Purali* (Albinia, 2012, p. 233). *Purali* means capricious, unpredictable. The nature of the darya, reflects in the manner in which it is invoked by the people. It expresses a knowing of the moods of the river, and the sacred relationships that have been formed through thinking, knowing and being with the wisdom of the land, water and its inhabitants. These relationships are expressed, celebrated and remembered in rational and watery forms of knowledges that become manifest in the making and material traditions of the inhabitants, reared by the darya.

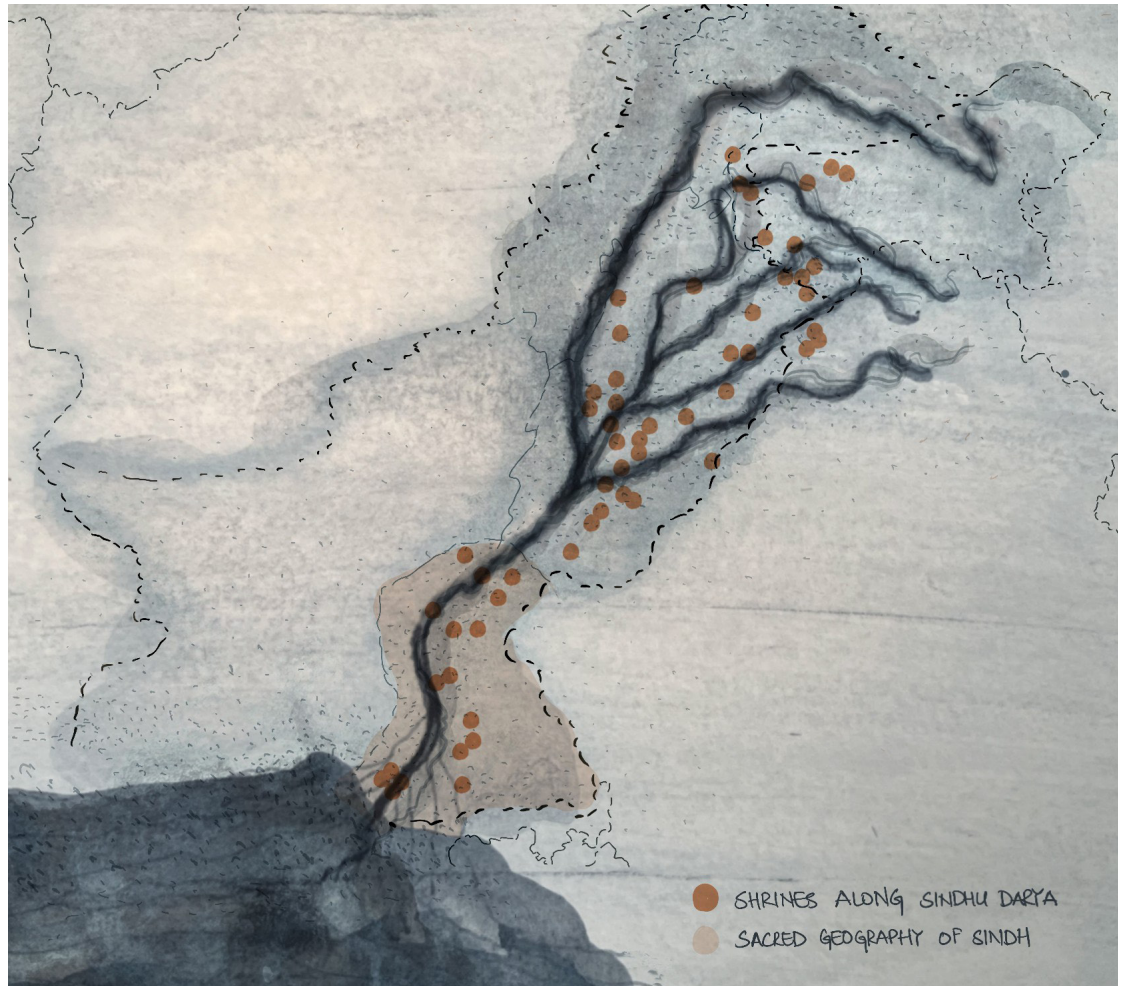
Debanji Bhattacharyya, a researcher in colonial environmental and legal history, concerning the Bay of Bengal writes, “land-water temporalities offer a metaphorical terrain, enabling alternative ways to understand human habitation and design upon earth” (Bhattacharyya, 2018, p. 22). This metaphorical terrain acknowledges the watery origins, and their fluid manifestations in narratives, sites, sounds and artifacts, as they are carried in thought and practice from one generation to another. However, the 19th and 20th century colonial occupation of the Indian subcontinent exercised power and control through violent acts of engineering, law-making and mapping land and water. These colonial tools of exploitation bound land-water temporalities in space, instituted a visualization that governed the narratives of a people and place, and established a political economy of land-water ownership that endangered the metaphorical terrain (Bhattacharyya, 2018, p. 11).



Contemplating the colonial imposition of Western modernity upon the Indian subcontinent, and the evolved forms of oppressive technologies that continue to devastate land-water ecologies today in post-colonial Pakistan, I am compelled to ask, how may a discourse of remembering; visual, colloquial and scholarly, enable a recovery of watery forms of thinking and making along the sacred geography of Sindhu Darya?

AN ENGINEERED FORGETTING:

The watery terrain of Sindh and Sindhu Darya constitutes a 'sacred geography'. Sindhu is a celebrated deity in the hymns of the Rig Veda, the Indian subcontinent's earliest literature in Sanskrit language, said and sung, in and around 1200 BC (Albinia, 2012, p. 233). Its flowing waters are worshiped; "giver of famous gifts, kind hearer, Sindhu who gives fair fields, listen with all his waters" (Griffith, 1995, v. 6). I use the words said and sung to indicate that it was 'committed to memory', as Alice Albinia (2012, p. 233), a journalist and author records. Perhaps this also establishes the emergence of oral traditions in the region which greatly developed with the arrival of the wandering Sufi Saints

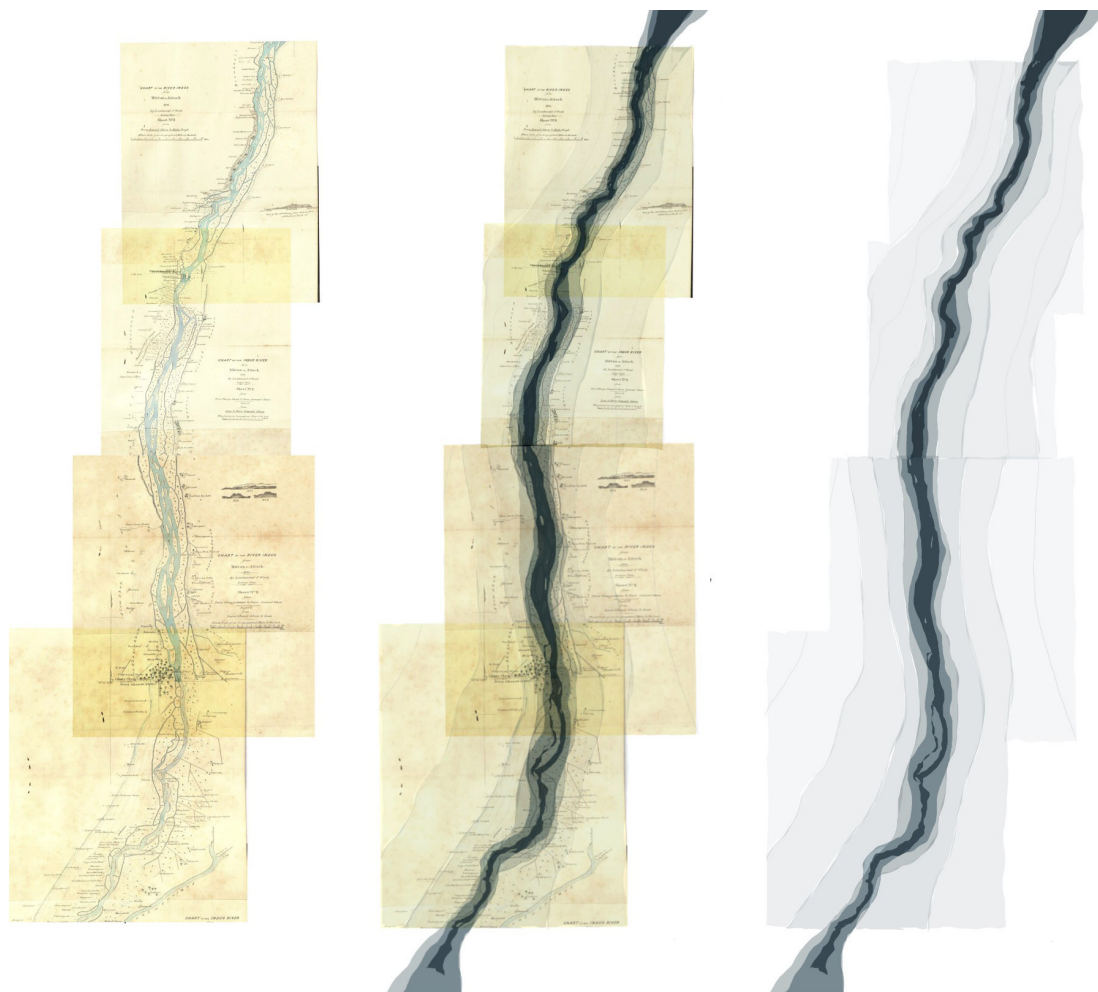


in the 7th and 8th centuries (Quraeshi, 1974, p. 36). The dargahs, shrines, of various saints who brought the teachings of the Islamic faith to the region are sites of devotional practices and remembrance, spread across the subcontinent. Along the darya, shared cultures, oral traditions and material knowledge systems emerged from the assimilation of various practices and beliefs. The darya itself, and the dargahs situated along its flowing waters render this geography, rich in thought and tradition, a sacred geography (Fig. 4).

In 1767, this sacred geography was the subject of the 'Survey of India', organized by the British Imperial Empire to assist the British East India Company in assuming control of the Indian subcontinent for the purposes of administration, taxation, and defense

(Longe, 1904). To exercise land-water control, colonial hydrographers documented the behavior of the subcontinental rivers through mapping, measuring rainfall, charting winds and tidal patterns (Bhattacharyya, 2018, p. 115). Bhattacharyya (2018, p. 126) writes, "narratives, songs, paintings and storytelling are sites of claim-making that remain outside the proprietary gestures

Figure 4. The sacred geography of Sindh Drawing with nila, indigofera tinctoria, pigment on paper. Photo by Author

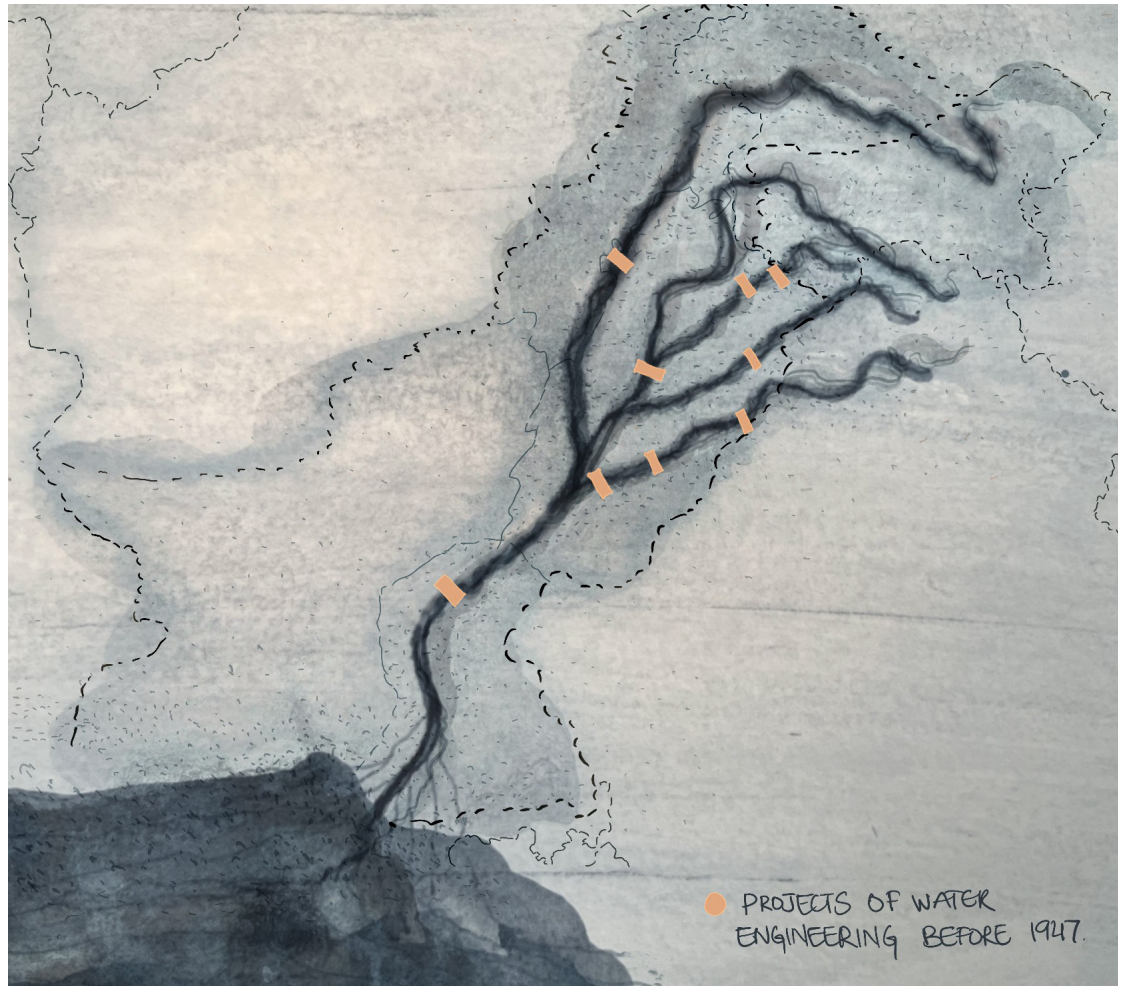


of mapping". These cartographic representations, which marked violent lines upon land-water temporalities, drew the tabula rasa, a blank slate, into being (Fig. 5): Local land-water knowledge systems and watery ways of thinking and making were rendered obsolete, and applied cartography, engineering and law were used as superior tools to gain control for state-making (Bhattacharya, 2018, p. 85-86).

The flow of Sindhu Darya constitutes a unique ecosystem; the fresh water from the upstream glacial melt, flows into the delta where it makes contact with the salty sea water. These are rich grounds that support and nourish human habitation; where the ecosystem of mangroves, shrimp beds, fish and farming thrived. The colonial dominion deemed the 'flowing of fresh waters' into the sea as 'waste of fresh water' and imposed violent infrastructures of dams and barrages to control riverine temporalities and propagate productive, agricultural lands (Albinia, 2012, p. 58).

The construction of dams in Punjab, where four out of the five tributaries were engineered, initiated and caused interference into the natural flow (Fig. 6) of

Figure 5. Undoing a forgetting; drawing the moods of Sindhu Darya.
Source of map: Thomas & Wood, 1855, p. 542-543



the darya. Completed in 1901, the British government lauded Punjab as productive and peaceful. They claimed that the grains brought livelihood to the people. On the contrary, Albinia breaks down this endeavor and presents a counter narrative; it was plain exploitation of land and water ecosystems, and an economic strategy that profited the empire from imposed taxation on the lands for agriculture and produce that was cultivated (Albinia, 2012, p. 57). In 1932, dismissing the concerns and expertise of the local populace, the Sukkur barrage was built in Sindh. It transformed the desert into fertile agricultural regions through intensive irrigation. Employing the same economic strategies, the imperial government benefited, as lands were naturalized (Albinia, 2012, p. 58). This established water as an agrarian commodity and land as speculative property. The British colonial approach reduced a way of being with land and water, in all its multiplicities, to mere endeavors in economic pursuits through naturalizing land-making practices.

Figure 6. Projects of water engineering along Sindhu Darya imposed by the British dominion during the 19th and 20th century occupation of the Indian subcontinent. Drawing with nila, *indigofera tinctoria*, pigment on paper. Photo by Author

As a consequence of the violent colonial zeitgeist, a slow and measured process of forgetting valuable indigenous thought and ways of being, emulated in locally devised land-water technologies, knowledge and belief systems, was instigated. Bhattacharyya finds grounding in the term 'forgetting' in her seminal work concerning the disruptive legacy of colonial cartographic practices in the Bay of Bengal. She writes, "the drawing of these lines of separation through technology and law also entails forgetting the soaking ecologies in order to embrace the dry cultures of land use" (Bhattacharyya, 2018, p. 202). While soaking ecologies, a watery terrain, enables an imagination of relationships and practices wherein people, land and water are connected, a separation of land from water transforms the inquiry as it lends a binary lens, rather than the fluidity riverine ecologies and relationships demand. Line-making, draws a geographic separation into being, a separation that facilitates a forgetting.

Learning from, and reflecting with Bhattacharyya, I gather that forgetting is a process, stretched over time and place brought about by a systematic erasure of thought and being through imposed power structures and systems. Such unlawful practices delineate the metaphysical grounding of a people and the environments they inhabit. A distance is created through alterations of reality, the known, the seen. And as a consequence, the unseen, the immaterial comes under tribulation, and is overtime rendered unknown. To forget, can be inadvertent or a deliberate act. Forgetting is also a consequence of a growing distance. In Urdu language, the word forget translates to *bhool*. The same word is used to acknowledge an oversight.

PECULIARITIES OF MODERNITY:

Practices of knowledge and technologies of power exercised by the colonial project of modernity have woven cataclysmic systems into the everyday living and being of postcolonial societies. Concerning modernity in 20th century postcolonial India, Partha Chatterjee, a political scientist and anthropologist, writes, "I am trying to point out that there might be modernities that are not ours, or, to put it in another way, that there are certain peculiarities about our modernity" (1997, p. 3). Thinking with Chatterjee, makes visible that modernity in the subcontinent is intertwined with its colonial past and exploitation of nature. Of land-water-human relationships, and situated knowledge systems. Lacking critical engagement, the organized and entrenched colonial ideologies have continued to operate in post-colonial Pakistan with a mere shift in power (Albinia, 2012, p. 58). From the colonial regime to an ill-equipped state leadership, continued projects of water engineering with the construction of Kotri barrage in 1958 in Sindh and Tarbela dam in 1976 in the north of Punjab (Albinia, 2012, p. 59-60) have exhausted the sacred geography.

Continued spells of droughts and flooding as a consequence of extensive land-water engineering and unthoughtful management evidence the devastation of the darya. The most recent protest of land and water, marked by the catastrophic floods in 2022, submerged lived and cherished lands along the river under water and impacted one third of Pakistan's population. The floods, concentrated in the provinces of Sindh and Balochistan, internally displaced 33 million people (Nanditha et al., 2023, p. 2). Between July and September, the wet season, unprecedented rainfall caused by the monsoon and the snowmelt from the upstream Himalayan region exhausted the rivers and burst embankments flooding homes, fields, and the entirety of villages (Nanditha et al., 2023, p. 1). 90% of the agricultural fields were destroyed in Sindh (Bhutto, 2022) and what followed was a series of misfortune; homelessness, famine, disease outbreaks and relentless suffering of the most vulnerable population of the country. Zahra Malkani, a multidisciplinary artist and researcher, expressing the devastation writes, "the water had surged from every direction: relentless rain, gushing hill torrents, bursting embankments. Where there were once homes, fields and villages, now: a toxic sea. In some places the water was 12-14 feet deep. For miles and miles, there was no dry land to rest. No dry land even to bury the dead" (Malkani, 2023). The unprecedented floods marked a new era of climate crisis in the region, the era of the anthropocene, of earthly vulnerabilities caused by the violent, extractivist behaviors towards land-water ecologies.

The 'peculiarities of modernity' as Chatterjee implies are imperative to identify, to lead a critical land-water discourse. The flowing waters cannot be contained and disciplined with aggressive concrete infrastructures and displays of frivolous human action. Framing the seasonal flooding in Mumbai, architects and authors Anuradha Mathur and Dilip da Cunha write, "and if this water threatens land with rising seas, melting glaciers, increasing floods and scarcity, it is an 'other' that has been placed across a line that we subject to artistic representations, scientific inquiry, infrastructural engineering, and landscape design with little attention to the act of separation and the geographic imagination that drew it into being" (Mathur & Da Cunha, 2020, p. 139-140). The othering, separation and geographic imagination, facilitated by the tabula rasa to organize a profitable political economy, drew the catastrophe of Sindhu Darya into being.

A RATIONAL, NATURAL AND SPIRITUAL DISCOURSE OF REMEMBERING:

Resisting the separation of land and water, and situating my thought and practice in the watery origins of Sindh and Sindhu Darya, I am motivated to unpack what it means to remember, to counter a forgetting.

The origin of the word ‘remember’, lay in the 1st century late Latin word, *re-memorari*, meaning: call to mind. To remember, means to recall, recollect and perhaps repeat. Recognizing a moment, a feeling, a story, a history. The documentary filmmaker Shabnam Virmani, taking delight in the oral traditions of Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai, a 17th century sufi poet from Sindh, in present-day Pakistan, writes: “Through repetition, the return to a familiar trope, story or meaning, a remembrance through song or poem lovingly sung and resung, quoted and recited, the old is thus cast into a new vessel. What is ancient is thus renewed, like the wellsprings of an old body of water” (Virmani & Rikhi, 2019, p. 15). She speaks of the ‘*rasa*’ of recognising and revisiting a familiar feeling, a musical note. *Rasa* is a Hindi word, used to describe a sentiment, an emotion. On the contrary, the 20th century approach of the *tabula rasa*, exercised upon the Indian subcontinent by the British colonial dominion, translates to a scraped tablet. It refers to the ideology of progress that disregards existing knowledges and modes of practice, and adopts the colonial attitude of a blank slate (Fitz et al., 2019, p. 12). The distinction in ways of thinking and epistemologies of knowledge at once become visible.

Acknowledging the autonomy of flowing waters and the various forms in which water exists, Mathur and Da Cunha provide an alternative way of thinking about the watery terrain. They argue that a reading of land-water relations begins with the recognition of water and its ubiquity (2020, p. 139–140). They define this ubiquity of water as *wetness*. While it reveals itself in some places, it often remains unseen and hidden from the eyes. *Wetness* is everywhere. They write, “this *wetness* does not flow as water does; it holds, soaks, blows, seeps, osmotes, and transpires, moving in non-linear and emergent ways to ever extending holdings that eventually become an ocean, an all-encompassing *wetness* in which there is no such thing as dryness”. This understanding of *wetness* not only makes visible the various forms of water, but it also provides a lens to situate watery forms of knowledges that resist the ‘drying cultures of land use’ (Bhattacharyya, 2018, p. 202); a *wetness* in thought and being, with the watery terrain.

*Don't believe
What drops from the sky
At dawn is dew*

*Seeing our suffering
The night is shedding
Tears*

*Sur Dahar, Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai
Song of the Desert Valley*



A compendium of watery forms of knowledges, that masterfully captures complex time-place relationships, can be traced to the oral traditions of Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai. The kalam of the sufi poet; the speech, poetics and discourse, traversed the

socio-cultural, political, physical and spiritual realms of the sacred geography of Sindh, and serves as one of many sites of recovery to think with and know Sindhu. Concerning the 17th century sufi poet, Albinia (2012, p. 114) writes, "he sang of farmers, fisherfolk, camels and crocodiles, the seasons and the stars - the very being of peasant life. It was the Indus, though, the river at the heart of Sindhi life, which was the silent protagonist of many of his songs". Sur Dahar, Song of the Desert Valley, is a contemplation of the unpredictability of the river, its changing course and consequent land-water complexities (Virmanni & Rikhi, 2019, p. 165). From fertile lands to barren tracts, the sur captures the capricious nature of Sindhu Darya and the changing landscapes of Sindh.

Figure 7 & Figure 8. Rendering the wetness of land-water relations into being. Drawing with nila, indigofera tinctoria, pigment on paper. Photo by Author



*On land and in water
Every living thing, every creature
The flowers and the trees
Cry out in concert
We are God
We are the light of God*

*Sur Sohini, Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai
Song of Beauty and Grace*

In Sur Sohini, Song of Beauty and Grace, Latif situates God above all creation, and God's reflection in all creation. Land and water, on land and in water (Virmani & Rikhi, 2019, p. 29–30). By attributing all creation to the light of God, all creation is rendered sacred. That which is sacred, is valuable, and is cared for. Thinking with Latif, I was drawn to the riverbanks. Standing here, I watched the water and the recurring waves meet the soil, and recede. Repeatedly. The soil soaks the water, and the water seeps into the soil. All flourishing is mutual, as the botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013, p. 20) implies. The watery layered

narratives of fluid ecologies require a language of softness. A representation that carries the spirit of temporalities, and echoes of spoken and sung wisdom. Submitting to the pull of the waters, I put my drawing pens to rest and picked up a set of brushes to embody the flow of water, in shades of blue. With a grain of nila, blue pigment obtained with *Indigofera tinctoria*, a wild plant species that used to grow wildly along the banks of Sindhu Darya, I rendered repetitive strokes on paper to emulate the spirit of recurring waves (Fig. 6 & Fig. 7) and protest the act of land-water separation through line-making. A richness and depth came into being. In this depth, I can trace textures Latif sings to; a wetness, a soaking, a seeping, of rational, natural and spiritual natures.

THINKING AND MAKING WITH SINDHU DARYA:

The devotees of Sindhu are called Daryapanthi; those who walk the path of the river

(Albinia, 2012, p. 122). If walking the path of the river, means thinking with the river, and finding grace in its flow, if it means that we intertwine our being with the abundance that the river brings into our lives, then shall we all not become Daryapanthi?

The rasa of remembering the sacred geography of Sindhu Darya, the wetness it cultivates in the thought and being of its inhabitants, and watery forms of knowledges that emerge from maintaining meaningful relationships with its ebb and flow, transformed this inquiry into a resistance. Through remembering, I was able to engage in a critical reflection of the narratives of the darya and unpack complex human relationships with land-water ecologies that have rendered the sacred geography into a critical geography. This research has only scratched the surface to initiate a critical land-water discourse, and has teased multidisciplinary ways of speculating, thinking and making. As I continue to listen to my surroundings and act upon my curiosities, I hope for my study and research to bring forth forgotten knowledges and mindful speculations through a careful recovery of situated thought and practice. The watery terrain where science, spirit and narratives intertwine, are grounds to develop deeper relationships with our surroundings. Investigating the entanglements of social, political and environmental natures, I look forward to leaning into rational, natural and spiritual modes of contemplating the critical geographies we inhabit today.

ENDNOTES:

1. Sanskrit is an Indo-Aryan, classical language that was developed in South Asia between 1500 - 600 BC. It is the sacred language of Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism.
2. Excavations in the region of Sindh were led by the British archaeologist Sir John Marshall, under the India Archaeological Survey, 1920, marking the discovery of the Indus Valley Civilization dating back to 3000 BC (Quraeshi, 1974, p. 26-27). Samina Quraeshi, an educator and author, writes about the ancient sites of Mohenjodaro, Harappa, Chanhudaro, Lothal and Kot Diji along the river and says, "(these were) highly developed cities that told of a civilization which had begun around 3000 BC, reached its apex by 2000 and completely perished by 1000 BC" (Quraeshi, 1974, p. 27). A sophisticated understanding of craft and building technologies is exhibited in the infrastructure unearthed at the prehistoric sites.
3. Bhattacharyya's use of the term 'soaking ecologies' refers to riverine swamps and marshes where land, water and biota coexist.
4. Urdu is the national language of Pakistan. It is a development of the language Hindustani, pioneered in the 13th century at the Delhi court of the Mughal Empire in India, by Amir Khusrau, an Indo-Persian sufi poet, administrator and scholar.
5. Definition and etymology derived from Oxford Languages.
6. Hindi is a language spoken in present-day India. It is a development of the language Hindustani, pioneered in the 13th century at the Delhi court of the Mughal Empire in India, by Amir Khusrau, an Indo-Persian sufi poet, administrator and scholar.
7. Definition and etymology derived from Oxford Languages.
8. Shah jo Risalo is a compilation of thirty sur, poetic chapters, sung and said by Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai. The sur are a telling of tales, in the form of poetic chapters, and Risalo translates to treatise or in a looser sense, a message. It is a record, an anthology, of a way of thinking and developing a knowing of rich histories situated along Sindhu Darya.

REFERENCES:

Albinia, A. (2012). *Empires of the Indus*. Hachette UK.

Bhattacharyya, D. (2018). *Empire and ecology in the Bengal Delta: The Making of Calcutta*. Cambridge University Press.

Bhutto, F. (2022). The West Is Ignoring Pakistan's Super-floods. Heed This Warning: Tomorrow It Will Be You. *The Guardian*.

Chatterjee, P. (1997). *Our modernity*.

Daston, L. (2000). *Biographies of scientific objects*. University of Chicago Press.

Fitz, A., Krasny, E., & Wien, A. (2019). *Critical care: Architecture and Urbanism for a Broken Planet*. MIT Press.

Griffith, R. T. (1995). *Hymns of the Rigveda: Translated with a Popular Commentary, 2 Vols Bound in 1*.

Kimmerer, R. (2013). *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*. Milkweed Editions.

Longe, F. B. (1904). *Survey of India: Specimens of Map Drawing*. In Library of Congress (No. 2021668463). <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021668463>

Malkani, Z. (2023). Mehran, Mit: Sailaab Temporalities. In <https://worldweathernetwork.org/report/khoj-report-1/>.

Mathur, A., & Da Cunha, D. (2020). Wetness Is Everywhere: Why Do We See Water Somewhere? *Journal of Architectural Education*, 74(1), 139–140. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10464883.2020.1693843>

Nanditha, J. S., Kushwaha, A. P., Singh, R., Malik, I., Solanki, H., Chuphal, D. S., Dangar, S., Mahto, S. S., Vegad, U., & Mishra, V. (2023). The Pakistan Flood of August 2022: Causes and implications. *Earth S Future*, 11(3). <https://doi.org/10.1029/2022EF003230>

Quraeshi, S. (1974). *Legacy of the Indus: A Discovery of Pakistan*. Weatherhill, Incorporated.

Thomas, R., & Wood, J. (Eds.). (1855). Report of the River Indus in Memoirs on Shikarpoor; the Syuds of Roree and Bukkre; the Khyrpoor State. Bombay Education Society's Press.

Virmani, S., & Rikhi, V. (2019). I saw myself: Journeys with Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai. Penguin Random House India Private Limited.