

COOP
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PROGRAM

A DHIKR OF NILA

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ABSTRACT

To forget, can be inadvertent or a deliberate act. Forgetting is also a consequence of a separation, a growing distance. In **Urdu**¹ language, the word forget translates to *bhool*. The same word is also used to acknowledge an oversight. **Sindhu Darya**, the **Sanskrit**² appellation for the River Indus, 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 belief 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**³ 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.

This research initiates a **dhikr**⁴ of **nila**, or **indigofera**, an embodiment of land-water relations and a blue dye yielding plant that used to grow wildly along the banks of **Sindhu Darya**. It probes into the transition of a natural phenomenon of land-water relations into an object of scientific inquiry for the colonial enterprise. Through this **dhikr**, or **remembering**, the study sets an inquiry into the phenomenological manifestations of land-water-human relationships through an oral, visual and (non)textual contemplation of the sacred and critical geography of Sindh, in Pakistan.

Thinking through the esoteric, Sufi concepts of **dhikr**, **fikr** and **amal** - remembering, reflective contemplation and practice - I am interested in learning: **How may a contemplative practice of remembering nila, a natural phenomenon in the context of Sindhu Darya, enable a way of thinking, knowing and being with land and water?** I am leaning into my curiosities through methodological acts of listening/reading/writing/conversing, making/mapping and studying archival records to enable and inform the process of **knowing** and **thinking** about Sindh and **Sindhu Darya**, through **nila**.

¹ **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 Amur Khusrāu, an Indo-Persian Sufi poet, administrator and scholar.

² **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.

³ Debjani Bhattacharyya, **Empire and Ecology in the Bengal Delta: The Making of Calcutta** (Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 202.

⁴ The word '**dhikr**', is a concept in Sufi thought and tradition - an esoteric branch of Islam. It translates to remembrance or invocation through prayer.