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From Relocation to Representation

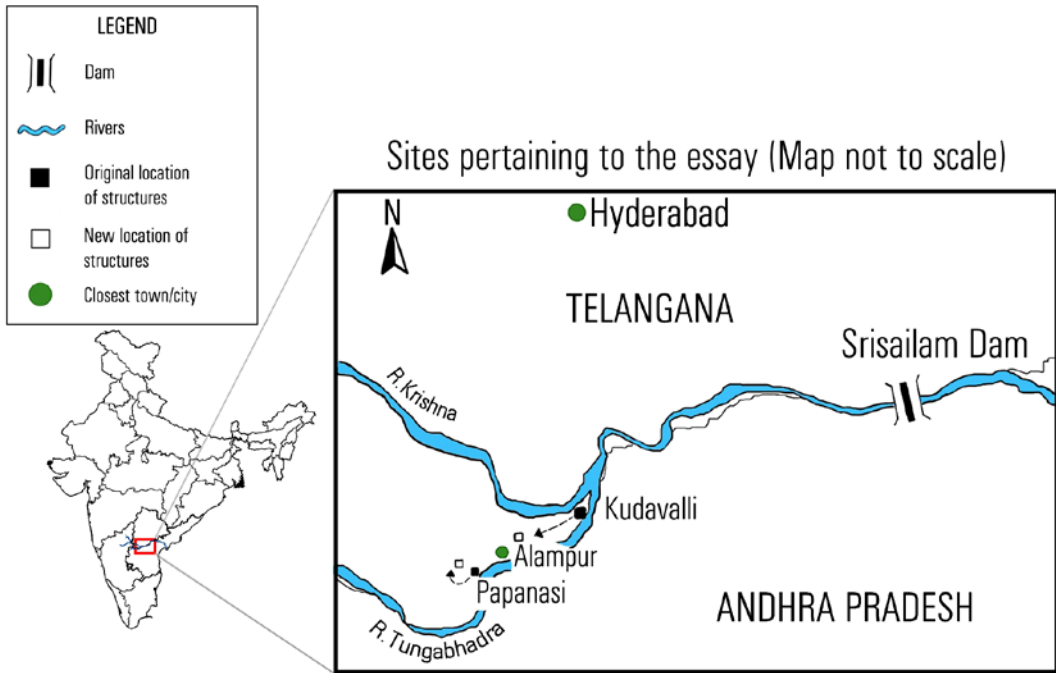
The Mediating Role of Archaeological Photographs
in the Context of a Hydroelectric Project in India

Introduction: Projects and Material Remains

In the aftermath of India's independence in 1947, the period between the 1950s and 1960s was marked by vigorous industrialization and significant infrastructural development. Among the most ambitious plans were those for irrigation and power generation to feed the burgeoning country's needs, including massive hydroelectric projects across the subcontinent. One such project was built on the river Krishna in the undivided state of Andhra Pradesh, aligning with the third Five-Year Plan (1961–66).¹ Officially named after the state's first Prime Minister, the Neelam Sanjiva Reddy Project was also known colloquially as the Srisaïlam Dam. With a length of over 1,685 feet, a catchment area of 79,550 square miles, and a surface area of 238 square miles, the Srisaïlam Dam remains India's third-largest-capacity hydroelectric station. Today, it stands between the bifurcated states of Telangana and Andhra Pradesh in South India (**fig. 1**), nestled deep into the gorge of the Nalamalla Hills, shared by the two states for power generation and irrigation.

An unintended consequence of the project, however, was its threat to over 107 settlements spread over 162.320 acres. Among these settlements were over sixty-seven ancient monuments and sites, some dating back to the 6th century CE. The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) was assigned the massive task of identifying and cataloguing archaeological and historically significant sites within the submersible zones of the dam's backflows. Today, the ASI in Hyderabad, Telangana, holds a collection of photographs which are witnesses of the "Temple Shift" and "Srisaïlam Shift," a preservation and relocation project undertaken by the Survey in the 1970s and 1980s.² The photographs, along with maps and detailed drawings of the structures, document the planning and history of rehabilitating these monuments.

Based on my field research within the ASI's archives, this essay examines a cluster of archaeological photographs to understand the form of knowledge-production



suggested by the fact of their making. The shift toward treating archives as subjects in the humanities, as noted by Ann Stoler and Jennifer A. Baird, prompts us to view archival documents as having agency and are, therefore, worth examining in and of themselves.³ Additionally, Assaf Nativ notes that uncovering archaeological material gives it a social turn.⁴ Hence, the first section reviews the literature around the agency of archaeological photographs. The second section introduces the ASI's collection from the transplantation project. The final section analyzes a series of five selected photographs, discussing their importance in transforming the sites into objects of archaeological relevance. All told, this essay suggests how the relocation process and its documentation become a continuation of the monuments' lives as they are reshaped physically and symbolically.

Agency of Photographs in the Archaeological Record

The archaeological record plays a pivotal role in building an afterlife for historical sites and structures. Ian Hodder argues that the agent who shares an embodied relationship with the object plays an active role in shaping it.⁵ Charles Goodwin similarly notes that the epistemic power of an image lies in the visualizer, who imbues it with meaning by choosing what to emphasize.⁶ Darrell J. Rohl casts such a relation through the concept of “chorography”—essentially the representation of a space or place—and suggests that a “chorographer” partakes in codifying a space with a specific meaning. Chorography's power, in his view, lies in the presence of an authorial voice and the culmination of experience, memory, and meaning.⁷ Michael Shanks addresses archaeological photography as a way of interpreting the meaning and significance of sites and artifacts, where the photographic act itself becomes an active agent that shapes our engagement with and understanding

1. Map detailing the sites of Alampur and Kudavalli, with respect to the position of the Srisailem Hydroelectric project.

of the past. As such, he emphasizes a performative rather than a purely representational approach in which the photographer actively creates meaning through their engagement with the subject.⁸

Sudeshna Guha discusses in detail the epistemological power specifically of colonial archaeological photographs of South Asia, including their unique agency and the lives they affect.⁹ She explains how archaeology and its codified visualization of South Asian sites and structures transformed them into quantifiable documents that could shape “truths.” Photographs are the materials of “raw histories” because of their inability to censor incidental details that leak through the camera’s lens.¹⁰ Archaeological imaging establishes specific presentation standards through equipment selection, processing methods, and publication techniques. Guha highlights the splicing of excess details in photo-images to reach a state of orderliness and accuracy, which coincides with the emphasis on inducing “truth” through the camera.¹¹ Despite many attempts to regulate the multiplicity of meanings of images, they accrue and generate different meanings through their circulation and archiving;¹² thus, they also shape their social biographies.

Tapati Guha-Thakurta explores the role of visuals in transforming monuments in South Asia that have significance as objects of archaeology.¹³ She examines the biography of Sanchi Stupa, a Buddhist monument with origins in the 3rd century BCE, to trace its many lives as imagined and reimaged through the transgressions of colonial archaeology at the site and their resulting documentation in photographs and drawings. She stresses the agency of visual materials and their makers in the epistemic dimensions of creating narratives for a monument.

Enter Visuals: The ASI Photographs

The photographs at the center of my discussion come from the archives of the ASI–Hyderabad Circle. They were produced across three decades, beginning with the formal identification and classification of sites during the 1950s up to a renewed interest in their condition and fate during the 1970s. In the latter decade, the ASI began the exacting task of systematically identifying structures at imminent risk of being submerged by the dam. These sites were categorized based on their archaeological layers, ranging from the Palaeolithic Era to monuments of various periods. In 1976, findings for 79 individual sites were published in the ASI’s annual report.

This archive comprises over one hundred photographs, including views of the sites, structures, landscape, and details of architectural features. Some of these are labelled with details of the image or the project phase during which it was produced, while others are digital versions of their original counterpart. The photographs of interest here are of two main locations: Kudavalli (also referred to as Kudali) and Papanasi (fig. 1), home to the Kudavalli Sangamesvara temple,¹⁴ representing architecture of the 6th–7th century, and the Papanasi group of temples, dating from the 9th to 11th centuries.¹⁵ Both groups were relocated to the town of Alampur.¹⁶ The Kudavalli Sangamesvara temple was the most significantly displaced, as its original site lay 23 kilometers north of Alampur, whereas the Papanasi temples, originally located two kilometers south of the town, were moved to higher ground, further inland but not so far from their original site.

Photographs from the collection were originally silver bromide prints; some of these were pasted into albums and annotated, as seen in the examples of physical



KUDALI SANGAMESWARA TEMPLE – BEFORE DEBRIS CLEARANCE, BEFORE TRANSPLANTATION.

2a.

contact sheets (fig. 3 and 5). Over the years, to protect against their deterioration, they were digitized. The collection also includes scanned negatives, transformed into digital contact sheets. A clear indication of this change is seen in the font used for the titles below the detail of a sculpture (fig. 3) and a view of the Papanasi structures (fig. 5), where the typewriter’s annotation is retained in the digitized version. However, in certain digitally annotated images—as seen from the perspectives of the Sangamesvara temple (fig. 2)—new digital annotations occur where no trace of the previous label is preserved. Besides photo-documentation, one hundred twenty drawings were made of the Sangamesvara and Papanasi temple architecture, along with regional survey maps for the transplantation project.

The photographs provide temporal threads in the tapestry of a cartographic vision juxtaposed to construct the narratives found within the ASI’s survey reports. To understand the network of actors behind their production and their embedded traces, I examine their indexical accounts. In contextualizing five photographs below, I attempt to show how they were used and reused during the transplantation, which points to the changing lives of the monuments. The indexical quality of these photographs also speaks of the sites and structures, helping differentiate between

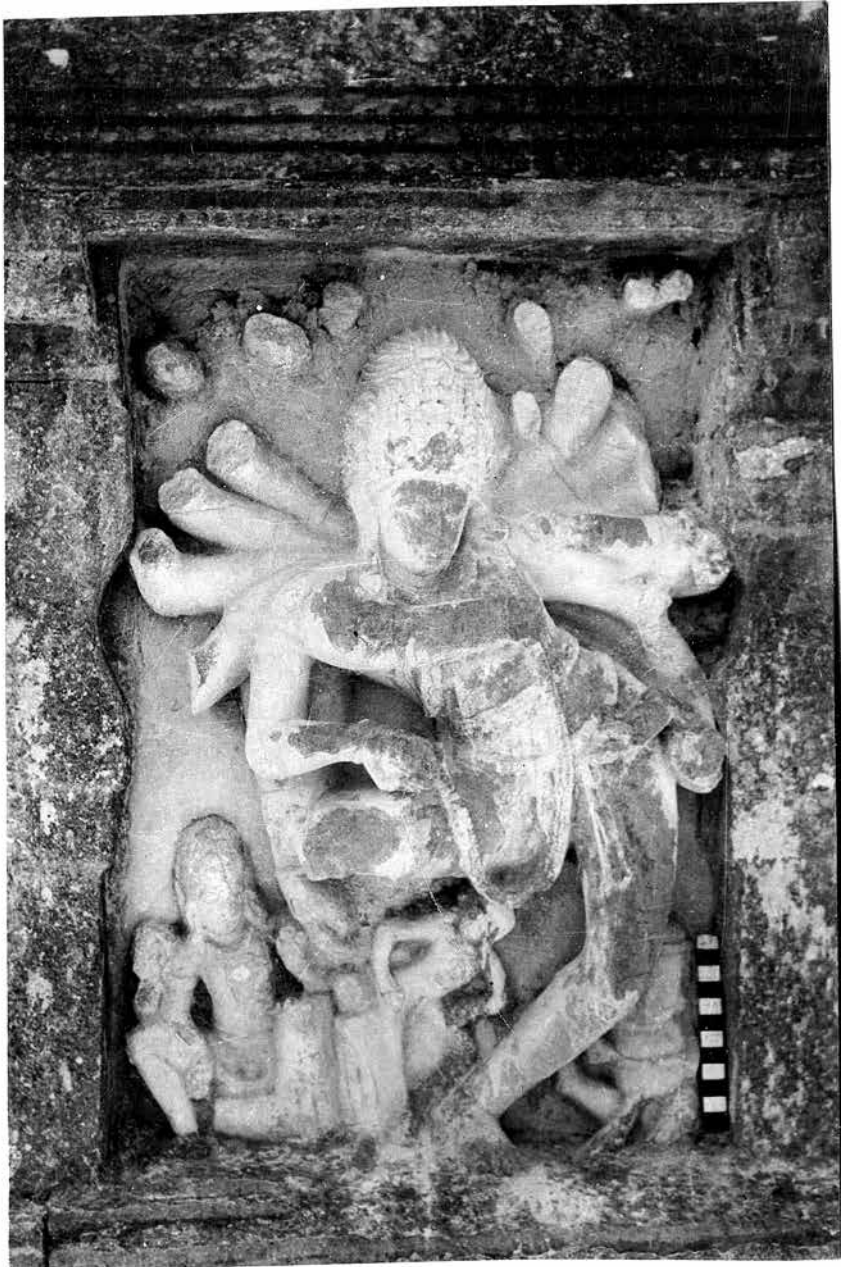


2b.

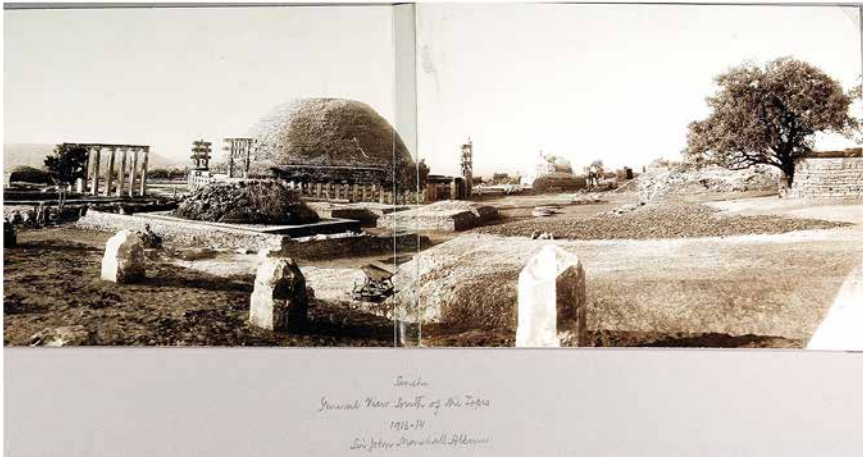
b. Debris clearance—Northern Prakara exposed, Kudavalli, c. 1960–70s, silver bromide print; dimensions unknown; Hyderabad, ASI—Hyderabad Circle.

2. Digital contact sheet with: a. Kudavalli Sangameswara Temple, Before Debris Clearance and Transplantation, Kudavalli, c. 1960–70s, silver bromide print; dimensions unknown;

3. Shiva (detail of sculpture), 6th–7th century, Kudavalli, Sangameswara temple, c. 1960s, silver bromide print pasted on paper, dimensions unknown, Hyderabad, ASI—Hyderabad Circle.



PL.XVII-C. Nrityamurti Siva; southern side. (20).



4. Sanchi, General View South of the Topes, 1913–1914, dimensions unknown, New Delhi, Alkazi Collection of Photography.

the man-made and the natural. Baird points out this crucial distinction in developing an archaeological photograph,¹⁷ which I foreground by comparing the images in question with a colonial example. In the current context, a comparative study unfolds the divergences between colonial and post-independent archaeological documentation and the unique agency of actors involved in reshaping and reimagining the monuments' symbolic and ontological dimensions.

Readings of the Photographs

The photograph of Kudavalli Sangamesvara temple (**fig. 2a**), labelled with the title *Before Debris Clearance, Before Transplantation* in the ASI albums, provides an overview of the temple within its natural surroundings. The temple dominates the frame, occupying nearly two-thirds of the picture. The foreground is scattered with vegetation and a few trees dot the background. The lighting seems to come from the left, capturing details across the entire scene rather than focusing solely on the architectural features. In *Debris Clearance–Northern Prakara Exposed–Before Transplantation* (**fig. 2b**), a slightly elevated angle shows the newly revealed outer wall extending to the left. A man stands beside it, offering a scale to appreciate the cleared debris. The background shows a seemingly barren landscape stretching to the horizon, merging with the sky. This photograph emphasizes the texture of the materials comprising the structure: the rough sandstone blocks of the outer wall; the superstructure (*shikhara*), covered in layers of whitewash, reflecting light to create a smooth, undulating surface.

The whitewashing of the temple in rural India is a practice observed during the festive season. A close-up view of a sculptural detail from the Kudavalli Sangamesvara temple shows a Shiva sculpture (**fig. 3**), located in a niche on the temple's southern wall. The archaeological scale bar, located next to the sculpture's left foot, demonstrates the many methods for recording. The photograph also shows the layers of plaster washes concealing most of the sculpture's delicate carving. Notably, this whitewashing is not mentioned on the description contact sheet in the ASI record.

Sanchi, General View South of the Topes (**fig. 4**) is a colonial photograph from 1913–14 of the Sanchi Stupa, taken from the Marshall Albums.¹⁸ Presenting a panoramic

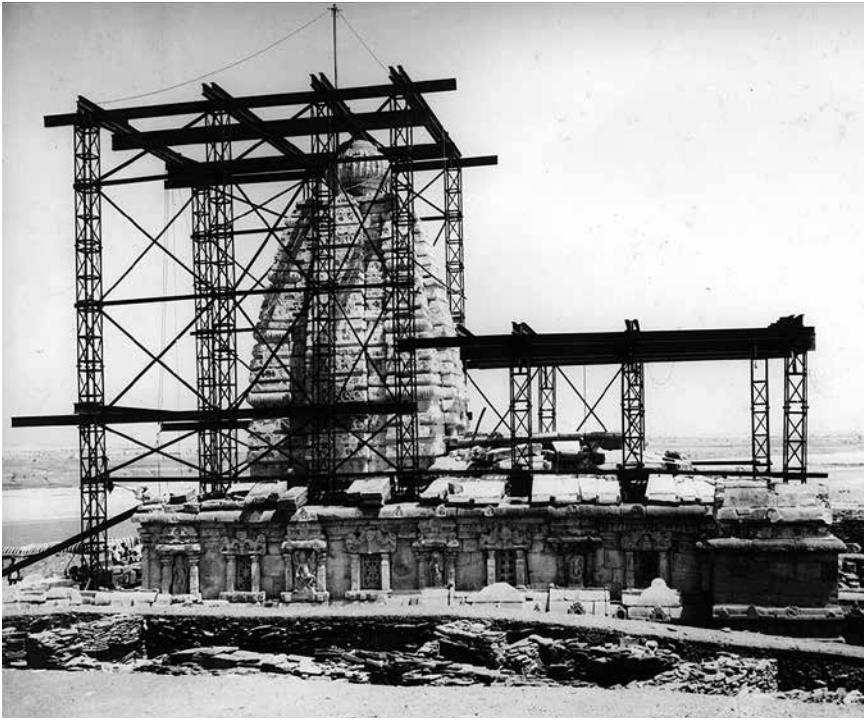
view of the stupa and its imbrication in the landscape, the emphasis is on the monument's condition—that of neglect. The title on the bottom confers a sense of authority to the picture. Images of this kind carry an implicit sense of authority and were a way for colonial actors to frame their power through the construction of visuals. While the ASI inherited this type of visual framing, a stark difference is that the latter appropriated this visual order to position itself as the true custodian of the nation's sites and structures. A photograph of one of the structures before transplantation (**fig. 2a**) provides a similar authoritative view of the site, intentionally devoid of people, offering an overview of the site and its structure within the environment. At the bottom of these “types” of images (**figs. 2, 4 and 5**), we find accompanying information, including the title, date, and the record to which they belong. This detailed context transforms the visuals into quantifiable documents, echoing the authoritative nature of colonial views.

View of Gudem Temples (**fig. 5**) displays eight of the twenty-three Papanasi temples before their restoration. They are framed by a clear sky above and wild vegetation below, suggesting neglect. On the left, a man approaches a sub-shrine, the photographer's angle placing him nearly level with the temple walls just below the superstructure's divisions. The framing of both the Sangamesvara and Papanasi temples (**figs. 2b and 5**) reflects inherited colonial archaeological tools—here, using a native figure as a scale of reference against the structure.¹⁹

Comparing photographs of the Sangamesvara and Papanasi temples (**figs. 2 and 5**) with the colonial example (**fig. 4**), we find strategic highlighting of specific structural aspects as well as the use of environmental conditions like barrenness or overgrowth to underscore conditions. By visually presenting these structures in distinct conditions, the archaeological lens frames them as objects. These photographs display the architecture's then-current state and traces of time, revealing how the monuments are gradually lost to natural vegetation, whereas archaeology intervenes to reclaim them. Borrowing from Baird,²⁰ I suggest that the presence or absence of vegetation becomes a visual tool to convey the narrative of human interaction with the environment, framing culturally significant sites as deserving of safeguarding and restoration. While not explicitly mentioned in any report,

5. *View of Gudem Temples (Papanasi group)*, c. 1950s, silver bromide print pasted on paper, dimensions unknown, Hyderabad, ASI-Hyderabad Circle.





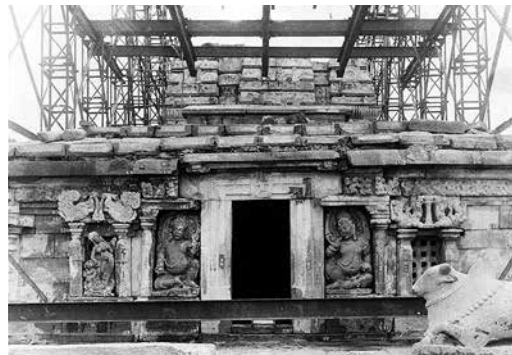
6. Kudavalli Sangamesvara Temple—After Debris Clearance—Erection of Scaffolding, Kudavalli, c. 1970–80s, silver bromide print, dimensions unknown, Hyderabad, ASI-Hyderabad Circle.

focusing on the environments captured in the photographs of the Sangamesvara temple at Kudavalli (figs. 2b and 6) makes it clear that they were taken outside of monsoon season. By doing so, the photograph places it within a barren landscape instead of emphasizing the threat posed by the dam to the structures—an aspect which might be visually clear during a monsoon.

Consequently, these photographs are not just indexical records of what is visible; they are carefully constructed to convey a specific perspective of the sites and architecture. They extend beyond historical-representational approaches—one in which the photographer actively creates multiple meanings through his engagement with the subject matter. These are also visual markers of the performative practice of an archaeological agency like the ASI.

The traces of the passage of time are not solely due to natural processes; they often involve the transgressions of the monuments and their actors. *Debris Clearance* (fig. 2b) shows the contestation between different actors. It shows the Kudavalli Sangamesvara temple after debris clearance, revealing the structure's outer wall in its original splendour, while also showing visible whitewashing of parts of the superstructure (*Shikhara*) and walled enclosure walls (*Prakara*), reflecting the practices of local users and temple boards. However, herein lies a crucial fallacy of the authenticity of these archaeological images. Although the dam's construction displaced over 100,000 people

7. Front view partly dismantled Shikhara—before transplantation, Kudavalli, c. 1970–80s, silver bromide print, dimensions unknown, Hyderabad, ASI-Hyderabad Circle.

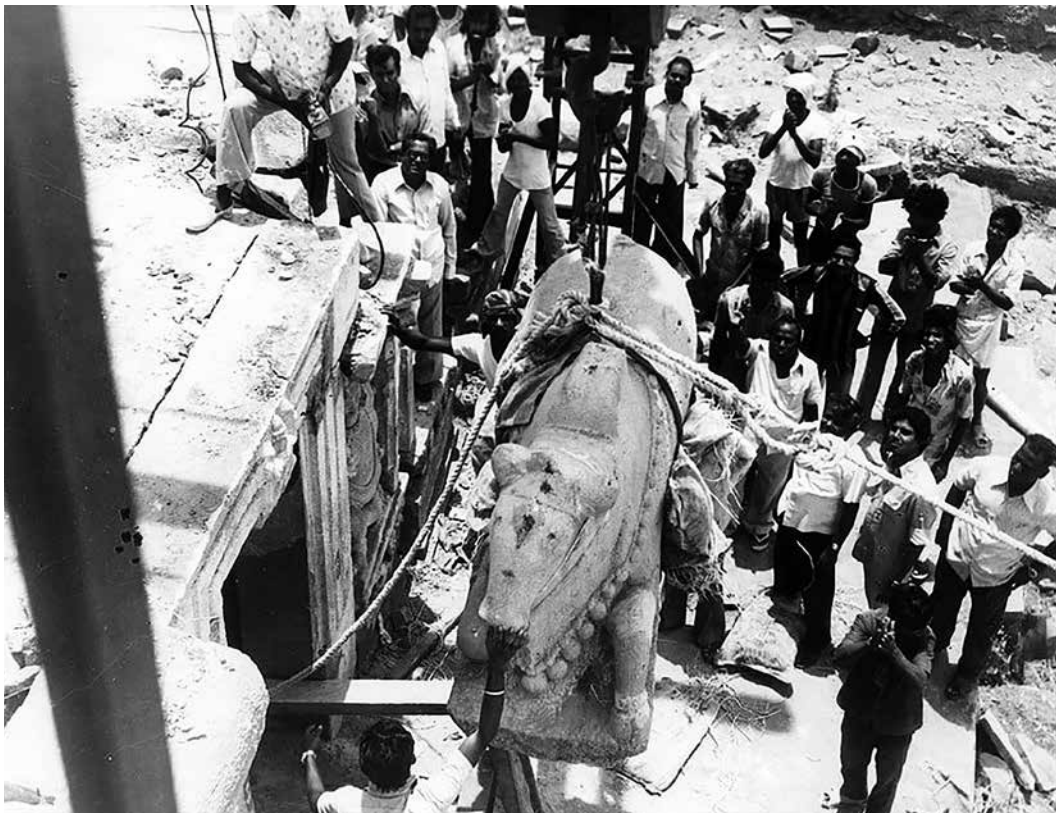


8. Kudavalli Sangamesvara Temple—Careful Detachment of Sculptures—Before Transplantation; Kudavalli, c. 1970s, silver bromide print, dimensions unknown, Hyderabad, ASI—Hyderabad Circle.

—the same communities who left their marks on innumerable structures in the region—they are nowhere to be seen in the pictures.²¹ Instead, a view of accumulated time and neglect is presented. The archaeological lens transforms the sites into objects open to contestation under the auspices of the heritage industry, necessitating preservation.

The archaeological image replaces the displaced, unseen populace with those reshaping the structures and sites symbolically. This is evident in a photograph of the Sangamesvara temple (fig. 6), which presents a panoramic view of the structure after the erection of scaffolding and gantry girders. Another view of the temple before transplantation (fig. 7) offers a frontal view with girders, metal beams, and sculptures dominating the frame. Upon closer inspection, painted numbers are visible on each stone block, indicating their use in the dismantling and reassembly process, akin to putting together a puzzle. These photographs depict the shift in the temple's life as it attains an objecthood—no longer a place of worship but a malleable symbolic object, signifying the power of archaeological intervention in safeguarding it from submergence. The photographs of the transplantation process reveal the process of rehabilitating the structures, with metal gantry girders dominating the picture frame—dragging the monuments into the 20th century as metal meets stone.

A photograph of the Sangamesvara structure before transplantation (fig. 8), while providing an objective view of fieldwork, also shows the intimate connections





9. Kudali Sangamesvara Temple—Partly Reconstructed. Front View—During Reconstruction, Alampur, c. 1970–80s, silver bromide print, dimensions unknown, Hyderabad, ASI-Hyderabad Circle.

of those involved in dismantling and rehabilitating the structure. Individuals are shown standing in reverence to the removal of the holy sculptures. The ASI record title, *Careful Detachment*, further indicates the level of concern among those involved in the rehabilitation process as well as those mediating the perception of the visuals. This indicates a shared patrimony to the sites and their arbitrated futures—a departure from colonial survey efforts.

To consider a final photograph, taken during the transplantation process, we see a partially reconstructed structure with a temporary ramp leading up to the elevated entrance (fig. 9). Brick and mortar now constitute the base of what was originally a sandstone structure. In the background on the right, a man who appears to be a priest observes the reconstruction efforts. The photographs of the transplantation and reconstruction efforts (figs. 8 and 9) reflect the proximity between people, sites, and structures as they transform into archaeological objects, reconsecrated but separate from their religious context. While colonial surveys aimed to uncover lost heritage and history, the transplantation documentation repositions active sites as neglected antiquities in need of saving, emphasizing their historical and material significance.

Conclusion

Visual documentation from the Temple Shift suggests the agency (greater or lesser) of various actors involved in the project. The authenticity of these archaeological images must be challenged, since they represent a re-imaginative process adopted by the ASI in their documentation: active sites are transformed into neglected monuments of heritage that require safeguarding from rising river waters and the hands of users. Thus, these photographs are not mere records of the visible; they are markers of the performative practice of the archaeological agency, showcasing the intricate relationships between people and structures in the archaeological domain, an ever-evolving relationship between humanity and its past.

Mahesh Hippalgaonkar recently graduated with an MFA in Art History and Visual Studies from the University of Hyderabad, India. His research interests include architectural studies, heritage politics, and digital humanities. He is currently examining how archaeological intervention shapes the lives of monuments and sites, focusing primarily on visual materials from archaeological archives.

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Notes

- 1 L. N Dash, *World Bank and Economic Development of India* (New Delhi: APH, 2000), 110.
- 2 For a contemporary report, see Amarnath K. Menon, “AP Government Project to Dismantle, Rebuild Endangered Temples Faces Uphill Task,” *India Today* (November 15, 1985).
- 3 Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009); Jennifer A. Baird and Lesley McFadyen, “Towards an Archaeology of Archaeological Archives,” *Archaeological Review from Cambridge* 29 (2014): 14–32; Annelise Riles (ed.), “Introduction: In Response,” in *Documents: Artefacts of Modern Knowledge* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 1–40.
- 4 Assaf Nativ, “On the Object of Archaeology,” *Archaeological Dialogues* 25, no. 1 (2018): 1–21.
- 5 Ian Hodder and Scott Hutson, *Reading the Past: Current Approaches to Interpretation in Archaeology*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2003), 124.
- 6 Charles Goodwin, “Pointing as Situated Practice,” in *Pointing: Where Language, Culture and Cognition Meet*, ed. Sotaro Kita (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2003), 217–41.
- 7 Darrell J. Rohl, “Chorography: History, Theory and Potential for Archaeological Research,” *Theoretical Roman Archaeology Journal* (2012): 19–32 at p. 27.
- 8 Michael Shanks, “Archaeography,” *Archaeography* (blog), s.d. [mshanks.com/archaeography].
- 9 Sudeshna Guha, “The Visual in Archaeology: Photographic Representation of Archaeological Practice in British India,” *Antiquity* 291 (2002): 93–100; Sudeshna Guha, “Beyond Representations: Photographs in Archaeological Knowledge,” *Complutum* 24, no. 2 (2013): 173–88.
- 10 Sudeshna Guha, “Beyond Representations: Photographs in Archaeological Knowledge,” *Complutum* 24, no. 2 (2013): 179.
- 11 Guha, “Beyond Representations,” 175, 180.
- 12 Guha, “Beyond Representations,” 184.
- 13 Tapati Guha-Thakurta, “The Production and Reproduction of a Monument: The Many Lives of the Sanchi Stupa,” *South Asian Studies* 29, no. 1 (2013): 77–109.
- 14 Built by the Badami Chalukyas (ca. AD 543–757) in the Nagara style of temple architecture as well as the same lineage as other early Chalukyan architecture, such as the Durga Temple at Aihole; for details, see Michael W. Meister and Madhusudan A. Dhaky, *Encyclopaedia of Indian Temple Architecture*, vol. 1, *South India. Pt. 2, Upper Drāviḍadēśa: Early Phase, A.D. 550–1075* (New Delhi: American Institute of Indian Studies, 1986), 315; Carol Radcliffe Bolon, “The Durga Temple, Aihole, and the Saṅgameśvara Temple, Kūḍavelli: A Sculptural Review,” *Ars Orientalis* 15 (1985): 47–64.
- 15 Built by the Rashtrakutas and Chalukyas of Vengi, the structures, while architecturally simple, represent an experimental, hybrid architectural form found in the region (Western Andhra); see Meister and Dhaky, *Encyclopaedia of Indian Temple Architecture*, vol. 1, 172; George Michell, *Southern India: A Guide to Monuments Sites and Museums* (New Delhi: Lotus Collection, 2013), 318–21.
- 16 The town is itself well known for Early Chalukyan architecture, namely the Navabrahma group of temples; for an overview, see Michell, *Southern India*.
- 17 Jennifer A. Baird, “Framing the Past: Situating the Archaeological in Photographs,” *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies* 26, no. 2 (2017): 1–21.
- 18 See Sudeshna Guha (ed.), *The Marshall Albums: Photography and Archaeology* (London: Alkazi Collection of Photography and Mapin Publishing, 2010), 11–67.
- 19 Sudeshna Guha, “The Visual in Archaeology,” 97.
- 20 Baird, “Framing the Past,” 10.
- 21 On the number of displaced, see M. Shatrugna, “Unrehabilitated Poor of Srisaïlam Project,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 16, no. 52 (1981): 2123–26 at p. 2124.

Crédits iconographiques

Fig. 1. Mahesh Hippalgaonkar, 2024. Figs. 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9. Courtesy ASI–Hyderabad Circle.