The Future in Ruins

Under the lowering, thundery sky, Harsud . . . [appears] like a scene out of a Marquez novel . . . behind the blind buffalo, silhouetted against the sky, the bare bones of a broken town. A town turned inside out, its privacy ravaged, its innards exposed. Personal belongings, beds, cupboards, clothes, photographs, pots and pans lie on the street. . . . The insides of houses lie rudely exposed. . . . Perched on the concrete frames of wrecked buildings, men, like flightless birds, are hammering, sawing, smoking, talking. If you didn’t know what was happening, you could be forgiven for thinking that Harsud was being built, not broken. That it had been hit by an earthquake and its citizens were rebuilding it. . . . The people of Harsud are razing their town to the ground. Themselves. They very young and the very old sit on heaps of broken brick. The able-bodied are frantically busy. They are tearing apart their homes, their lives, their past, their stories. . . . There is an eerie, brittle numbness to the bustle. It masks the government’s ruthlessness and people’s despair.

—ARUNDHATI ROY, “The Road to Harsud”

I first encountered the village Jetprole in a sumptuously illustrated, center-spread story about an obscure yet important archaeological project in the Telangana region of the southern Indian state of Andhra Pradesh that appeared in a major national English-language newspaper. The project, known widely among Indian archaeologists simply as the “salvage archaeology project,” involved the physical removal and transplantation of more than a hundred monumental temple complexes from their original locations in
village sites that had been submerged due to the construction of the Srisailam megadam, several kilometers upstream (fig. 9.1). Subsequent to their transplantation, the temples were also “revivified” by ritual reconsecration performed by priests handpicked by the Andhra Pradesh state government. By the time the article appeared, the village sites had been submerged for almost a decade beneath the dam’s reservoir lake. Most of the villages had disappeared both in name and as communities; others had merged and rearranged themselves as communities in the course of resettlement. More than 150,000 people were displaced as a result of the submergence. A large number of people had left the region altogether as they lost lands, homes, the means for livelihood, and, by many accounts, the will to continue living in such close proximity to the remains of a settled, if often difficult life.

Yet the newspaper article presented this reconstruction and resettlement project as an unqualified success, and Jetprole in particular stood out as a model village—a place where a historically continuous community had resettled voluntarily and that was chosen, for that reason among others, as a site for an open-air “temple-museum” complex. The perfect convergence of modern technology with the preservation of a carefully selected and curated past received unqualified praise whenever journalists and archaeologists brought the project to the public’s attention. Within a vast compound at the edge of this resettled village, the Andhra Pradesh State Department of
Archaeology and Museums had reconstructed a fifth of the “rescued” monumental temple complexes. In addition, archaeologists also removed, reconstructed, and transplanted Jetprole’s own monumental temple, the Jetprole Madanagopalaswamy Temple, although they deviated from their principles by reconstructing this particular temple within the space of newly resettled village community of Jetprole, rather than in a museum compound along with temples of the same period and style. The transplanted monuments in Jetprole could therefore be placed in two different categories: first, the “archaeology temples” that were reconstructed within the temple-museum complex; second, the Jetprole temple complex, which was transplanted within the resettled village space. The juxtaposition of these differently placed monuments also made Jetprole a place of special interest and a model site for showcasing both the technological transformations enabled by the modernization project and respect for the village spaces and traditions despite the destruction of their everyday material environments.

However, these archaeologically manufactured ruins, made from existing historical materials, both veiled and sur-veilled a historic and psychic landscape that was far more complicated than that implied by the successful archaeological rescue operation of the temples. Embedded within the geography of the new village are also the (in)visible remains of the old site—of homes, fields, village temples, a monumental fort, and royal palaces—that attest to Jetprole’s own past as the capital of a “little kingdom,” a political entity that was between a feudal estate and a princely state in its scale and political impact. The old village site, which lies beneath the placid lake created by the dam for part of the year, resurfaces seasonally during the dry months, from March to July, creating a dramatic theater for the play of local imaginaries and, more practically, providing much-needed additional land for cultivation, even though cultivation of the submerged land is illegal. The reservoir and the submerged village site are both easily visible as well as just a short walk from the new site and thus are integral to the new village. The remains are always present in some way, even when they are not being used or actively traversed.

Unmaking Jetprole

What is the relationship between these remains that surface regularly and recurrently and the museum site on which the successful claims of the nation’s development project rest? Arundhati Roy’s image of Harsud, a town actively being broken, is a powerful reminder of the status of the material debris
that remain after acts of deliberate and willful destruction, especially those undertaken in the name of the public good. Like Jetprole, Harsud, a seven-hundred-year-old town in the State of Madhya Pradesh, was slated to be submerged by the Narmada Sagar Dam, which is a part of India’s largest dam system, second in scale only to China’s Three Gorges project. Roy argues in the article that these images make “visible” a normally invisible relationship between development and destruction.

Since independence, projects like the Sardar Sarovar (of which the Narmada Sagar Dam is a part) and Srisailam have displaced nearly thirty-five million people. From the state’s point of view, Harsud’s material destruction appears only as a stepping-stone to “development” and “progress.” One could be forgiven for thinking that this was a town being built, not broken, as Roy puts it. For the state, the material processes of destruction and the remains they leave in their wake are willfully acknowledged not as ruins, but simply as the costs of development. Bland and neutral categories like “resettlement,” “rehabilitation,” and “project affected person” come to be used both officially and casually when referring to displaced persons and processes of forced resettlement. For the first time in postcolonial history, the story of towns like Harsud also makes visible the longer and deeper history of the costs of development paid by places like Jetprole, as social movements protesting the dams over the river Narmada in the mid to late 1990s have made development projects a major political issue, contesting the rights of the state to trample citizens’ rights at will.

This essay is an ethnographic exploration of the particular predicament of Jetprole—what it would mean to acknowledge the remains of the old village as ruins, or as the debris of a sustained and protracted process of destruction undertaken in the name of progress and modernization. When I was doing fieldwork in Jetprole, more than two decades after the completion of the dam, modernization remained an elusive goal. The archaeological salvage operation was the one concrete sign of the achievements of modern technologies, aside from the dam itself. But its benefits for the villagers were ambiguous at best. Despite the evident grandeur of these resurrected ruins, Jetprole and its people remain remote and unconnected to the circuits of development, heritage tourism, and investment. Their isolation and desperation is all the more evident thirty years after the dam, as the region is now an active node in a Maoist war against the iniquitous policies of the nation-state and its political technologies. Yet the dam itself and the damage it has wrought on this region are accepted matter-of-factly in everyday conversations.

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But the silence surrounding the remains of the old village is a veil. As people moved in and out and around these ruins, their keen understanding of the effects of the dam became increasingly articulated both in quotidian conversations with me and in a special repertoire of poetic and musical narratives still performed on ritual occasions in the village. In these articulations, a sharp contrast emerged between a modernist sense of the future, expressed implicitly in the hopes of progress and modernization through development projects on the one hand and, on the other, in a sense of being arrested or imprisoned in a space that was neither progressive nor evidently continuous with their past. This modernist sense of the future however was clearly tied, through the archaeological project, to the equally significant work of “taming” or containing the past so as to limit any deleterious and feudal pull it might exert on the future. I focus on the persistent thread presented by these articulations about the future in the midst of ruins. The proximity of the abandoned and the rescued, the contrast between the abject poverty of the villages and the grandiose claims of heritage bring together two very different projects and the different senses of the future they engender into a “relational history.”

Such schizophrenic landscapes of modernist development are neither particular to India nor unique to Jetprole. The drama created by this village’s particular geography resonates with similar, arresting images across the world where modernist constructions or ancient sites reclaimed as national heritage stand in an analogous relation to erased local histories and the material tokens of those histories. But here in Jetprole, the juxtaposition between the abandoned and the rescued provides a particularly vivid context within which to explore the texture of material traces and their enduring distribution within everyday life, within the space of that which is left behind and apparently intact. By contrasting these traces, not officially recognized as marks of ruination with the care provided for the ruins that signify vestiges of national history, we can track certain complicities between the colonial project of archaeology, its contemporary practice in India, and the political technologies of the nation-state’s agenda for development, modernization, and attracting transnational investment capital.

These complicities and the entanglements between colonial practices such as archaeology and modernist ones of development, committed to a project of modernization at all costs, raise questions about the straightforward mapping of the effects of colonial history on a postcolonial landscape. The expectations postcolonial nation-states have of transcending the effects of colonial history have been entangled, from the very beginning, with these
modernist agendas. What name could capture these convergences, which, however, exceed both colonial effects and modernist agendas within the bounded sovereignties of postcolonial national states? The term postcolony as conceptualized by Achille Mbembe designates a structure of terminal convergence that subverts and challenges temporal conceptualizations of the post-colonial as a node of dislocations of modernity that dream transcending colonial effects or of reversing the hierarchical ontological relationships between colonialism and its progeny.

Yet this structural account seems incomplete, especially in relation to the powerful imaginaries of the future exerted by projects of modernization and their ongoing and constantly deferred temporal effects and the ways in which these effects continue to be vividly entangled with the colonial and precolonial past. Ann Stoler conceptualizes such temporal effects—deferred as the only ways of fulfilling "expectations of modernity"—as specific to what she calls "imperial formations" or forms of political sovereignty and power that simultaneously exceed and concatenate what scholars have conceived of as colonial, postcolonial, and modern. In this essay I explore the specificity of such imperial effects by focusing on a place whose relationship to the colonial past and the nation-state has been historically oblique and complicated by the political dominance of native elites as intermediaries.

How do dreams of modernity and aspirations for modernization play out in a place like Jetprole, in the shadow of a ruthless and obliterating development machine? What does listening carefully to the silences around the remains of the old village tell us about contemporary political technologies and their relationship to historical antecedents? What new vectors of accountability might emerge from this exercise and what are the ethicopolitical consequences of exploring the effects of these new vectors of accountability?

When I first arrived in Jetprole, people used the phrase "after Srisailam" a great deal, expecting me to translate Srisailam as I wished: as a dam that was constructed at Srisailam as a traumatic event in their collective history; as an evocative metaphor for their present condition in their collective history; as a way of unmooring them from the place they had lived their lives in, both material and psychic—and was often coupled with assertions that in fact, nothing had changed from how they had lived their lives in the village before submergence. This assertion was made time and again despite the fact that the villagers were now living in a space that was utterly different from the one they had inhabited before.

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transformed by the temple-museum at the edge of the village. Despite the huge shadow cast by the “archaeology temples,” their presence was largely ignored. A single priest, paid by the state’s Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments Department looked after all the temples, opening them up each day, cleaning them, and making ritual offerings to the deities. The priest was an outsider, appointed by the local endowments department officials, and was often absent from his job. The archaeology temples were therefore falling into neglect and disrepair within a few years of reconstruction.

Although evidently magnificent from a distance, the archaeology temples—or “group temples” (mukalla gudlu) as villagers called them—presented a very strange sight up close. Each stone of every temple had been marked indelibly with a code to enable archaeologists to determine its right position for reconstruction. These marks were still visible after decades, despite the Archaeology Department’s efforts to cover them up with a coat of saffron paint. Up close, the temples resembled pieces of a giant puzzle rather than sacred monuments. The sole rescued temple that was in active, daily use was the Madanagopalaswamy Temple that had stood at the center of the old village of Jetprole and had served as the family temple of the Rajas of Jetprole since the sixteenth century.

In order to translate “after Srisailam” and to connect it with the common, sometimes emphatic assertion that nothing had changed, I had to undertake a historical ethnography to understand how the pasts of this village—which had little connection to either colonial governance or the nation-state—came to be connected with a particular form of postcolonial political technology that is enacted through the willful destruction of material life and the persistent exposure of social relations to the deconstructive gaze of postcolonial law. The marginal space of the archaeology temples, rescued and enshrined as vestiges of the past, is an important part of that puzzle.

Rebuilding Jetprole involved an active, everyday, and material engagement with the submerged village site. On the one hand, villagers had been forced to contest the state in courts to gain recognition of their claims over the submerged lands. The ownership of these lands was actively entangled with forms of tenure that diverged radically from the private-property paradigm, and the legal battle that ensued over recognition of claims lasted for nearly two decades. The effects of this legal drama resonate to this day. On the other hand, within a few years of submergence, villagers had to begin using their old fields during the dry season, when the dam’s reservoir emptied, because they were unable to secure enough land with the meager cash compensations they were offered by the state. These incursions into the submer-
gence zone were fraught, both because of the fear of state reprisal, since the agricultural activity in the submergence zone was a threat to the dam, and because of the villagers’ haunting confrontation with their past. The movements in and out of the abandoned village site—which was just a short walk from the new village—created new ways of relating materially and mnemonically to the past as well as to the future.

While every place may be composed of a palimpsest of material forms—some in active use, others abandoned or more ambivalent in terms of their contemporary influence—in Jetprole after submergence, there was an active call to relate to these remainders of the Srisailam project. The archaeology temples are familiar to a modernist sensibility, signifying structures abandoned by time yet recoverable within an enchanted and linear national history, attesting to the past glory and achievements of the nation. The salvage archaeology project was thus suffused with the “redemptive satisfaction of chronicling loss,” a sentiment that was amply evident in my conversations with various archaeologists involved in the project. But it was significant that the archaeology temples, while admired by the villagers, remained largely invisible in the broader narratives surrounding their own displacement, remaining hidden under other layers of the palimpsest that was Jetprole. The submerged village, on the other hand, exerted a much more ambivalent, psychic pressure on villagers. It marked a deep sense of loss, but one that could not be mourned as such. Recovering the village as a material resource was an important reason why the engagement with the submerged site—the houses, monuments, and fields—felt current and contemporary rather than like an encounter with a forgotten space from the past.

For the residents of Jetprole, the work of rebuilding the village coincided with their being interpellated, perhaps for the first time in their history, by the institutions of the nation-state. Like many regions of what is now India, Jetprole was never under direct British colonial rule, but rather was governed by Rajas who were themselves the vassals of the princely state of Hyderabad, the largest, indirectly ruled territory in the subcontinent. The State of Hyderabad was itself integrated into the territory of the Republic of India only after a short but brutal military action one year after the Indian independence from British rule. Yet, like many other territories that were formerly princely states in British India, the State of Hyderabad was poorly interpellated into the structures and institutions of the newly independent nation. A separate bureaucracy was created for abolishing jagirs, or landed estates like Jetprole, within the State of Hyderabad, but the complexities of land-tenure arrange-
ments were hard to untangle and existing arrangements continued to prevail until the dam’s construction was announced.

In the early 1970s, when Revenue Department officials from the capital of Andhra Pradesh came to Jetprole to decide on land claims and to apportion cash compensations for lands about to be submerged, issues of ownership, private property, tenancy arrangements, and the lifeways that went with them came to the fore with visceral force. Those who could not prove their status as holders of ownership titles or as protected tenants of “legitimate” landowners were cut off altogether from receiving compensation. What ensued were long battles with the state over legitimacy of rights and material claims as well as over the amounts of cash that were handed out as compensation.

This contestation took place through the court system of the Andhra Pradesh, with the active participation of dozens of lawyers from nearby towns, who moved quickly into the submergence villages to offer legal advice and help. Their goals, of course, were neither altruistic nor calculated to expose the state to critique through the practice of law. As hundreds of thousands of people were receiving compensations in cash, the customary fee of 10 percent was a major attraction to these mofussil lawyers, some of whom had familial connections to the villages. In these courtroom dramas, the entanglements of the past with the present became sharply visible. As well, the legal cases had crucial bearing on the future lives of the villagers, for many of those who were forced to go to court were precisely those whose claims to landholding were denied by the state. In denying these claims, the state was refusing to acknowledge the particular history of places like Jetprole.

The Past of a “Little Kingdom”

Like many of the other submerged villages, Jetprole lay in a region between the two important and historic Saiva pilgrimage centers of Srisailam and Alampur. For several centuries, this region was a frontier over which successive South Indian kingdoms fought for dominion. The rich monumental legacy of the villages was a result of these battles, as each successive kingdom consolidated its powers by building and endowing monumental temples, monasteries, palaces, wells, and travelers’ shelters as signs of power and status. By the mid-seventeenth century, Jetprole had become the official seat of an eponymous “little kingdom,” known in Telugu as samsthanam, ruled by the Surabhi family.
In multiple ways, the submerged village site reflected the social life of the “little kingdom.” A massive stone fort, several monumental temple complexes, and the palace of the Rajas of Jetprole formed the spatial and political heart of the now submerged village site. Although the seat of government was moved in the mid-nineteenth century to another village (Kollapur), Jetprole continued to be of special importance due to the Madanagopala-swamy Temple, a monumental sixteenth-century SriVaishnava temple that was at the geographic center of the submerged village and served as the royal temple even though Jetprole was no longer the capital of the Samsthanam.7

In the nineteenth century, the Rajas of Jetprole, who controlled around a hundred and fifty villages, became vassals of the Nizam monarchy of the princely state of Hyderabad paying tribute in exchange for control over revenue, autonomous policing, and administration of justice within the Samsthanam. Unlike much of British India, there was little reliance on land revenue to generate tax income, and much of the land was in fact governed by complicated tenurial practices involving hereditary squatting rights over land in exchange for certain forms of labor. Such services were rendered either personally for the royal family or to the temples in the direct control of the Raja’s family. These land tenure arrangements were referred to as inams, conceived as variations on forms of gift-exchange, exchanging labor for rights to land use across multiple generations. Each specific type of grant, or inam, had a particular name, depending on the extent to which taxes were waived or the type of service for which the tax-waiver or tenurial rights were granted.8

Importantly, the arrangements governing the control of land were not merely administrative but modes of subjectification as well, for they enmeshed generations of villagers in complex social, political, moral, and economic relations with the governing authorities.9 The dam interrupted these relations while also making visible their deep, structural links to village life. The remains of the submerged village thus evoke this deep history of subjectification as well. The ruins of monuments, fields, and homes each tell a story of a particular community within the village and their relation to the moral centers of authority—the palace and the temple. The spatial organization of the village, too, divided into caste-based neighborhoods, or geris, provides important clues to understanding the social relations between communities.

Formally, these arrangements continued until 1948, when, after independence, Hyderabad (the largest princely state in British India) was annexed into independent India. Many of the complicated land-revenue grant
arrangements between the Raja of Jetprole and his subjects continued de facto well into the 1970s, even though various land-reform acts had been passed in the 1950s rationalizing and redistributing land according to socialist principles of land to the tiller. The persistence of historic arrangements in the face of land reform rendered issues of ownership and compensation immensely problematic, postsubmergence. The tenuous yet real authority of the “little kingdom,” which rested on this patchwork of landed arrangements between ruler and subjects, came into direct contact with regimes of modernization and with the nation-state itself after the dam. During my own research in Jetprole, I interacted extensively with two groups of villagers, belonging to the largest caste-groups in the village—the tenugu bhoyas and the dalits—and on many occasions I also visited with Muslim families in the village. Both the Hindu groups had crucial relations to the Jetprole Madanagopalaswamy Temple, and the reconstruction of the temple impacted each group in a critical though different way.

The history I recount here is embedded and compressed into local imaginaries of the tenugus and the dalits surrounding the aftermath of “Srisailam.” The state’s refusal to acknowledge these microrelations of power, moral authority, and forms of social structuration stood in sharp contrast with their willingness to rescue the temples around which these social relations were constructed and to reconstruct those temples as objects cast in a new historical light. Thus the archaeological practice of salvage actively rearranged relations both between people and things as well as among people. Yet villagers felt deeply ambivalent about the relations that had been displaced in the course of their forced resettlement even as the ongoing engagement with the submerged village site seemed to block a complete disengagement with those relations. This active, ongoing demand to inhabit and engage with the remains of a life that had not entirely ebbed away while anticipating the modernization of those social relations through the new laws and structures of the state translated into a refusal on the part of many residents to acknowledge the extraordinary transformation of the landscape of their village. When this transformation was acknowledged, it often came up swiftly and suddenly, in moments of distraction, marked by a profusion of what Walter Benjamin has called “memoire involontaire,” a state that was closer to forgetting, but nonetheless tethered to recollection.
An Ungraspable Event

In everyday conversations about the dam project and its effects, many villagers spoke about their relationship with the state in terms of a division in time—between a time of promised but deferred development and a time of deliberate abandonment. The contrast between the time of deferred development, before the dam, and of deliberate abandonment, after the dam, described the space within which a relationship to the sustained political project of neglect and disregard, precipitated by the development project, could be located. After the dam was sanctioned, in the late 1960s, the government stopped all investment in public works in the region on the grounds that the villages were slated for submergence anyway.

As an example, older residents recounted memories of a destructive flood that might have been prevented if a small earthen dam had been constructed at the right time. This period before Srisailam is remembered as a time of suspension due to the deliberate deferral of even such minor public works. After the Srisailam dam’s completion however, villagers found that their situation had not improved, but perhaps had worsened. The future promised by the state had arrived, arrested in a form that was unexpected. Ironically, the “future” converged, visually and materially, with the monumental “past,” as the village became partially a museum. For the state, the vision of this region as an ongoing zone of modernization ended with the completion of the archaeology project, thus contributing to the villagers’ sense that their expectations for the future had been somehow petrified and forever “arrested.”

The “time of suspension” that many villagers spoke of seemed to stretch indefinitely over the dozen years that it took for the dam to be completed and even beyond, as it became clear later on, years after the dam was completed. During this period, many residents said that they lost faith in the project, hardly even believing that the dam was actually being constructed. Four years before submergence, revenue officials started touring throughout the submergence zone, studying land records and deciding on amounts to be paid as cash compensations for houses and agricultural lands. At the same time, archaeologists began intensifying their operations in these villages. The extended bureaucratic scrutiny of the revenue officials produced one of the most extraordinary legal battles against the State in contemporary India as lawyers rushed into the scene and instructed thousands of villagers to accept cash compensations “under protest.” By accepting the cash amounts “under protest,” villagers were retaining their rights to bring suit
against the State, contesting various aspects of their forced resettlement, including the amount of compensation. The meager amounts paid set an extremely low value on the lives and livelihoods of the displaced and the lack of a post-submergence resettlement plan rendered their situation particularly precarious.¹¹

In March 1981, when the dam construction was finally completed, many of the villagers spoke of being rudely awakened from this time of suspension to a nightmarish reality. Not believing the rumors that the dam was nearly complete, most villagers had not made any plans for the impending move. Finally, they had to be forcibly evicted from their homes by the police through a campaign officially labeled Operation Demolition.¹² With no alternative plans, many residents described camping out on the rocky high ground overlooking the reservoir that had submerged their homes and fields as they watched. Several people spoke of feeling like castaways, completely unmoored from the social and moral contexts of their lives. This liminal period lasted a few years, but there was very little willingness to recall what things had been like during that time. On numerous occasions, however, I was directed to talk to a man named Sayalu, from the Madiga community (one of the two major dalit communities in this village) to better understand Srisailam, an event whose dimensions were yet to be grasped. When I finally met him, he was with a large group of his kinsmen when they came to consult a lawyer from Mahbubnagar town (the district headquarters) whose parents lived in Jetprole. In response to my request for an interview, they invited me to a ritual performance in their geri (neighborhood) the same evening.

A number of men from the community were performing a ritual hagiography of Brahmamgaru, a saintly figure known for his apocalyptic prophecies. Through this ritual performance, Sayalu and his kinsmen, like hundreds of other devotees across the region, hoped to prepare themselves for the ephemeral nature of human life and its everyday attachments by reminding themselves of imminent apocalypse. In between two acts of this performance, Sayalu picked up his single-string drone and started singing alone, a very different kind of a song. It was a song he had composed just after the villagers were brutally evicted, looking down on the reservoir and all that it had swallowed. Sayalu’s song, and its affective and melancholic quality, was known throughout the village as a repository for their collective feelings about the event. Even though it was an individual’s composition without any ritual significance—a secular song—it had achieved a measure of fame not only in Jetprole but elsewhere in the submergence zone as well.

The song comes out of a local tradition of spontaneous poetry called kai
kattu, mostly composed in the fields to pass time during work. Kai kattu’s distinguishing feature is its context-sensitive nature. Songs in this genre often refer to current events, rumors, and local gossip. After Srisailam, Sayalu’s song and a few other such songs referring directly or obliquely to the experience of dislocation came into circulation, but they were rarely performed. Many of the other songs and poems about Srisailam were incorporated into ritual performances on various festive occasions throughout the year. While performing a mythic poem about a divine figure or a hagiographic song, a group of song leaders would incorporate a remembered scene or a story relating to Srisailam into the ongoing song by introducing a refrain about Srisailam. The other singers would then use the opportunity to add their own, spontaneously composed recollections. Such spontaneous interjection about actual historical events or contemporary happenings was not uncommon, and villagers who performed regularly on these festive occasions had come to expect these interjections as part of the song’s routine. Yet when Srisailam was mentioned during such performances, it always appeared to surprise both the singers and their audience as an unexpected punctuation into the space of the everyday. Sayalu’s song about Srisailam was different because it was carried only by a singular voice and was not tied to any particular ritual occasion.

As if addressing the unknown, an abyss, not expecting an answer, Sayalu structured the first lines of his song—also the recurring refrain—in the form of a rhetorical question: “Where is this Srisailam? Who built these projects?” The refrain operates as a door to each stanza—which is preceded by and returns to this lament—opening onto a scene or a space indicated by the name of a vanished place (see the appendix for the full text of the song). While the song is also descriptive, its centerpiece is a lamenting rendition of the names of villages, many of them in the vicinity of Jetprole, which vanished in the aftermath of Srisailam. With dense movement around these names, the poet suggests that the only thing that can be grasped about Srisailam is what has vanished, not what has remained. The names themselves stand in for the communities, and Sayalu’s song makes clear that these social forms are gone yet he structures the entire song around the refrain—“Where did this Srisailam come from?” or “What is this Srisailam?”—unable to grasp its effects entirely.

The song ends with the image of people pulling themselves up to the edge of another land, an image suggesting something beyond the sudden and inexplicable disappearance of everything that makes life possible—the fields of millet and peanuts in full crop, for example. But the image is not a
hopeful one. And the song stopped everyone short, coming as it did in the middle of another performance about theodicy and apocalypse. The remains of Srisailam are its ongoing effects, but as Sayalu’s song suggests, understanding these effects remain out of reach, except for that moment in which everything disappeared for a while.

Ruins and Recollections

Soon after I started living in Jetprole, in early March after the last full moon of winter, marked by the Festival of Colors and winter bonfires, and before the festival of Ugadi (New Year), the reservoir ran dry. I was struck immediately by the extraordinary spectacle of the remains. Most of the villagers I was working with were going into the submergence zone to clear their old fields of mud and detritus to start planting their peanut and millet crops, as they had in the old days. They felt lucky that they could harvest an extra crop from the submerged lands. After submergence, most villagers in Jetprole had only managed to lease lands from neighboring villages for one crop every year. Without the second crop harvested from the old fields, many said that they would be perilously close to starving. I hesitated to follow them into the fields knowing that they would be very busy with work. However, on the night of the full moon, just before the reservoir had fully dried up, Ramulu—the Jetprole temple watchman—and a few other people offered me a tour of the old fort that the Surabhi Rajas had built and their palace, which was now reduced to a foundation with a single, free-standing, winding staircase in the middle.

We wandered among those places, with Ramulu telling us stories about the Rajas, about hidden treasures and treasure hunters. All these stories, while interesting, were simply partial representations of a very complex field of social relations. Such stories generically tie history with the sublime aesthetic experience of landscapes considered representative of the past. As such, they are closer to the experiences that archaeologists and museologists sought to produce in viewers and consumers of national history. And this turned out to be just the first of many trips into that submergence zone. An outsider might expect this dramatic front of mythic stories and rumors to be played out against the backdrop of the monumental fort and palace, as happens at many sites of historical tourism all over India. My subsequent trips with different groups of villagers, however, were dedicated to more mundane pursuits. In retrospect they could be conceived as mapping exercises through which I was being circuitously led to understand the effects of Sri-
sailam. We looked for the foundations of houses and neighborhoods (geris), for the original location of the Jetprole temple, marking all the shrines to the minor village deities and other divine beings that were left behind with their habitations. I followed people as they worked their fields and listened to the songs they composed and sang in the fields.

Several months later, just before the reservoir filled up again, I accompanied a group of dalit women to the shrine of a locally famous Muslim pir (saint) called Darvesh Kadri. Unlike the monumental stone temples that were rescued by archaeologists, the dargah, or the tomb-shrine, of Darvesh Kadri could not be moved. Nevertheless, it was clearly not abandoned. Each year, before the annual festival of the saint (the urs), the villagers—both Hindu and Muslim—still crossed the muddy remains to clean the dargah and to whitewash its walls, preparing for the urs as before. Even before they began to reclaim their fields on a regular basis, this annual ritual drew them into the zone of submergence without fear or hesitation. When I started my research, almost two decades had passed since the submersion. The visit to the dargah was the first invitation for me to personally cross into that zone, which remained unspoken in my daily conversations with many of the villagers.

Until that moment, my insistent questions about “what had changed” were often met with the cryptic response that “nothing had changed.” This was incomprehensible to me, particularly in the light of the ruptures visible in the material landscape that appeared so clearly, albeit only to me. If I had expected a neat division of time and space into the old and the new, the past and the present, I was, of course, constantly confounded by the assertion that “nothing had changed.” That claim, however, had little to do with the continuity of the monumental past represented by the various reconstructed and resurrected temples, as I understood from the conversations that developed on the way to the dargah.

In response to my persistent question about how life was different after Srisailam, Lakshmamma, an outspoken Madiga woman and a group of her friends, asked me, “Do you know what happens when we go back to our old fields to work?” “In the fields,” they said, their children ask, “Where is home?”14 “We take them there, we point out — there’s the granary, there are the pots, there are the sleeping quarters, there we are — all this was ours.” “We swallow our sorrow and we move on, we peek into other people’s houses. There’s Balaiah’s house and there’s Rosaiah’s house.” They then spoke as if transfixed, “We think of our own condition. At our age, our grandfathers had everything, but we, we are already drowned.”
The stillness of the air as we wandered through the muddy paths of the old village to get to the dargah perfectly matched the stillborn quality of the lives that the women were describing to their children. They were speaking of their lives, post-Srisailam, as if they were already dead, and yet we were all forcefully aware that they were speaking about their present, about the village and the life from which we had walked the short distance to the dargah. But in that distance, they had conveyed to me a sense of despair about change. Forced to abandon a life with all its trappings of settled domesticity and intergenerational ties, the women worried that their future was already prophesied in the life that they were now living, in the village they had put together using bits and pieces of their old homes—door frames, wooden beams, and other objects. That future was suffused with a feeling of going nowhere, of being rooted and arrested in an unchanging scenario.

The women were viscerally aware that even this cobbled-together foundation for their futures and those of their children was inherently precarious. On another day, standing at the edge of the reservoir, when it was full and they could no longer see their old homes, Lakshmamma and others said to me, “We wonder when the day will come for us to destroy even this hearth. We wait for the day when a catastrophe will befall us again. One day when we are asleep we wonder if the flood will drown us and move on. Like those villages, which were washed away in the flood three years ago. Crops, goats, sheep, cattle, cots, jars, clocks, thresholds of houses—the flood tossed them our way. We saw those things, we saw the big wardrobe marooned in the mud at the edge of the reservoir. We grieved for ourselves as we grieved for those who had drowned there.”

Built on promises of a better future in exchange for the sacrifice of their homes and lands and livelihoods for the sake of the public good, the expectations of these women for a stable, secure, and indeed modern future were constantly dashed by the realities of living amid the ruins produced by the modernization project in the form of the archaeology temples and among the silences surrounding the ruination of the social and material ecologies of their old lives. The deterioration of intergenerational relations, competition among kinsmen for scarce land, and strained relations with their natal homes over new laws granting equal property rights to women were often mentioned as among the intangible hardships engendered by Srisailam. If there was a sense that mere abandonment of their old lives—the recognition of those ecologies as ruins whose place was in the past—could allow people to move on with their lives, the situation they found themselves in was an intolerable one. They could neither move forward nor step back fully into what
they had lost. Their engagement with these forms of ruination was an ongoing process, traced in their daily movements between the new village and the old, between new kinds of social relations and the persistence of older structures of oppression and power.

However, living in this zone of abandonment and reconstruction obliquely conditioned their expectations of the future. What was there made clear what was missing: there were archaeology temples, but no factories or even tourists; there was the dam, but no electricity for illumination or for irrigation; there were houses, but no land. Everything was incomplete and therefore precarious. These observations, shared by many of the villagers, were critical of the modernization project, but specifically through the recognition that the deleterious effects of Srisailam were distributed not just by the dam at a distance, but by the very presence of the archaeology temples, close at hand. These impotent markers of modernization, mute, abandoned by both villagers and tourists, were routinely ignored in daily life and conversation—but therein also lay their power and hold over local imaginaries of suffering.

Living Monuments, Dead Pasts

The archaeological project began nearly a decade after the dam was approved. In the mid-1970s, a “high-power committee” consisting of representatives of the Ministries of Irrigation, Archaeology and Museums, and Tourism, as well as of various experts, sanctioned the massive project, which competes in scale with the famous monument salvage project undertaken by UNESCO in Egypt. Archaeologists, technicians and armies of laborers were involved in the project. The temples to be moved were first identified based on their historical importance and the feasibility of moving them. Their stones were marked with indelible ink to identify their location, and then the temples were dismantled. The stones were transported to the new locations for reconstruction. In case the temples had been actively “in use” prior to submergence, the idols were removed to a temporary sanctuary after elaborate rituals, justified by reference to ancient texts, were performed. Similarly, after reconstruction, the State of Andhra Pradesh facilitated the performance of equally elaborate reconsecration rituals for all the transplanted temples, thus “resurrecting” the temples for worship while also turning them into national monuments (see fig. 9.2).

By the late 1990s, when I was doing research in the area, the salvage archaeology project was nearly complete, with just a few “disputed” temples
remaining to be reconstructed. The decision to remove the temples from their original village contexts had caused problems in cases where village-level attachments to the particular shrines had to be reckoned with politically. In the case of Jetprole, an important exception was made to accommodate the interests of the Raja of Jetprole, then living in the city of Hyderabad. At his request, the monumental Madanagopalaswamy Temple of Jetprole was removed and transplanted to a site that would become the geographic center of the reconstructed village, rather than into a museum with other temples from the same period or built in the same style. Like most of the submerged villages, a part of Jetprole’s territory remained outside the submergence zone and this remainder was appropriated for the reconstruction of the Madanagopalaswamy Temple. The new village grew around this transplanted temple since its reconstruction was already in progress when the dam was completed and the residents displaced. In addition, Jetprole was chosen as a site for a temple-museum, given its prior historical importance.

It is important to note, however, that the Jetprole temple was the proprietary temple of the Surabhi family, in which the Surabhi Raja’s family and their invited guests enjoyed exclusive rights of worship. Apart from high-caste families, the village public rarely participated in the temple rituals, and many, especially the untouchable communities in the village, saw the deity only when specially made procession idols (utsava vigrahalu) were taken out into the streets of the village during festivals. The two main communities in
the village, the tenugus and the dalits, had intimate yet different relations to this temple. While the former experienced a form of intimate inclusion, performing various services in the temple, the latter experienced a form of intimate exclusion in which the temple featured prominently because they were not allowed to enter the temple at all. Moreover, the remainder of Jetprole village’s official revenue territory, which was appropriated for transplanting the Jetprole temple, was being used by certain dalit families who claimed hereditary squatting rights to the land as an inam for serving the Rajas of Jetprole for various personal needs not involving the temple. Their dispossession was emblematic of the complex forms of displacement that took place after Srisailam. These groups formed the main population of the village, while the remaining groups—mostly upper-caste farming families—had largely moved out of the social life of the village after submergence, since many had homes in district towns even though they continued to maintain homes and farms in Jetprole.

From 1968, when the dam’s construction began, to the late 1990s, the entire submergence zone was being incorporated into national geography in new ways. Already known for being major suppliers of labor to construction sites all over India, these districts were seen by the state as hopelessly underdeveloped and remote. Yet the interventions into the region brought many outsiders into the region including state officials, ambulance-chasing lawyers who enabled villagers to contest the compensations being paid to them, and construction laborers working on archaeological sites. The remoteness of these villages should be understood in the phenomenological sense, experienced, perceived, and evoked by villagers in their stories about the development project.

The project brought new relations to the world, but at the same time the proximity of the past in its material forms drew the place into other lived times and spaces. These development-driven interventions had juxtaposed the large-scale ruin-making capacities of the state, the willful and calculated disregard for how people would survive without land or water, with the loving care the state extended to the temples that it chose to rescue as vestiges of a glorious, precolonial national past. The sense of neglect experienced by the people of these villages was evidenced by comments that they made about archaeologists being the only agents of the state that they saw with any regularity both before and after the submergence. This sense was also conveyed to me by many archaeologists who felt uncomfortable with the role they occupied as agents of a neglectful and indeed irresponsible state
as they witnessed, at very close quarters, the hardships experienced by the villagers throughout the process of displacement.

Yet the archaeologists were both motivated and even excited by the historical and aesthetic opportunities afforded by the project. Postreconstruction, the monuments manufactured by the salvage process occupied a very particular kind of past tense, the past perfect. The archaeologists whom I interviewed over the course of my research were clear about the role of archaeology in rescuing the “relics” of the past. They viewed these monuments as tokens of a bygone era, even those temples, such as the Madanagopalswamy Temple of Jetprole, that clearly continued to play a complex role in the social, economic, and political life of the villages in which they were located. The formal and aesthetic aspects of these monumental temples were what most interested the archaeologists, since style, according to their analytic, signified period of construction and thereby allowed them to draw historical conclusions about precolonial South Indian polities.

As in many countries, archaeology in India is tied intimately to the state. The archaeologists involved in the salvage project were, first and foremost, civil servants, rather than university-based research archaeologists. The latter were able to undertake field research only in collaboration with state-employed archaeologists. Another important feature of archaeological practice in post-independence India is precisely its intimate connection to the development regime. As the then director of the Andhra Pradesh state department of Archaeology and Museums, who supervised much of the Srisailam salvage project, stated in a written report on this project, “These salvage operations have become a catalyst for even the ‘normal’ work of archaeology in a country lacking in the resources for expanded archaeological activities, causing archaeologists to move from one scene of submergence to the next, excavating and choosing remains destined for museums.” The sense that the rescued temples were remains, leftovers, from a past that was decisively separate from the (modern) present was dominant, at least among this particular community of archaeologists.

This melancholic but redemptive understanding of the ruin as the decayed remnant of a vanished past is certainly modernist, but at the same time the archaeological ruin is not found but made. The salvage operation is but an extreme practice in a genealogy of practices that actively constitute relations between history and identity through material artifacts, rather than merely reflecting a preexisting relation between history and identity. Recent histories of archaeology in India trace the continuities between the institutions of

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postcolonial archaeology and their colonial predecessors. In particular, the distinction, made by colonial archaeologists, between “living” and “dead” monuments, or between monuments in active use and abandoned or disused monuments, continues to animate the concerns of contemporary archaeologists. A large number of the historic monuments tended to by archaeologists in India are also actively occupied and therefore objects of contest between the state and the occupants, or between different communities with competing claims over these monuments.

The distinction between the “living” and the “dead” monument is significant to understanding how and why the material trace of the past has come to assume such a contentious position in debates about national identity in recent years. Combined with archaeological methods of excavation, the “proper” positioning of material remains has proved, as it has in so many other places, to be a volatile practice in contemporary India where the more temporally recent layers have been interpreted to embed signs of iconoclasm and desecration. The violent debates over the Babri Mosque in Northern India, which was claimed by both Muslims and Hindus as a holy site, for example, have animated a virulent, exclusionary identity politics for over two decades. The passage of the mosque into the trusteeship of the state after independence contributed to an imaginary of its being a “dead monument,” while the claims of Hindu nationalist politicians and archaeologists, aligned by their mutual contention that the foundations of the mosque lay on top of the foundations of a destroyed temple, contributed to a fierce debate over the site itself, which culminated in the physical destruction of the mosque by armies of youth members of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and other, similar, xenophobic Hindu nationalist groups.

The salvage archaeology project highlights similar processes of history-making by aligning layers of spatial forms to the temporal ideologies of historical periods. More important, by transplanting the temples and reorganizing their relations to one another as evocative ruins within the open-air museum compounds, the salvage archaeology project follows a modernist aesthetic attitude, both in terms of its organization of time and in terms of its organization of individual sensory experience. Such an organization of time foregrounds a particular emphasis on understanding the past as a completed process, as “history outside of lived reality.” As Jacques Rancière elaborates in his recent work, the aesthetic focus on particular objects, considered to fall solely within the sphere of art, attempts to fundamentally affect the “redistribution of the relations between the forms of sensory experience.” Yet the archaeology temples are caught in a paradoxical ontological
bind: the salvage process turns them into objects of an aesthetic regime of recognition, while at the same time the reconsecration ceremonies attempt to bring them into a different order of time, to reconstruct their qualities as “living” monuments.

The archaeologist’s work, tied to the modernization project, is central to a politics of dislocation as well as to an apportioning of risks. The state and its allies envision development as a normative project whose overall benefits are not blunted by the costs borne by some populations. The sustained disregard for the lives of people in the submergence zones of dams, in the forests being extracted for resources, or in the shadows of the high-rise buildings of globalizing cities is recast as a necessary cost of “progress.” But the state is well aware that acknowledgement of the large-scale ruin-making required by the project of modernization is not enough to justify these processes. Other, more calculated projects—such as the salvage archaeology project and other schemes of “compensation”—are in fact required to supplement and substantiate the necessity of development. Such schemes and schemas trace the continuity between imperial pedagogic projects that projected natives as children in need of an education and the policies of postcolonial states. These schemas also recast the ruination of life, opportunities, and aspirations by cutting off specific material ecologies from the flow of time and pushing the ways of life associated with these ecologies into the sphere of “history outside of lived reality.” Yet this cordonning off of space and time hardly stems the flow of history or the seepage of these very material ecologies into the political imaginaries of the present as people struggle with the ambivalence of letting go of an oppressive past in the context of a hopeless present.

The salvage archaeology project struggles to contain these imaginaries, restricting the understanding of the past to the loss documented, archived, and aesthetically repackaged by the project. This imperialist nostalgia, however, is called into question when that which is destroyed demands to be recognized as having an influence on the imaginaries and possibilities of the future. The archaeological refusal to establish a relationship to the destroyed is turned on its head by the villagers, who in turn refuse to acknowledge the transformative, aesthetic effect of the salvaged temples. Through the salvage archaeology project—in the attention to the material trace of history, in its relocation and repositioning as an evocative ruin—an evasive history of empire reappears and is joined to a sustained biopolitical project to disregard the agency of particular populations, populations already rendered vulnerable by hurts that can be traced back through time.

THE FUTURE IN RUINS
The Disappearance of Jetprole

If modernization projects have a particular relation to that which they lay waste to—viewing the pasts of villages they submerge or the spaces of slums that they redevelop or the depths of mines and forests that they extract resources from as necessary and inevitable waste—then projects like the salvage archaeology project pick up that waste and attempt to curate and control its effects. The salvage archaeology project cultivates a particular, modernist sensibility of the past as a space that can be cordoned off from the flow of time and whose symbolic effects on the present and the future can be carefully controlled through the control of the material objects representing the past. Yet this process of control gives rise to unexpected, critical encounters that reveal new possibilities for grounding processes of recomposing lives. In this concluding section, I turn to narratives surrounding the relocation of the Jetprole Madanagopalaswamy Temple to explore these encounters.

The archaeological relocation of Jetprole’s monumental temple provided an important element of physical continuity between the old village and the new. But it also proved temporally disorienting to the villagers because, after reconstruction, worship was resumed in the temple but with very different vectors of authority since the management of the temple had been radically transformed. Although the Raja of Jetprole retained rights of worship and other kinds of honors as the hereditary trustee, the temple was now fully managed by the Religious Endowments Department of the Andhra Pradesh government, which controlled everything from the budget to appointments of temple servants. This situation particularly affected the many families—both tenugu and dalit—attached to the temple through rights of use over temple lands. These lands—numbering hundreds of acres—had been endowed to the temple by the Rajas of Jetprole over the course of four centuries. Rights of use over these temple lands were, in turn granted to different families in the village in exchange for specific services: pouring oil into the lamps, supplying flowers for daily worship, washing vessels, bearing the processionary idol, and, of course, priestly duties among numerous other major and minor duties.

After the reconstruction of the temple, the cash compensations paid for these lands were collected by the Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments (HRCE) Department and deposited in a bank account from which salaries were paid to a few villagers for taking care of the daily operations of the temple. The staff was reduced to a priest, a watchman, a sweeper, and
a gardener, who struggled to maintain the huge, magnificent temple complex. They spent their days in the temple gossiping and waiting for the very occasional visitor to drop by. Villagers still refrained from going into the temple without a specific reason for doing so because it remained tied, in their memories and in reality, to the family of the Raja of Jetprole, who now resided in Hyderabad city and visited the village only on rare occasions.

Other families, who had served in the temple until it was dismantled and who had cultivated the temple lands, were locked up in a legal battle with the state, arguing that they, and not the HRCE Department, should rightfully receive the cash compensation for the temple lands. For these families, there was a deep sense of disappointment; they were no longer servants of the temple, nor were the rights accrued from their previous position serving the temple recognized after the submergence. The legal battle and the forms of testimony required by these families required them to relive memories of particular forms of oppression and humiliation that they had suffered for the rights to cultivate the temple’s fields. This, coupled with the fact that the dam project had failed to materialize a radical transformation in their living conditions, contributed to their repeated assertions about the fact that “nothing had changed,” despite the extraordinary incursions into their everyday life by the dam, the reconstruction of the temples, the lawyers, and the courts.

Not surprisingly, however, the temple formed a central motif in the poetic language in which experiences of displacement often resurfaced. A story sung about the transplantation of the Jetprole temple provided an extended canvas on which to observe these ideas at play. I first heard the song performed during the celebration of Ugadi, the Telugu New Year, which coincides with the harvest in midsummer. On the day of Ugadi, there were typically celebrations and entertainments in all the different neighborhoods of the village. In the tenugu neighborhood, a woman named Savaramma gathered a group of her kinswomen to sing a long and moving song about the process of dislocation, transplantation, and reconsecration of the temple. The song was reputed to be Savaramma’s original composition, which came to her in a moment of possession by the deity himself. Such moments of possession led men and women to start singing stories and legends about deities, especially caste and family deities. That the Jetprole gopalswamy, as the deity was affectionately called by the villagers, should possess someone was somewhat incongruous, given his status as a “high” god, removed from everyday life and worshiped only by the highest castes. But the events of the submergence had rendered him available to treatments similar to those of
the caste, family, and village deities, including practices of storytelling into which events from everyday life were woven.

Prior to submergence, Savaramma’s family was intimately associated with the temple. Men from her family carried the processional idols around the village during festivals. During its reconstruction, she was employed as a laborer on the construction site. She was deeply moved by the experience of witnessing the deity removed from his place, being taken away to a temporary shrine in the neighboring village, and his return to Jetprole, many years later. Savaramma’s song referenced the special relations that her family and community enjoyed with the deity and the Jetprole temple. She was quite wary of performing the song too frequently, afraid of becoming possessed as she had been when she first composed the song, but the song itself had migrated to other neighborhoods and other singers took up the basic story, weaving in their own stories of displacement. All versions of this song, regardless of who performed them, turned on a trope of death. They recounted the scene of the deity leaving the village as a corpse, drained of his life by the elaborate deconsecration ceremonies. The touch of this corpse turned the old village site into a ghostly space that people waited to flee, but they had nowhere to go until they were forcibly evicted, years later. And yet, Savaramma’s song suggested, they were unsure that the condition of being ghosts, of being between life and death, had ended when the village was rebuilt and the temple reconstructed.

Later, on the same Ugadi day, I heard another version of this song, performed by Lakshmamma, the dalit woman whom I had accompanied into the old village. Her version of the song told the story of her community’s dispossession from the lands they were cultivating under the decree of the Raja of Jetprole. These lands, which were appropriated for rebuilding the Jetprole temple, assumed a symbolic charge as the only part of village territory that was not submerged. Reconstructing the temple on these grounds meant that the temple would retain its ancient connection to the village. But, as the song explained, the Madigas who cultivated those lands had no idea what was in store. They assumed that the land was charayi (common land, typically used for grazing) to which the Raja had gifted them squatting rights on his authority. Yet they discovered that these rights could be taken away just as arbitrarily. The temple therefore stood as the emblem of a very particular kind of history in the memory of Lakshmamma and her kinswomen who sang with her.

Her song was not a direct indictment of the state or the Raja but something more. Lakshmamma’s song and her story provide an exploration of
the impermanence and mutability of the relations of care and attachment across generations. While such arbitrary dispossessions may have been part of historical memory, the labor needed to resituate the vanished into the order of lived time was new. For the vanished objects of intergenerational transmission, like the landed ties of their inam, marked the difference, for these women, between life and death, between being corpses and becoming ghosts. The song decried the foolishness of their elders, who in their ignorance had given away their land to gopalaswamy, and it contemplated the women’s own futures as elders to their children, wondering what would become of them and how they would be remembered. Both in its structure and its affect, the song exhibited a deep concern with the recognition that the future, which they were so worried about, might already have arrived, in a form that could not be changed. Their understanding of the future contrasted distinctly from their aspirations for a life in which their children would have greater opportunities than themselves.

Many of the women recounted, for example, how they had obliquely become aware of the equal property rights that the government of Andhra Pradesh’s laws had bestowed on women. They only become aware of this right, they said, when their brothers from other villages in the submergence zone requested that they sign away their rights to compensation for their shares in the family property. The women did so, they said, in order to maintain their visiting rights to their natal homes and their rights to receive turmeric and vermillion on ritual occasions. Thus dispossessed many times over, Lakshmamma and her kinswomen struggled to account for the vanished and the appearance of a stillborn future into their everyday experience. The Jetprole Madanagopalaswamy Temple became both an emblem of ruination and a token of the capacity to constitute a meaningful understanding of this experience.

Encountering Srisailam: Modernist Ruins and Imperial Debris

To encounter Srisailam, the project, and to trace its location is to encounter this complex terrain of ruins and debris generated by the project of modernization. The resituation of these traces of the vanished—like the moral geographies of entitlements that are passed along generations—into the order of lived time required the sustained work of confronting the material remains of this event, of resignifying their status as emblems of progress or as the wasted matter left over by the project of development or as the ma-
terials with which to rebuild their lives. The “verification” of these claims and entitlements is an extremely complicated process, as the legal cases make clear. I focus here on the claims that are made in the songs specifically because my informants and I were never able to discuss their land claims directly. The larger work of which this essay is a part looks into the ways in which postcolonial law deals with customary claims as well as into the broader problematic made visible by different narrative styles of introducing claims. Claims made in the everyday and poetic speech of ordinary villagers adversely affected by the dam project stand in sharp contrast to the rationalizing discourses of the law which were deployed both by the lawyers that I worked with and by literate, upper-caste villagers conversant with the legal framing of displacement and compensation issues. If the latter narratives foreground verification and verifiability, the former are more concerned with affective framing of the spaces and materials that remain and with the contextualization of claims over these spaces in relation to forms of authority that continue to operate without being visible to the law.

In this ethnographic exploration, I have marked the ways in which the language and practice of contemporary political activism has been critical in making visible the connection between public works and evasive histories of imperial formations in the contexts of large-scale development projects. In mapping the effects of development on formerly colonized societies, scholars have offered us a rich array of accounts situated in multiple localities. As many of the accounts make clear, modernization projected above all a biopolitics directed toward remaking the normative conditions of subjected societies. Development constituted an ideology of hope, deeply linked to the aspiration for modernity itself. At the same time, such projects also embedded the experience of violence and catastrophe within the life-worlds of people and fostered a politics of protest and identity formation. Several accounts have paid close attention to the question of scale, spatiality, and sovereignty in the formation of such politics of protest and identity. Yet other accounts look at the effects of the violence of development on the constitution of memory and subjectivity and the recovery of everyday life from such catastrophic experiences that are visited by purely exogenous factors.

Most accounts, however, do not focus on the relations between subjects and the material ecologies of remains, leftovers, and the debris among which those subjects must lead their daily lives. To encounter Srisailam — the project — and to trace its location is to encounter a complex terrain of ruins, as traces of the vanished as well as the specter of the future in the form of the phantom debris of the project of modernization. Paradoxically, the archae-
ology temples serve as the only concrete signs of a modernization project and its promised future, which has come and gone. The temples stand as the relics and ruins of progress, and they act as “fossils of the future,” to use the English writer J. G. Ballard’s evocative expression. In so doing, they offer a rearview-mirror look at the future in the absence of any hopeful, redemptive visions of progress in this space of disappearance, dereliction, and vanishing. Yet, viewed alongside the recurrently reappearing village, these relics of destruction and construction together open a space in which it is possible to witness the intertwining of different senses of temporality and historical consciousness and, in general, different levels of saturation and investment in debris.

Within a logic of modernization, the memorialization of fragments of the past as heritage by the archaeological salvage operation takes place by denying the contemporaneity of these fragments. A utopian notion of the future is connected to understanding these fragments of the past as a form of waste, inevitably produced by modernization, permanently withdrawn from time. In this understanding, waste is material that has no duration, only durability, for which the passage of time is irrelevant. From this perspective of waste as durable substance without temporality, the utopian products of modernization and modernism—whether cities like Brasilia and Chandigarh or the temples rescued by the salvage archaeology project—are thus waste from the outset, but as examples of perfection. Such a notion of waste reconfigures the utopian futures of modernization as a future already in ruins, albeit permanent and aesthetically perfect or correct ruins.

By contrast, an exploration focusing on the material remains that people are left with in the wake of development projects adds to the literature on development in one significant way. It brings to the fore some of the historical vectors through which postcolonial regimes of national development achieve their goals. In the Jetprole case, I have explored in depth the positioning and repositioning of the different categories of monuments manufactured by the salvage archaeology project and placed them in relation to the remains of the submerged village that are invisible yet viscerally connected to the everyday life of the villagers. This intersection between a still-colonial practice of archaeology, saturated with an imperialist nostalgia for resurrecting a glorious past, and the biopolitics of the development and modernization process that actively disregards and neglects the economic and social welfare of the villagers suggests the persistent relevance of colonial effects. Yet it also scrambles any sense of analytic neatness in finding temporal convergences between colonialism and imperial forms of the mod-
ern, on the one hand, and postcolonialism and utopian forms of modernism on the other—or, in other words, between political technologies and forms of power, on the one hand, and aesthetic and subjective experiences on the other. It is urgent to recognize the persistent relevance of colonial effects not in order to absolve postcolonial regimes, but in order to recognize the histories through which they work and that are at work through them. At the same time, it is necessary to recognize the disjunctive and persistent relations between colonial practices and effects and the modern practices that Ann Stoler provocatively captures through the term “imperial formations.”

Certainly, life in Jetprole does go on and new forces are at work within the village. A more meaningful monument appearing openly in this landscape these days is the memorial marker topped off by the sickle and hammer erected in memory of comrades slain in the extrajudicial “encounters” between the police and the Maoist revolutionary guerrillas who constitute the most active political force in this region today. Yet the scars and wounds of Srisailam, the “ecologies of remains,” are precisely the signs whose presence concretely ties this geography of despair to a larger canvas of colonial privilege and its distribution of the vulnerabilities that continue to play an active role in the politics of the present.

In Jetprole these material remains are hardly forms of waste in the modernist sense. Rather, they are actively morphing, changing, and being recycled in local imaginaries around displacement, suffering, and life-making. The active and ironic disregard that the people of Jetprole and other villages show, in everyday conversation, to the archaeology temples and their museological settings and the deployment of all forms of remains in their poetic narratives about displacement are both significant ways in which villagers grapple with the ongoing effects of Srisailam. These veiled and oblique attempts to grasp at the event and to situate its effects point not to a passive acceptance of their fates, but rather to an active and ongoing engagement with ruins, not as remains to be feared for what they predict about their future or as intimations of loss, but as sites from which to direct and sharpen “political and affective states of sustained resentment that redirect what will be in ruins and who will be living in them.”34 An exploration of those active forms of political resentment being played out today through sustained everyday insurrections and insurgencies across India today is beyond the scope of this essay. However, to understand the specificity of new forms of action, visibly symbolized by new memorial markers such as those of slain Maoist cadres, it is necessary to follow the traces of histories embedded in these scarred landscapes.
Appendix. Sayalu’s Song

“Where is this Srisailam? Who built these projects?”

“Land, like the mother who bore me,
vanished from the sight of my eye.
Fields, full of standing crops,
drowned in the water.”

“Where is this Srisailam? Who built these projects?”

“For destroying cultivated land,
they gave us money.
For destroying cultivation,
the government gave us money.
One part for the loser’s soil,
another for the lawyer’s bribe.
Six thousand apiece,
six thousand a head,
six thousand a portion of land.
Six thousand they promised,
but not even three can be accounted for.”

“Where is this Srisailam? Who built these projects?”

“Land, like the mother who bore me, vanished from the sight of my eye.”

(Lament on names of disappeared villages)
: Kurramu, Bollaram, O Brother, Amaragiri, Marugocche . . .
Drowned, mingled in the waters . . .

“Where is this Srisailam? Who built these projects?”

(Lament on names of disappeared villages)
: Kurramu, Bollaram, O Brother, Amaragiri, Marugocche . . .
: Siddheswaram, Malleswaram
Mingled in the waters . . .
: Malleswaram, Sangameswaram
Drowned . . .
But Koppunuru and Jetprole, they sank without a trace . . .

“Where is this Srisailam? Who built these projects?”

(Lament of names)
: Peddamarur, Chinnamarur, Kanuru, Erupalle
Disappeared . . .

: Sangameswaram, Kudavelli [important pilgrimage centers, at the confluence of several rivers, that were submerged by the reservoir]
Sealed up and drowned . . .

“Where is this Srisailam? Who built these projects?”
“Land, like the mother who bore me, vanished from the sight of my eye . . .”

“Fields in which young peanuts ripened,
fields in which young millet ripened,
lie engulfed in the middle of waters . . .”

“Our lives drained,
we've taken refuge on these rocky shores,
we pulled ourselves to the edge of disappearing,
we reached the edge of another land . . .”

Notes

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1. The location of these reconstructed monuments mattered greatly to their influence on local imaginaries and on accounts of the development project.

2. The term “little kingdom” is used by Nicholas Dirks in his book, The Hollow Crown, a historical ethnography of a minor political entity in Southern India. Dirks argues that the concept of the “little kingdom” — which symbolically perpetuated the sumptuary practices central to precolonial tactics of power, while itself being eviscerated of “real” power — is crucial to understanding the British colonial rule of South Asia. Such vassal states worked by maintaining their rulers’ symbolic power while real political authority was ceded to the British.

3. See Coronil, “Editor’s Column.”

4. See Stoler’s essay in this volume.

5. See Bruno Dagens’s Entre Alampur et Srisailam, an archaeological survey of his-
historical artifacts and monuments in the presubmergence villages. Dagens, a French indologist, suggests, from his survey of inscriptions and types of monuments that his team found and classified in each village, that the submersible zone appeared to have an identity, not so much through any recognizable essence like language or religion, but in fact as the place that many successive Southern Indian empires sought to control in order to secure their access to these two major pilgrimage towns. While this might be a highly simplified characterization of the social history of these villages, it can nevertheless be used as a shorthand for understanding the wealth of monumental remains—both sacred and secular—in these villages. As I showed in my unpublished master’s thesis, “Itinerant Temples and Monumental Ruins,” the construction and endowment of temples, mosques, monasteries, and other similar institutions was essential to the consolidation of imperial powers, especially in frontier zones, for these institutions performed vital economic functions by redistributing agricultural surplus and by providing local employment on the lands endowed to these religious institutions. See also Appadurai, Worship and Conflict under Colonial Rule; and Talbot, Pre-colonial India in Practice.

6. The following account of Jetprole’s history is compiled from various sources, including interviews with the Surabhi family head, S. V. K. V. Aditya Lakshma Rao; Bhattara Srinivasacharya’s “Jetprole Samsthnam Parishelana,” an M.Phil. thesis in history submitted to the Telugu University, Srisailam; interviews with M. R. Sarma of Osmania University; and local accounts. There is little written material apart from Srinivasacharya’s thesis and a few manuscripts relating to royal history.

7. See Appadurai, Worship and Conflict under Colonial Rule, for a detailed history and sociology of the SriVaishnava sect and their religious institutions. Here it is sufficient to note that the SriVaishnavas exclusively worshipped different physical forms and manifestations of the deity Lord Vishnu.

8. For a detailed analysis of the system of inams and the roles that such arrangements played both in direct rule and indirect rule in the colonial period, see Dirks, The Hollow Crown; and Frykenberg, “The Silent Settlement in South India.”

9. Numerous local accounts make reference to these relations as if they were social facts, well understood even though they are not officially recorded in revenue documents and other official forms of post-independence record keeping.

10. I thank Ann Stoler for referring me to the work of Carol McGranahan on “arrested histories,” on which I build this notion of an arrested future.


12. “The evacuation of the villages was carried out with brutal insensitivity towards the feelings of the villagers who, not unnaturally, were bewildered and distressed at being forced out of their homes. The villagers were not properly informed about the details of the evacuation: some did not even know where to go once they had been
ordered to move. Many villagers did not take government announcements about the evacuation seriously. 'The government is always announcing things which it never carries out,' they told us. Some refused to believe that their villages would be submerged—or thought that, at worst, their lands would only be flooded when the Tungabhadra and Krishna rivers were in spate. Still others delayed moving either because they had no money to do so or because they had failed to find alternative housing and employment. The evacuation programme was so rushed that few villagers had enough time to move all their belongings to the resettlement sites. Worse still, when the villagers reached the new sites, they found them lacking in basic amenities—including proper housing.

“During the last week of March 1981, the government announced—for the first time—that all villagers had to leave their homes. Two months later, convinced that the villagers would not move whilst their houses and huts were still standing, the authorities launched ‘Operation Demolition.’ Under heavy police guard, officers and staff from the Departments of Revenue and Irrigation and Power, accompanied by hired labourers from the towns, set about demolishing those villages which were to be flooded. Some twenty thousand houses and huts were destroyed—leaving a hundred thousand people (twenty-one thousand families) homeless. The houses were either knocked down or dismantled by removing doorframes, window frames and roofs. Demolition work on the huts was carried out with much vigour and zeal. Utensils and other belongings were thrown out on to the streets, cattle were let loose and entire families were unceremoniously driven out of their homes. The operation was carried out without any regard for the villagers, who were already in a state of shock. An old woman in Rolampad village reported that her ankle and the bone of her right hand were broken when she was dragged by the police from her hut. Not surprisingly, the villagers are still bitterly resentful of the behaviour of the authorities” (Fact-Finding Committee on the Srisailam Project, “Srisailam Resettlement Experience,” 258, 259).

13. D. Venkat Rao, writing about a similar tradition of rural and revolutionary song-making, notes that “the tune or the refrain . . . works as a trace, as an already glimmering grapheme. The source of the trace is in other people’s voices” (“Writing Orally,” 256).

14. Dalit which literally means “oppressed” is the political term used by the formerly untouchable communities to identify themselves. It emerged as a term of contrast and confrontation with the term harijan (“children of god”), which was coined by Gandhi. Arguing that harijan glossed over a highly oppressive history, the former untouchables preferred dalit as a label for self-identification. Many of my older informants, however, preferred to refer to themselves as harijan. I worked with both the main dalit communities in the village—Malas and Madigas—who had little contact with each other and largely behaved like autonomous caste groups.

15. The project came close on the heels of a similar initiative, on a much smaller scale, to rescue and museumize Buddhist relics that were discovered in Andhra during the construction of the Nagarjuna Sagar dam.

16. The Madanagopalaswamy Temple was likely constructed during the period of
the Vijayanagara empire (circa sixteenth century CE) and was dedicated to an unusual form of Vishnu known as Madanagopala Swamy, affectionately called Gopala Swamy by the villagers. This iconographic form is extremely rare, making the temple an exceptional monument.

17. The Muslims of the village also had an interesting relationship to the Jetprole temple. According to local legends, the deity Madanagopala Swamy regularly played chess with the Muslim pir Darvesh Khadri, and during the annual urs of the saint, the temple sent sandalwood to the dargah as a birthday gift from the deity. The sandalwood gift was reciprocated during the annual temple festival in the summer season.


20. See especially Chakrabarti, A History of Indian Archaeology.

21. As Jacques Rancière puts it in his recent book, Aesthetics and Its Discontents, “Aesthetics . . . is a form for identifying the specificity of art and a redistribution of the relations between the forms of sensory experience. . . . [A] regime for identifying art [that] is linked to the promise of an art that would be no more than an art or would no longer be art. . . . The stake here does not only concern those objects that fall within the sphere of art, but also the ways in which, today, our world is given to perceiving itself and in which the powers that be assert their legitimacy” (14–15).

22. See S. Stewart, On Longing.


24. See Stoler’s essay in this volume.


26. See Bauman, Wasted Lives, for a development of the relationship between modernity and waste. Bauman’s implicit understanding of waste as substance withdrawn from time is politically salient for his establishing a relationship between waste and modernity.

27. These services were also encoded into the names of the fields themselves, which in turn were important mnemonic devices within local narratives about the submerged village.

28. The Madigas, as explained above, are a subgroup of the larger dalit community.

29. In this understanding, the future has none of the positive instability attributed to it by various theorists of modernity, including Marx and Reinhardt Koselleck, among others, who write of this instability as central to modern historicity.

30. See Sivaramakrishnan and Agrawal, Regional Modernities; Ferguson, Expectations of Modernity.


33. Das, Remaking a World; Ferguson, Expectations of Modernity.

34. See Stoler’s essay in this volume.