Two Stories about the Transmission of Knowledge

The most general term for “knowledge” in the Jain tradition, in the sense of something that can be taught and learned, is suyān, literally “what has been heard.” It refers implicitly to an act of hearing, a moment of presence before one of the “bearers of knowledge” (suyahāra), those members of the community who retain in their minds, and thus in their bodies as well, what they themselves have heard. The very idea of knowledge therefore implies its transmission within a community. What follows are two stories, from the Śvētāmbara and Digambara Jain literary traditions, about that transmission.

I.

The first comes from a work of about the fifth century CE, called Tīthāgāli (The Dissolution of the Teaching). Śvētāmbara Jains include it among their “canonical” texts, that is, those said to have been collected and redacted in the sixth century CE under the leadership of the monk Dēvārdhī. In the guise of a prophecy, it tells the story of how the Jain teachings were gradually lost—not only the texts disappearing from cultural memory, but what they taught, including the practices constitutive of the path to liberation, inevitably disappearing as well.

There was a famine in North India. At the time, the Jain teachings were transmitted orally. Many of the senior monks who remembered

I felt that, to make the film work as a whole, it needed to be very strongly rooted in somewhere familiar—if not in sound, in an image, in some sort of form and structure.

I always start with wanting the sound to say something about image that’s not already there, and vice versa. Either the sound has to go against the image or with it, or it has to do something completely different, but it can always stand on its own. It says something about or against the visual.

For this film, I used three sonically strong ideas: the first is a double bass rumbling, recorded on two different tracks that I could split; the third consists of three sustained electric guitar tracks; and the second is a long transition from first into third. The second idea is very simple material in terms of tonality—baby xylophone played with a drill. These three things hold the structure together, joining up in the end with the other sounds, which sometimes very literally explore the movement or materiality of the place—you see stone or sand somewhere and also have that association, in the sound, of stone and sand on your fingers.

As it’s a two-screen film, I figured out that I needed to also make two soundtracks—one for the left and one for the right screen. There’s all kinds of panning and splitting of tracks. In principle, you should be able to watch the left screen and only play the sound in your left ear and have a complete experience. You would also have a complete experience for the right, but different—image and sound are unique for both sides.
the teachings did not survive. Those who did got together after the famine
and tried to reconstitute the teachings. Nobody, however, could remember
the last of its twelve āṅgas or “limbs.” The only person who remembered
them was the monk Bhadrabāhu, who was practicing silent meditation
in an isolated place. The community asked him to “give a recitation” of
the twelfth āṅga. At first he refused, but the community threatened to
impose sanctions on him, and he grudgingly agreed to recite a few words
here and there in between practicing his silent meditation. The students,
by and large, failed to retain anything. Only one student, Sthūlabhadra,
managed to learn the text this way. He patiently learned word after word
for eight years, at which point Bhadrabāhu finished his meditation and
spoke to him for the first time:

“I hope you are not exhausted by this way of studying.”
“Not at all,” he said. “But how long will it take me to finish?”
“A man drops a mustard seed near Mount Mandara. The amount
you’ve finished is the mustard seed, and Mount Mandara is how
much there is left.”

Sthūlabhadra was discouraged by this, but Bhadrabāhu assured him that
it would go quickly, now that he was available for questioning. And in this
way Sthūlabhadra mastered ten of the fourteen parts of the twelfth āṅga.

One day Sthūlabhadra’s family visited him. Wanting to impress them with
his learning, he turned himself into a lion. His teacher was displeased
with this trick, and stopped teaching him the texts. Sthūlabhadra said:

“I am not so upset that I have not learned these texts, since after
all I have only myself to blame for that. And as it says in the teach-
ings, these texts were bound to disappear, even were it not for me.
No, what tortures me, in every part of my body, is that it is my
fault. The teachers in the future, and indeed today, will say that
it was in the arrogant Sthūlabhadra that these texts were lost.”

The community begged Bhadrabāhu to forgive Sthūlabhadra and teach
him the rest of the texts. He agreed to teach Sthūlabhadra the reami-
ing texts, but he refused on principle to give him permission to teach the
texts to subsequent students: if even so devoted a monk as Sthūlabhadra
was subject to ethical lapses, minor as they were, then it was inevita-
ble that those lapses would accumulate over time, and inevitably the
knowledge contained in the texts would be used for malign purposes.
Sthūlabhadra thus received the textual tradition without being permitted
to transmit it further. And it feels strange to apply the term “tradition”
to a text that cannot be shared. In the end the twelfth āṅga really was
lost in Sthūlabhadra, the last person to learn them. R6

I don’t know if it actually works; I never tried it. I did a lot of
very, very close miking and, especially if you’re using head-
phones, you hear sounds as close by, which produces a sense
of anxiety. I used drills on a brick—a crunching that’s uncom-
fortable. I also hear the motor of that drill as one huge beep
with different frequencies. I put those together, and it’s too
close for comfort. S8

AB: How did engaging with Anupu influence the sound
composition?

MV: It’s a site that wasn’t there—it had been put there because
there needed to be an artificial lake. That’s a very contemporary

issue, and so needed a contemporary sound. In addition to
that, it’s sort of a place of entertainment, a wrestling pit. I felt
the need to reflect that idea of a wrestling pit in the sound
somewhere, the whole politics of repositioning this amphithe-
atre from somewhere else, which I hope was done carefully
so that the acoustics are not completely gone. That’s where
you get all the sand and bricks, as ultimately you just have a
bunch of old bricks in a very new situation. These are the two
ideas: one that is the low—the sand, brick, sweat, heat, intense
physical activity—and the other is the opposing sound: the sky,
the lake, these sounds with some sense of purity. And then the
baby xylophone in the middle, which I then played with a drill
to make it a bit of both. It becomes very banal when I say it
The second story comes from the Dhavalā (White Commentary) by the Jain monk Virasēna. Virasēna belonged to the Digambara Jain community, which was distinct, in terms of key beliefs and practices, from the Śvetāmbara community that produced and transmitted the Titthōgālī discussed above. In fact the two communities hold very few authoritative texts in common. Virasēna’s Dhavalā, completed in 816 CE, comments on an earlier work, the Satkhhandagamah (Teaching in Six Parts), which is unknown to the Śvetāmbara tradition. In his introduction, Virasēna explains how that earlier work came to be. Thus while the Titthōgālī thematizes the disappearance of a textual tradition, the Dhavalā reflects on the continuous existence in the past—although with several major shifts in its mode of existence—of the tradition that readers of the text find before them.

The last person to retain some part of the Jain teachings was Dharasēna. Aware of his impending death, and worried that it would mean the death of the tradition, he sent a letter to the Jain community from his solitary cave in northwest India asking for two students. Two students arrived, and once Dharasēna confirmed their suitability he composed a text specifically for them. The students, named Puṣpadanta and Bhūtabali, were then dismissed, and Dharasēna ended his life.

Some time afterwards, when Bhūtabali was in South India, he received a visitor: Jinaṅgala, the nephew and student of his colleague Puṣpadanta. From the manuscript Jinaṅgala brought, which represented the first part of the teaching they had received from Dharasēna, Bhūtabali inferred that Puṣpadanta was not long for the world. He therefore finished writing the text that Puṣpadanta had started and that Jinaṅgala had brought to him, which would become known as the Satkhhandagamah.

Several different timescales are overlaid in these stories. First of all, there is the span of a human life. We have but a few dozen years to both learn everything we will ever learn and pass it down to future generations: “Aber was sind auch siebenzig Jahre!” (But what is even seventy years?). In the case of Jain teachings, there is even less time. Shūlabhadra only became a Jain monk well into adulthood. This is one point of contrast with the transmission of the Vedas, which are taught to Brahmin boys when they are very young and their brains are most plastic. The Vedas exist, in a certain sense, within the temporality of the family. The claim that the Vedas are eternal, which is met with in Brahmanical schools of thought, depends on the ability to imagine families extending infinitely into the

like this—that happens when you talk about it too much—but I didn’t find it banal when I was hearing it.

AB: As contemporary artists, you’re engaging with this ancient site—and this contrast is really striking because a contemporary dancer who doesn’t fit into the existing idea of heritage dance categories is encountering a space that is symbolic of antique culture. Could you talk a bit about how you’re creating a relationship with the space through your movement, or drawing attention to an alienation from it? Or are you interrogating it—the temporality and history it represents? What is your relationship as contemporary artists to the history that this site summons?

PC: You’ve mentioned the disconnect between the “contemporary” and national heritage. There’s a sense of that, of being outside the discourse of what is in India itself. But the contemporary is very complex, especially in a country so vast and complex, as are discussions around different modernities. There’s no one idea of the contemporary within India, and contemporary practice is completely derived from Western contemporary dance idioms. Where I come from, the work is always in conversation with the past. We’ve never really seen ourselves as just sort of dropping down from the sky into an amphitheatre and being contemporary artists—we have always existed within this tension and interrogation between the past and the present. The advantage is that
past and the future. But the biological family is not the only way to stitch human generations together. These stories are about succession within a line of teachers: Bhadrabāhu was the seventh in line from Mahāvīra, the final tīrtha-kāra or "ford-maker" of Jainism, essentially the founder of the religion in its current historical dispensation. Dharasēna was twenty-sixth.

The transmission of texts within this line of succession is lossy. T2 The loss is represented most obviously in numerical terms: Mahāvīra's teaching was represented by twelve āngas, the twelfth of which was represented, in turn, by fourteen immense collections of technical teachings called the pūrvas. These texts, starting with the pūrvas, were gradually lost. In the Tīthogālī, we are told that four entire texts simply winked out of existence with the death of one person, Śhūlābhadra. But this is not the only kind of loss to which that story alludes. Śhūlābhadra becomes Bhadrabāhu's disciple in the first place because of a crisis of memory within the community: natural disaster had decimated the ranks of senior monks, and those who survived struggled to remember what they had been taught. The bitter irony of the Tīthogālī is that the texts that survive are in fact those that had been half-remembered and stitched together in a time of crisis, while the texts that the most gifted student patiently learned over many years were lost immediately and forever.

The eruption of natural disasters onto the relatively predictable temporality of human generations is an important motif in the Tīthogālī and in the Jain tradition more broadly. Disasters challenge the assumption of a uniformity reaching into the distant past and future, and articulate the tradition into stages. A different famine than that described in the Tīthogālī is held to have occasioned the redaction of the Jain teachings under the leadership of Skandila and Nāgārjuna, and, later, yet another famine led to their being put into written form under Devarddhī. These articulations resemble, in their outer form if not in how they are experienced, the way in which political formations structure historical time. The Tīthogālī makes this comparison explicit: "the lineage (vānī-sa-) of the Aṅgas, the Nandas, and the Mauryas came to a sudden end, alongside the lineage (vānī-sa-) of the textual tradition."

As the very title of the Tīthogālī makes clear, the history to which these developments ultimately belong is that of the tīrtha, the salvific path taught by Mahāvīra—in a word, Jainism. The Tīthogālī reckons time in years that have passed since Mahāvīra's death, which is traditionally dated to 537 BCE.

In both stories, the oral transmission of a text comes to an end. Only in the Tīthogālī, however, does this imply the text's total disappearance. In the Dhavaḷa, Puspadanta and Bhūtabali avail themselves of writing,

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I can come without baggage and say, "I'm an Odissi dancer, a Kathak dancer," in South India and perform a form that geographically belongs to another space. My aesthetic can be anything; it is not bound.

This is how I propose that my aesthetic connects somewhere to the aesthetic of the space, not in a kind of a superficial "Oh, now I'm going to do something that looks ritualistic, etc." sense, but as something essential. Ironically, the theatre that Chandralekha built when she started to develop her work is called Mandala. I spent ten years working a lot on the geometric systems with which she created work and how conversations around the body were held, understanding these notions of the circle within the square. The minute I sent those photographs of Anupu to friends who shared that history with me, they said, "This is a mandala." Even if I wasn't going to overtly reference it, having been a classical dancer and acknowledging this within the Indian historical context, reconstructing the past or literal conversing with it, there was a great familiarity with the proportions of the space. It is built to contain many, but the single human body seems to fill it with an incredible ease. After watching the early footage we made, I said to Nida, "I should have planned the whole film with just two people—it feels like more would be too much."

I'm in relation to the space more than making a relationship with the space. As a performer, I bring acute
which allows some version of the text, at least, to reach the commentator Viśāsena, and ultimately readers like us.

The Tithṭhūgāli makes no mention of writing at all, and represents the normative conditions of transmission: the student learns the text and its meaning from his teacher over a period of many years, until he is finally given permission to teach it to others in the same way. The oldest Jain texts make no clear mention of writing, and the earliest texts to do so—the Niyuktiś, a set of commentaries composed in verse around the beginning of the common era—clearly state that monks really ought to have nothing to do with it: they were prohibited from possessing manuscripts, and penalized for every letter they wrote.7

Dharasena and his students, by contrast, live in a world where literacy is presupposed. Dharasena himself resorts to writing, but only as a technology of communication, when he sends a letter to the Jain community. He does not write down what he has learned, even as his death approaches. His student Puspadanta, when he finds himself in the same situation, resorts to writing as a technology of storage.8 I am tempted to read this story as an allegory of the gradual acceptance of writing as a means of storing the Jain teachings. By Viśāsena’s time, there is no longer any trace of opprobrium attached to writing.

The Dḥavala, like the Tithṭhūgāli, shows us a moment of crisis, a point of articulation in the tradition. The articulation here is writing. Once scorned as a support for unserious monks, or associated with love letters and other cultural phenomena monks ought to avoid, writing emerges as the only conceivable way of forestalling the disappearance of the Jain teachings. It was a compromise that would shape the tradition ever after. The story of Bhadrabāhu raises the possibility of a different compromise, only to reject it. If the survival of the Jain teachings is at stake, couldn’t he have simply overlooked his student’s momentary arrogance, which was after all harmless? His rationale for withholding the teachings from Śhūlabhadra seems to have been the following: such moments might not seem very serious in themselves, but they contribute to the normalization of a situation in which learning is not used for its intended purpose of liberation, but instead for shallow displays of erudition, or worse, for more cynical and destructive purposes. In relation to this outcome, the need to preserve the teachings is not absolute. Teachers such as Bhadrabāhu are not obligated to ensure their continued transmission at all costs. They can, and often do, intervene in their transmission: “the law is not in heaven.”

5.

We have been talking about the “teachings” of Jainism, and only now has the identity of those teachings been called into question. On the

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awareness—a lot of my work is about concentration, not just on what’s happening within the body, but a concentration which brings the viewer to see what’s around the body. These were some of the strategies with which I tried to make friends with the space and not disrespect it. I’ve seen choreographers from Europe come to produce works at historical sites in India and end up with such a clash of aesthetics. I was cautious to the extent that I thought it was just not possible to dance here. But if dance is not possible, other kinds of movement are.

AB: It’s really interesting that at a certain stage you wanted to work with stillness because the possibilities of movement had already been mined in your previous explorations. This site seems to be in a very good location to explore that idea of stillness in the choreographic decisions you make around the tempo of the piece. The film’s opening image begins already as part of the site. We see this still body on one side, on one screen, and then, on the other, a torso with the face turned away from us, and the gesture of your palm dragging across the stone surface. It produces this fiery, crackling sonic texture. You begin with a mode of refusal, refusing a conventional approach to subjectivity and its representation, refusing the gaze of the spectator. Then we see the body begin to move in a medium shot and a long shot of a stilled posture. There’s a dialectic between your status as subject
one hand, they were passed down with great care over the genera-
tions; on the other, what is passed down inevitably changes, whether
due to unforeseen disasters, deliberate interventions, or simply the
limitations of human memory. Clearly the dichotomy of preservation
or loss is inadequate to this situation. Nevertheless, it has become a
cliché that the Śvetāmbaras believe the teachings are “preserved” while
the Digambaras believe they are “lost”—even though the Śvetāmbara
Titthāgālī narrates the total loss of the twelfth āṅga, whereas the
Digambara Dhavalā narrates its partial preservation in the form of the
Śākhāṅḍāgamah.

There is firstly a question of what should count as preserving a text.
The transmission of the Vedas represents one model, where no linguisti-
cally relevant detail is omitted: the text has to be memorized by the student
in exactly the form in which the teacher recites it, down to the length
and pitch of its vowels. But the transmission of Jain texts, like Buddhist
texts, was influenced to a much greater degree by the linguistic context
of its transmitters, leading to a profusion of forms for what is ostensibly
the same word (for example, kappa, kappati, and kappadi for “is permit-
ted”), and leading scholars to attempt to determine the “original” form.¹⁰
Moreover, what degree of accuracy is sufficient for us to consider a text
“preserved”? If one word out of every thousand were misremembered,
would it still count? What about one out of every hundred?

There is, secondly, the question of what the “original” form of a
text represents. In Brahmanism, the Veda is considered eternal, and re-
vealed to men by seers in every cosmic cycle. In Buddhism, the teachings
are considered to be “the words of the Buddha.” This is sometimes taken
in an expanded sense, to mean things that the Buddha might have said
or should have said. But all the same, the privileged textual form in this
tradition is the discourse given by the Buddha to his disciples. In Jainism
almost every teaching is framed as a restatement of an earlier teaching,
and almost every text is framed as a textualization of a preexisting
discourse. This is true even for Mahāvīra, who is considered to be the
twenty-fourth in a line of teachers stretching back billions and billions of
years. Discourses of Mahāvīra are in fact uncommon in the Jain “canon,”
and when Mahāvīra’s words are presented, they are recalled by his disciple,
Sudharman, to the latter’s disciple, Jambūsvāmin. The “canon” includes
many texts that are clearly reorderings, restatements, and analyses of
traditional teachings, and are attributed to monks who lived centuries
after Mahāvīra. From this perspective, the textual tradition should not be
imagined exclusively as the passing down of a pristine set of teachings in
their original linguistic form—although this kind of transmission did take
place to some degree—but as a process whereby ideas, stories, practices,
and rules were periodically given textual form.¹¹ While knowledge
of the texts per se (suttāṁ) is a privileged domain of knowledge about

and object, almost like you want to engage as an object among
the rest of the vibrant matter at Anupri? I couldn’t help but
think of how, in film, a dancing body marked as female is
constantly subject to the male gaze and configured within a
patriarchal economy of representation.⁴

How do you navigate this challenge of becoming an
object in terms of the aesthetic, or something approximating
an object with respect to your own relationship to the site,
while also being aware of that tension around the imposition
of the male gaze on the dancing body?

PC: I’m not a filmmaker; I’m a performer-maker. This is my
second film, and as before I chose to work with a director

who is normally a wildlife filmmaker. He’s used to lying patiently
in wait for an elephant for a whole day. He watches more than
intervenes in the frame, which gives me a free hand.

Nevertheless, my approach and my thinking, the poli-
tics, the sensibility, all of these questions around the gaze—the
male gaze in particular—these are questions that have already
existed within the context of making new performance in India.

Although this history is contested today, the popular
narrative is that in the 1930s and 1940s, with Rukmini Devi,
dance was taken from the temples and the courts and thrust
onto the proscenium stage.⁴ All the dancers could do was
to suddenly deal with the front—the need to be frontal,
the need to smile, to be seductive. That’s where all of this
the tradition, it is not the only one. We have seen that the community periodically intervenes in the regular course of the transmission of knowledge in order to create opportunities for certain teachings to be disseminated more broadly, or indeed to guarantee their survival into the future. Thus traditional knowledge, which, once again, is literally “what has been heard” (suyaṁ), reflects the community’s judgments about what is worth learning. 

Recording Classical Dance at Ranigumpha: What Does It Mean to Listen to Odissi’s Past?

Anurima Banerji

conversation around the male objectification of the dancing body discourse comes from.

Chandra had already started to deal with the problem. Her instruction to the dancers was: “Don’t smile, don’t seduce. Let’s de-objectify and see what else the body can propose. Can it propose itself as that which holds power and strength, to reclaim the spine and not to have to somehow fulfill?” This is a long trajectory that I have been a part of. In my own work, I still struggled with the whole question—even if the work is rid of narratives, the minute there’s a body on the stage, trying to give reason or meaning to movement, as a way for moving itself to happen, we always fall back into this idea of subjective expressivity. Then I made Beautiful

Thing 2, one of my few solos. I always struggle with the solos because, at least with a group work, you have multiple bodies and attention can be on the space between them, to distract from their presence. With a solo it’s difficult; solo activity feels enhanced. I thought to myself, “Well, I am going to take this body back, I’m going to turn it back into an object,” an object that is only concerned with its form, the lines that it holds, the space that it holds. It became a good strategy, because the mind could become preoccupied with something other than its own subjectivity. All of a sudden, a lot of these problems, including the gaze, went away.

I love working with this idea of the body’s back surface, an important element, and giving equal importance to
CONVERSATION WITH
PADMINI CHETTUR AND MAARTEN VISSER
Anurima Banerji, Nida Ghouse

1 Alexander Keefe in A Slightly Curving Place digital discourse program, Coming to Know panel, September 5, 2020.
5 Rukmini Devi Arundale (1904-1986) was an Indian classical dancer who was instrumental in reviving the Bharatanatyam dance form and who founded the Kalaschandra Foundation in Madras.

Voice, Listening, and Sonic Memory as Primary Recorders
Annette Wilke

5 See Wilke and Moebus, Sound and Communication, 492–503 for many examples.
6 Finnian Gerety, This Whole World is OM: Song, Soteriology, and the Emergence of the Sacred Syllable. PhD Dissertation, Harvard University, Department of South Asian Studies, 2015.

Nevertheless, similar to Porter, sensation and materiality are the major focus, although not relating to art, but to religion and the claim that religions essentially consist of “sensory practise” (Ibid. 3).
8 Grieser and Johnston, “What is an Aesthetics of Religion?”, 3.
11 For this and the following two paragraphs, see Wilke and Moebus, Sound and Communication, 288f., 292f., 361, 370-390, 405, 415f., wherein also the original quotes are found.

Two Stories about the Transmission of Knowledge
Andrew Ollett

5 Friedrich Nietzsche, Morgenteiße. Leipzig: Fritsch, 1887, 196.
Recording Classical Dance at Ranigumpha
Anurima Banerji


2 The other dances in the classical canon are Bharatanatyam, Kathak, Kathakali, Kuchipudi, Manipuri, Mohiniattam, and Sattriya. Classical dances are important symbols for the Indian state and central to endeavours of domestic and international cultural diplomacy. While such forms often claim a connection to antiquity, critical historians and dance scholars have argued they are essentially modern aesthetic constructions, invented in the mid-twentieth century as part of a postcolonial project of cultural recovery, in the wake of India’s political independence from imperialist rule in 1947. The Sangeet Natak Akademi, India’s national agency of performing arts, administers the cultural policies on dance, music, and theatre and has the power to designate a given form as "classical." However, the criteria and process for establishing a style as "classical" remains ambiguous. See Pallabi Chakravorty, “Hegeemony, Dance, and the Nation” in South Asia 21, 2 (December 1998), 107-20; "From Interculturalism to Historicism: Reflections on Classical Indian Dance” in Dance Research Journal 32, 2 (Winter 2000), 100–11; Ananya Chatterjee, “Contestations: Constructing a Historical Narrative for Odissi” in Alexandra Carter, ed., Rethinking Dance History. London: Routledge, 2004, 143–56; Purnima Shah, "Stereotyping in India: The Regional and the National" in Dance Chronicle 25, 1 (2002), 125–41; and Anita Cherian, "Institutional Maneuvers, Nationalizing Performance, Delineating Genre: Reading the Sangeet Natak Akademi Registries, 1974-84" in Dance, Performance, Culture, and Society 2, 3 (July-September 2009): 32–60.


4 The Natyasastra (c. 2nd century BCE-2nd century CE) is a wide-ranging manual on the performing arts that is also considered the source text for many Indian classical choreographies. It catalogues the styles, techniques, and aims of performance in the Indian subcontinent, and provides a detailed and comprehensive examination of dance knowledge from the ancient period. See Anupa Pande, The Natyasastra Tradition and Ancient Indian Society. Jodhpur: Kusumamati Prakashan, 1993; Kapila Vatsyayan, Bharata: The Natyasastra. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1996; and Bharatmuni, Natyasastra, vol. 1–4, trand, and ed. Manohomohan Ghosh. Varanasi: Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series Office, 2007. See Tina M. Campt, Listening to Images. Durham: Duke University Press, 2017. Campt reconfigures these photographs “as quiet, quotidian practices that give us access to the affective registers through which these images enunciate alternate accounts of their subjects”—“quiet” here not to be understood as silence, but “as a level of intensity that requires focused attention” (9–10). I am inspired by her approach to analyzing historical images, from which she harvests multiple hermeneutic possibilities by deploying the sonic metaphor.

6 I acknowledge that this move might necessarily sit in tension with the political need to identify, very definitively, the cultural content with a particular historical erasure. So let me clarify that I am speaking about an approach towards interpretation of established facts, rather than debating their actual existence.


8 Brooke Holmes notes that this is a problem also attached to the concept of “documentation,” a word that so frequently comes up around the making, cura- tion, and collection of live art, and bears the additional sense of getting the “right” papers so a subject or object can belong properly to history, to a nation, to some stable community, and also be authenticat- ed (personal conversation, 1 October 2021).

9 Many theorists have troubled the idea that dance should be framed as an event that is primarily seen. From the perspective of the dancer, dance creates bodily vibrations, sensations, and experiences that may not be discernible to a spectator. Further, modes of perception other than sight may organize the reception of dance in different settings. On this, see Marcia Siegel, At the Vanishing Point. New York: Saturday Review Press, 1973; Susan Foster, Choreographing Engagement. New York: Routledge, 2011; Sally Ann Hess, “The Inscription of Gesture” in Sally Ann Hess, Carrie Noland, eds., Migrations of Gesture. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008, 1-30; and Rebecca Schneider, Performing Remains. New York: Routledge, 2011.

10 Dominant historical narratives of Odissi, for instance, suggest that proof of the form’s past iterations can be found in the dance carvings at Ranigumpha; in references in the Natyasastra and related texts on aesthetic praxis, like the Abhinaya Darpanam and Abhinaya Chandrakas; in the sculptural and architectural traditions of Orissa; in the actual practices of the maharis, female ritual specialists who offered song and dance as worship in Hindu temples; and in the art of the gopin判决, a tradition of female impersonation in Odisha. Collectively, these sources span from the ancient to the early modern period. The architects of Odissi drew from this broad repository to invent the classical dance in 1950s. For more on Odissi’s history, see Kothari, Odissi: Indian Classical Dance Art and Patnaik, Odissi Dance. Michel Foucault, “On the Ways of Writing History,” in Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology trans. Robert Hurley. New York: New Press, 2019.

11 While Odra-Magadhi is an identifiable dance style from ancient Odisha (as described in the Natyasastra), there is little historically verifiable information about other dances that may have been prevalent in the region around the time when Ranigumpha was built. There are visual and literary mentions of dance forms prevalent in the same period, indicating its importance and presence in the cultural life of Odisha, but the particular names are unknown. For instance, a nearby inscription at Hathigumpha notes that the king Kharevala was an enthusiastic patron of dance, music, and acrobat- ics, but doesn’t mention the specific style(s) involved. The interpretation that Ranigumpha’s dance images might correspond to Odra-Magadhi is therefore completely conjectural, and I can only allude enigmatically to the kindred forms.

13 Hinduism is a modern political ideology invested in the project of claiming India as a nation fundamen- tally belonging to Hindus, to the exclusion or mar- ginalization of adherents of other faiths. The colour saffron, sacred in Hinduism, has been appropriated by proponents of Hinduism. See Jyotirnaya Sharma, Hinduism. Noida: Harper Collins, 2015.


15 There has also been a robust discussion in the dance world about which caste- and class-privileged bodies can appropriately signify classicalism, and which ones tend to be excluded from this function. See Bishnuprity Dutt and Urmimala Sarkar Muni, Engendering Performance: Indian Women Performers in Search of an Identity. New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2010; Bishnupriya Dutt, “The Artifice of Brahmin Masculinity in South Indian Dance.” Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019; Brahma Prakash, Cultural Labour: Conceptualizing the ‘Folk Performance’ in India. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2019; and Nithyaa Pillai, “The Politics of Naming the South Indian Dancers” in Conversations Across the Field of Dance Studies, Decolonizing Dance Discourses XL (2021), 13–15.