

HERITAGE MATTERS LOOT- PLUNDERING INDIA'S HERITAGE

India contributed the word LOOT to the English language. It is no longer invading armies or colonial powers that are looting India. The main agency now is the art and antiquities market. India is one of the richest treasure troves for international illicit traffic in cultural property for auction houses and antique dealers. Two key factors provide fertile ground. Poor documentation and infrastructure for safeguarding heritage assets. Secondly for every foreign receiving hand there is a collaborating Indian hand. However, India is a State Party to the 1970 UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property. It was adopted by the UNESCO General Conference at its 16th session, on November 14, 1970. As of March 2019, there are 139 States Parties. Yet during the meeting of the State Parties last month India was invisible.

Safeguarding heritage assets, including significant art works should be a priority for India. To leapfrog from the archaic systems of registers and lists to digital systems for access and use requires contemporary infrastructure with capacity building for personnel to international standards.

Ministry of Culture has made available significant resources to digitise collections. Several States and museums are taking advantage of this provision. But digitisation is only a means and not an end in itself. The questions of access and use afterwards as well as maintaining the systems require considerable expertise and sustained effort among the host institutions. The typology of collections and locations of art, culture and heritage that constitutes the nation's heritage is yet to be properly developed and understood. Most vulnerable are

places of workshop and archaeological sites.

Last Monday, the US returned over 200 cultural artefacts estimated over \$100 million to India at a ceremony in Washington. The Prime Minister of India himself received them. He underlined poignantly that the measure is more than monetary. Among the returned treasures is the statue of Saint Manikavachavakar, a Hindu mystic and poet from the Chola period (circa 850 AD to 1250 AD) stolen from the Sivan temple in Chennai. It was valued at \$1.5 million. I started the Heritage Matters Column focussing on questions of What Value Heritage and What Price Heritage on 10th February 2018. They continue to remain critical questions for discussion, debate and policy formulation.

Not all that long ago the then Australian Prime Minister on his visit to India in September 2014, returned sculpture of an invaluable bronze 'Dancing Shiva' valued at \$5 million. Since then, an exhibition at the National Museum of India profiled three stone sculptures (Seated Buddha; Worshippers of Buddha; and Goddess Pratyangira) returned from Australia to India. Worshippers of Buddha was purchased by National Gallery of Australia from Nancy Wiener, New York, in 2007. This was actually one of the nine objects stolen from Chandavaram, Prakasam District, Andhra Pradesh, on different occasions surprisingly in quick succession—on October 9 in 2000, February 2 in 2001 and March 23, also in 2001. Within seven years of disappearance, one of them was seen among exhibits in the National Gallery of Aus-

tralia. On the opening night of the exhibition I mentioned to the curator that the sculpture belongs to Andhra Pradesh and that it is a masterpiece of the Amaravathi School of Buddhist Art. Its return is mainly thanks to respect for due diligence, including rigorous research on the provenance by Australia and India, both State Parties to the 1970 UNESCO Convention. Nobody at that point knew that it was stolen property.

The Interpol in Paris, however, maintains a database of stolen objects and art works. Good documentation at the site and notification to Interpol could have helped recover the objects faster, including the five that are still missing.

There were no proper images or photographs of the stolen objects from Chandavaram and in the absence of awareness about prevention of illicit traffic, the stolen objects left the country. Andhra Pradesh, like the rest of the country, faces the scourge of lack of documentation and understanding the basic tenets of protecting heritage assets.

Looting indiscriminately is ongoing.

This double whammy of antiquated museum and heritage practices and gross neglect need to be addressed systematically. Awareness raising among journalists, local youth and officials is also much needed.

In the past I facilitated capacity-building workshops on preventing illicit traffic in cultural property for 49 countries in the Asia Pacific and adjacent regions. I always emphasise that unless there is some form of documentation using the international standard tool Object ID; and there is either a digital image or drawing or photograph that is accessible, it is very difficult to track stolen works. Your information must travel faster than the stolen object to intercept it with the help of Interpol and World Customs Organisation. ICOM and UNESCO provide a range of practical tools.

People that demand return of sculptures from Indian and overseas museums to Andhra Pradesh must spare a thought to the fact that most museums

in the State have inadequate security and lack basic conservation standards. Almost all the museums have valuable objects strewn around in the grounds outside in pathetic conditions. It is not surprising then that priceless collections from places like Chandavaram are stolen.

The rich heritage of Andhra must now be properly catalogued and digitised opening a range of possibilities for use, from education to evidence-based quality interpretation in tourism. If the Government is eager to make tourism one of the top GDP earners for the State, then the content and interpretation for experiences can be provided by the conserved and cared for collations and sites.

Resources are being poured into marketing and infrastructure development but international standards are a long shot. Most importantly, when visitors come to the State, they must learn about the heritage of the Andhra people which is the bedrock of providing experiences. Added to this we must enable the collection of information on new trends and developments in the fight against the illicit trafficking of cultural property and appropriately empower the staff across all portfolios from police to tourism.

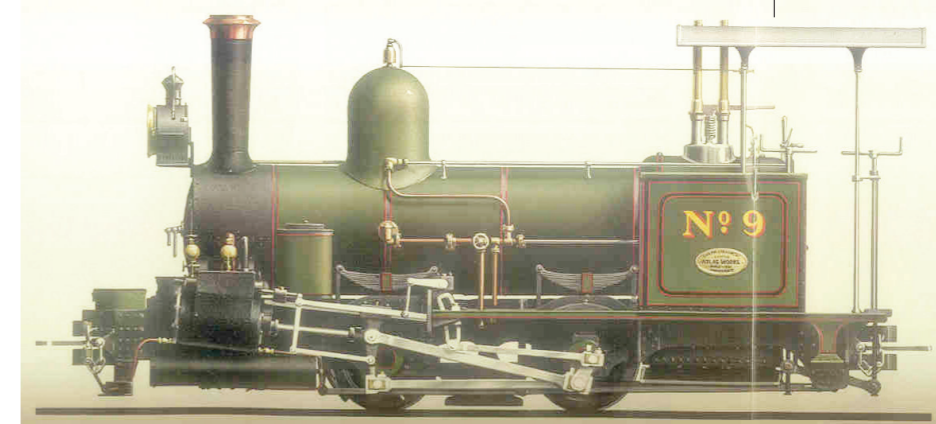


Exquisite Buddhist sculpture from Chandavaram, Prakasam District, Andhra Pradesh, returned from the National Gallery of Australia. Only four of the nine stolen sculptures are recovered so far



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Industrial and craft heritage is often looted in India for export - vintage cars to parts of locomotives and even significant parts of ginning mills and weaving looms



Sacred objects stolen from tribal communities are recognised as being significant for rituals, initiation ceremonies and spiritual well-being among indigenous communities, especially for intergenerational education and immersion of children and youth



Images such as this Gandhara Buddha from the Pakistan and Afghanistan region is one of the most sought-after sculptures in the global antique trade



Collections management of significant objects in monasteries and temples is increasingly promoted in Southeast Asia. Even novice monks participate in such capacity building in Cambodia



Significant heritage textile returned by Sweden to Peru

NEXT WEEK

Heritage Matters will focus on the process and development of the Amaravathi Heritage Centre and Museum within the current redefining of the institution of the museum by the International Council of Museums