



Perspective: Safeguarding Cultural Heritage

For Prelims: [Archaeological Survey of India \(ASI\)](#), [Antiquities and Art Treasures Act of 1972](#), Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act, 1958

For Mains: Stolen Antiquities in India: Current Scenario, Challenges, Way Forward

What is the Context?

Recently, a **parliamentary panel recommended setting up a dedicated [cultural heritage squad](#)** (Multi-departmental Task Force) **for the recovery of [stolen antiquities](#)**, with a team of officers who can be trained on various aspects of retrieval.

The **task force should include senior officials from the Ministry of Home Affairs** (police and investigation), **Ministry of External Affairs** (for coordination with foreign governments), [Archaeological Survey of India \(ASI\)](#) and senior scholars and experts.

Several countries, such as Italy, Canada, the Netherlands, the US, Scotland, Spain and France, **have established dedicated cultural heritage squads with a team of experts that focus their efforts singularly on tracking and recovering stolen antiquities.**

What is Antiquity?

▪ About:

- The [Antiquities and Art Treasures Act of 1972](#), which came into effect on April 1, 1976, **defines "antiquity" as any object or work of art that has been in existence for at least 100 years.**
 - This **includes** coins, sculptures, paintings, epigraphs, detached articles, and other items that reflect science, art, literature, religion, customs, morals, or politics from a bygone era.
- For **"manuscript, record or other document which is of scientific, historical, literary or aesthetic value"**, this duration is **"not less than 75 years."**

▪ Protection Initiative:

◦ Indian:

- In India, **Item-67 of the [Union List](#), Item-12 of the [State List](#), and Item-40 of the [Concurrent List](#)** of the Constitution deal with the country's heritage.
- Before Independence, **the Antiquities (Export Control) Act was passed in April 1947 to ensure that no antiquity could be exported without a license.**
- The [Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act](#) was enacted in 1958 **to protect ancient monuments and archaeological sites from destruction and misuse.**

◦ Global:

- [UNESCO formulated the 1970 Convention](#) on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property.

- The [United Nations Security Council](#) also passed resolutions in 2015 and 2016 calling for the protection of cultural heritage sites in conflict zones.

What is the Current Scenario for Stolen Antiquities in India?

- According to records accessed under the [Right To Information \(RTI\) Act](#), only **486 antiquities have been reported as missing from the 3,696 monuments protected and maintained by the ASI** since Independence.
- According to the ASI list, **322 of the 486 antiquities were reported missing since 1976**, when India implemented the Antiquities and Art Treasure Act of 1972.
- Over the course of 15 years since its establishment, the **National Mission on Monuments and Antiquities (NMMA), 2007 has only been able to document approximately 16.8 lakh antiquities, accounting for about 30% of the estimated total of 58 lakh antiquities.**
- Monuments and sites **maintained by the ASI** are only a small percentage of the total number of archaeological sites and monuments across the country.
 - As per **UNESCO's estimates, more than 50,000 art objects were smuggled out of India till 1989.**
- Since 2014, 305 antiquities have been **brought back to India from abroad since 1976, including 292**
- Following the [recent visit of the Prime Minister of India to the US](#), a total of 105 antiquities were handed over to India by the US.

BACK FROM FOREIGN SHORES



NATARAJA

Time Period: Middle Chola, 10th CE

Bronze. Four armed. Lower right is in abhaya mudra while the lower left is thrown across his body; the upper left holds a flame in an open palm, the right hand carries a Damaru.



KANKALAMURTI KADAYAM

Time Period: 11 CE

Bronze. Fearsome aspect of Siva. 4-armed holding Damaru and Trishul in the upper hands. A dog is shown on the right and a dwarf figure on the left. Siva is holding a bowl in the lower left hand.



CHILD SAMBANDAR

Time Period: 12 CE

Bronze. Dancing on a lotus, with one leg raised. His right hand points towards the heavens, while his left is extended gracefully in the elephant trunk gesture.

NADIKESWARA KADAYAM

Time Period: 11 CE

Bronze. Standing with folded arms holding an axe and deer on the upper arms. Profusely ornamented.



FOUR ARMED VISHNU

Time Period: 12 CE

Bronze. Standing, holding chakra and shankh in upper hands. Lower right in abhaya mudra and lower left in kati hasta.



SIVA & PARVATI

Time Period: 12 CE

Bronze. Standing. Siva is four-armed, and is gently embracing Parvathi with his left hand. Beautifully ornamented.

STANDING CHILD SAMBANDAR

Time Period: 12 CE

Bronze. Standing. His raised hand points to Shiva's heavenly abode at Mount Kailash.

What are the Challenges Related to Antiquities in India?

- **Illegal Trade and Smuggling:** One of the most significant challenges is the [illegal trade](#) and [smuggling](#) of antiquities. Many valuable artifacts are **looted from archaeological sites and temples and smuggled out of the country.**
- **Lack of Documentation:** Proper documentation of antiquities is crucial for their preservation and retrieval in case of theft. However, **there are shortcomings in the documentation efforts, leading to difficulties in identifying and recovering stolen artifacts.**
- **Inadequate Security Measures:** Many museums and archaeological sites lack proper security measures, making them susceptible to theft and pilferage of antiquities.
- **Lack of Awareness and Community Involvement:** The lack of awareness among local communities **about the significance of cultural heritage and their role in protecting** it can contribute to instances of theft and trafficking.
- **Inadequate Funding:** The preservation and protection of antiquities **require financial resources for conservation,** documentation, research, and retrieval efforts. Inadequate funding can hinder these essential activities.
- **Challenges in Retrieving Antiquities from Foreign Countries:** Recovering stolen antiquities from foreign countries involves complex legal and diplomatic processes. The **retrieval process may face resistance from the host country and may be subject to international laws and conventions.**
- **Lack of a Comprehensive Database:** A comprehensive national database of antiquities is essential for effective management and retrieval efforts. **The absence of such a database can cause problems in identifying and tracking stolen items.**

Way Forward

- **Local Awareness and Community Involvement:** The panel emphasizes the role of local awareness and community consciousness in preventing the theft and trafficking of cultural artifacts.
 - The community **should be encouraged to report any instances of theft or suspicious activities related to antiquities.** Local awareness can be instrumental in preventing further losses of cultural heritage.
- **Enhancing the Budget for Art and Culture Promotion:** The panel points out that countries like China, the US, Singapore, and Australia allocate a higher percentage of their budgets towards promoting art and culture.
 - The panel recommends **increasing the budget for preserving cultural heritage in India.**
- **Role of Civil Society Organizations and CSR:** To strengthen efforts for preserving and promoting cultural heritage, the panel suggests involving civil society organisations and [Corporate Social Responsibility \(CSR\)](#) initiatives.
 - These **entities can contribute to spreading awareness about heritage preservation and can also provide financial support** to conservation efforts.

UPSC Civil Services Examination, Previous Year Question (PYQ)

Mains

Q.1 Safeguarding the Indian Art Heritage is the need of the moment. Discuss. **(2018)**

Q.2 Indian Philosophy and tradition played a significant role in conceiving and shaping the monuments and their art in India. Discuss. **(2020)**

