



Menace of Missing Antiquities in India

For Prelims: Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), UNESCO, Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act 1958, Antiquities and Art Treasures Act of 1972.

For Mains: Issues Regarding Missing Artefacts, Initiatives Related to Protection of Antiquities.

Why in News?

There is a formidable gap between [artefact](#) that has been “officially” declared missing and what is surfacing in global markets or being found in museum shelves and catalogues.

- Since Independence, **486 antiquities have been reported as missing** from the **3,696 monuments** protected and maintained by the [Archaeological Survey of India \(ASI\)](#).

What are the Issues Highlighted Regarding Missing Artefacts?

- According to ASI, **292 antiquities have been brought back to India** from abroad since 2014 and 13 between 1976 and 2013.
 - The ASI’s list of missing antiquities covers 17 states and two Union Territories. It includes **139** from Madhya Pradesh, **95** from Rajasthan and **86** from Uttar Pradesh.
- The Parliament committee flagged that “**number of antiquities retrieved**” by the ASI from abroad “are not **even the tip of the iceberg in comparison to the huge number of antiques smuggled** out from the country”.
- Monuments and sites maintained by the ASI is only a “**small percentage**” of the **total number of archaeological sites** and monuments across the country.
- The menace of **missing antiquities is also illustrated by UNESCO**. It estimates that “**more than 50,000 art objects** have been **smuggled out of India till 1989**”.

What is Antiquity?

- **About:**
 - The **Antiquities and Art Treasures Act of 1972**, which came into effect on April 1, 1976, defines an “**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 'Provenance' of Antiquity?

- **Provenance** includes the list of all owners from the time the object left its maker's possession to the time it was acquired by the current owner.

What is the Procedure of Bringing Back the Antiquities?

- **Categories:**
 - **Antiquities taken out of India pre-independence;**
 - Antiquities which were taken out **since independence until March 1976;**
 - **Antiquities have been taken out of the country since April 1976.**
- For **Antiquities taken out of India before independence**, requests for their retrieval must be raised bilaterally or on international fora.
 - For example, in **November 2022**, the **Maharashtra government** announced that it was working to bring back the **sword of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj from London.**
- Antiquities in the **second and third categories** can be retrieved easily by **raising an issue bilaterally with proof of ownership** and with the help of the **UNESCO** convention.

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)

Source: IE