

## Lost and not found: India's stolen artefacts

Theft is chipping away slowly but surely at India's heritage treasures, with at least 32 idols and artefacts under the protection of the archaeological authority going missing in the last three years.

According to data from the ministry of culture, 38 protected works of art have been stolen since 2004 but law-enforcing agencies have managed to find only six of them.

Among those recovered are a Shivling from the Bumzuva Cave in Anantnag district of Jammu and Kashmir, a Jain image of Alathur in Tamil Nadu and an Anant Shesh idol from the Laxman temple in Chhattisgarh.

While these were under the protection of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), many others too have been stolen and probably smuggled abroad.

'The theft cases are a cause of concern for the ministry of culture and we have asked the concerned state governments to take up the issue in a more strict manner. Two cases, one each in West Bengal and Bihar, have been handed over to the CBI and they are doing a good job,' Tourism and Culture Minister Ambika Soni told IANS.

The ASI has collected theft data from all over the country and submitted a report card to the culture ministry. Among the states, Madhya Pradesh tops the list of places from where relics have been stolen followed by Rajasthan.

In Madhya Pradesh, 14 art objects, including 11 sandstone sculptures, and one stone sculpture have been stolen.

Among these are two Buddha idols - one in sitting posture and the other in meditating posture - that have been missing since Jan 20 this year. However, the state police recovered one female deity, Tara.

In Rajasthan, 10 artefacts, including seven sculptures from several parts of the state and one wheel and cart frame from the Archaeological Museum in Kalibagan, are missing.

However, what is heartening is the recovery of 17 of the 18 idols that had been missing from [Patna Museum](#). These are not part of the 32 ASI protected artefacts missing since 2004.

Eighteen bronze idols have been stolen from the state-owned museum Sep 27, 2006. The case was handed over to the CBI and so far 17 idols have been recovered, the theft report card of the ministry stated.

Apart from ASI protected artefacts, one relic from the Kolkata-based Indian Museum, an autonomous body under the ministry of culture, has been missing since Dec 29, 2004.

After the state police failed to crack the case and recover the stone head of Lord Buddha, the case was handed over to the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI).

Elaborating on the smuggling of artworks from India, ASI director general C. Babu Rajeev said: 'We

have already signed an agreement with China to stop illegal smuggling of these heritage items. Such agreements with other countries are in the pipeline.'

Idol theft in Delhi and its adjoining areas is also peaking. In January, this year, 10 precious idols were stolen from a Jain temple in Gurgaon on the outskirts of Delhi. The idols were made of 'ashtadhatu' or eight metals, and some were up to five centuries old.

A 900-year-old idol stolen from a temple in Uttar Pradesh was recovered in Delhi and two people were arrested in connection with the theft last month.

In another incident, three 700-year-old Jain idols costing Rs.130 million on the international market were recovered in Delhi in March from a man who allegedly planned to smuggle them out of the country. In the three above cases, the idols were not ASI protected.

Soni said her ministry is in touch with Indian embassies abroad to keep a close tab on such illegal activities and is consulting the CBI to devise ways to curb them. The government is planning amendments to the Antiquities and Art Treasures Act, 1972 to make the provisions more stringent.

*Prashant K. Nanda ( © IANS / India eNews)*