Temple idol from T.N. surfaces in Australia

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CHENNAI: A thousand-year-old stone sculpture of Ardhanarishvara from the historically important and popular Virudhagireeswarar temple in Vriddhachalam in Tamil Nadu has surfaced in the Art Gallery of New South Wales in Sydney. It is the second museum in Australia now to be involved with the purchase of possibly smuggled Indian artefacts.

Intriguingly, the temple authorities in Vriddhachalam, a town about 200 km south of Chennai, claim ignorance about any theft. They are also unaware that the idol currently under worship in the temple could be a fake one. The Chola-period Ardhanarishvara is datable to 10th century CE.

With this revelation, that came during ongoing investigations involving Subhash Chandra Kapoor, a United States-based antiquities dealer arrested and jailed for his alleged involvement in an idol theft case, it has become apparent that the looting of Indian temple treasures is far more rampant than what was hitherto assumed or known. And, it would seem that even big and well-known temples have not been spared.

The National Gallery of Australia in Canberra is already the focus of investigations with regard to another idol from Tamil Nadu that has been linked to Kapoor’s operations.

The fact that the Ardhanarishvara – an androgynous form of Siva and Parvati – was missing was not noticed in Vriddhachalam so far because a relatively new idol, though vastly different in terms of details and craftsmanship, replaced the original one. The new idol, which is located in the koshtha or niche near the sanctum, is in worship now.

The credit for spotting the missing sculpture goes to Vijay Kumar, a Singapore-based blogger who extensively writes about art and architecture of South India.

Following public pressure that followed the arrest of Kapoor, museums across the world barring a few have had a relook at artefacts procured from him. To its credit, the Art Gallery of New South Wales is probably the only one to release the provenance documents (pointing to the history of ownership) and list the objects it had bought from Kapoor.

Examining photos and documents, Mr. Kumar noticed that the Ardhanarishvara in Australia was strikingly similar to the one that was in Vriddhachalam. He compared it with photographs of the sculpture published by Douglas Barrett, a scholar of Chola sculptures, in one of his books in 1974 and confirmed the match. He alerted The Hindu by email and published his finding on the blog site Poetry in Stone. Following this, The Hindu, collaborating with Mr. Kumar and two investigative journalists based in the U.S. and Australia (Jason Felch of the Los Angeles Times and Michaela Boland of The Australian), unearthed further details. The French Institute of Pondicherry (IFP) has been studying South Indian temples for decades, had documented the Ardhanarishvara sculpture in Vriddhachalam in 1958, 1967 and 1974. All the three images obtained by The Hindu from the IFP visually match the Ardhanarishvara in Australia.

This has raised serious doubts about the genuineness of the provenance documents, which Kapoor provided to the Art Gallery of New South Wales. One of the documents shows that Uttam Singh and Sons, a handicrafts firm in Delhi, sold the Ardhanarishvara to a diplomat in April 1970. This seems unlikely since the sculpture was in Vriddhachalam until 1974.

When The Hindu traced out the shop, which still exists in Old Delhi, and spoke to one of the sons of Uttam Singh over the phone, he said he was not aware of such a sale. He also clarified that his deceased father Uttam Singh signed only in Urdu. The receipt produced by the Australian gallery bears no signature. In an email, the gallery officials said they were looking into this issue and promised to reply in a week.

The authorities in Virudhagireeswarar temple seemed blissfully unaware of the lost sculpture and insisted that Ardhanarishvara was still there, pointing to the idol which is in worship. But this idol has no resemblance to the one photographed by Barrett and IFP. The authorities claimed that there were no records of either theft or replacement of the sculpture.

When The Hindu took up the matter with the Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments Board in Chennai, the Tamil Nadu government department that administers most of the temples in the State, P. Dhanapal, Commissioner, acknowledged that it was a serious issue. He immediately referred the matter to the Idol Wing of the Tamil Nadu police for investigation.

(With inputs from A.V. Ragunathan in Vriddhachalam)