Canberra gallery gives up claim on stolen Nataraja

Return of Chola-era idol to Tamil Nadu village in sight

Nirupama Subramanian

MELBOURNE: The National Gallery of Australia has surrendered to the Indian claim that a Chola-era Nataraja that it acquired for (A) $5.6 million had indeed been stolen from a village temple in Tamil Nadu, paving the way for an early return of the idol to India.

The NGA, Australia’s foremost art institution located in the national capital of Canberra, had 30 days to claim its ownership of the imposing bronze Nataraja after receiving a notice from the Australian Attorney General’s Department under the Protection of Movable Cultural Heritage Act 1986. That deadline expired on April 26.

The Attorney General’s Department said on Tuesday the NGA had not contested the March 26 notice, thus forfeiting the idol to the Australian government.

The legal notice to the NGA was sent after India pressed the Australian government for the return of the idol following sustained coverage by the media in India, led by The Hindu.

The 1,000-year-old Dancing Shiva is central to the investigations against antiquities dealer Subhash Kapoor who was arrested in 2012 and is being tried in Tamil Nadu for conspiring to smuggle the idol and several others out of India. The return of the idol is expected to strengthen the case against him.

The NGA initially defended its purchase of the idol from Kapoor, but with its reputation scorched by the international controversy that erupted over the provenance of the Nataraja, the Gallery seemed to have decided not to pursue any claim over the idol. Similarly, Sydney’s Art Gallery of New South Wales also did not contest a notice on ownership of an Ardhanariseswara Idol bought from Kapoor.

The National Gallery of Australia at Canberra forfeited its right to retain the 1,000-year-old Nataraja by not responding to a notice from the Attorney General under the Protection of Movable Cultural Heritage Act, 1986.

Initially, NGA defended the purchase of the idol from Subhash Kapoor, a dealer who is facing trial in Tamil Nadu for idol smuggling.

1 Both idols were seized by the Australian authorities after the galleries removed them from display.

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The police, which found a visual match between the stolen Nataraja and the one displayed in the NGA, sent a letter rogatory in early-2013, seeking information.

However, the NGA initially denied even receiving it. When The Hindu then got in touch with the Australian Attorney General’s Department, it refused to either confirm or deny the receipt of a letter rogatory.