The quest for the Suthamalli Nataraja

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CHENNAI: An 800-year-old Nataraja bronze, stolen about four years ago from Suthamalli, a remote Tamil Nadu village, is at the centre of a quickly unravelling story of illicit international trade in antiquities. Hot pursuit of the trail of the sculpture provided the police key evidence that led to the extradition to India in mid-July of Subhash Chandra Kapoor, an antique gallery owner from New York accused in the Suthamalli idol case.

There was some deft detective work involved, but it was also sheer chance that helped trace the Nataraja. A communication sent from Interpol in Washington to its New Delhi office about a year ago contained images of two Nataraja idols – one from Interpol’s stolen works of art database, and the other from a New York gallery. Both appeared to be of the same icon.

Delhi Interpol forwarded the message to the Tamil Nadu Police and that created much excitement among the investigating officers. Not only was there a visual match, they had another crucial clue. On the pedestal, near Nataraja’s feet, was an inscription. This is evident in the picture from New York, but not in the Interpol image. Those familiar with the investigation say one photograph was taken before the icon was cleaned and the other after it was restored and made ready for sale.

The inscription, the detectives conclude, is of the name of the village, ‘Suthamalli,’ in Tamil. However, expert verification is pending. This breakthrough did not come easily. The Sundaresvara temple in Suthamalli, a relatively large Siva temple, is situated about 30 km west of GangaiKondacholapuram, one of the capital cities of the Chola kings.

This centuries-old temple, off the main road, was abandoned some years ago. Inside the bat-infested and almost collapsing shrine is an impressive linga, and around it, some broken images.

A few years ago, about 10 bronze icons from this temple were moved to a smaller Vishnu temple. It was no better in terms of security or structural strength but had a locational advantage: it was on the main road. In 2008 three thieves opened the lock and stole the icons. Before leaving, they fixed the lock back, leading anyone passing by to assume that all was well within. After two months, when a visiting priest opened the temple, he found the idols missing and informed police.

However, the investigation could not proceed because either the temple nor the Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments Department, which manages temples in Tamil Nadu, had any documentation of the icons. The police did not know what to look for. But unexpected help came from a research institution. Over the decades, the French Institute of Pondicherry (IFP) has been systematically documenting temples in South India.

It has an archive of 1.3 lakh photographs of monuments and sculptures, more than half of them from Tamil Nadu. An IFP team had visited Suthamalli some years ago and documented the icons. The police obtained the photographs and sent them to Interpol, which circulated them. The search ended in Kapoor's New York gallery, the police claim.

On a parallel track, detectives were pursuing the criminals. The chance arrest of two petty thieves in an unconnected case revealed some details of the Suthamalli theft. Subsequent investigation led to Sanjeevi Asokan, an art dealer based in Chennai who the police identify as the master-mind. The police website explains that Asokan hired a group of thieves who stole the icons, transported some of them to Chennai by truck and took the rest to Pondicherry. The idols that reached Asokan were mixed with newly made handicrafts and shipped to Hong Kong and subsequently to New York.

The police claim that Asokan confessed to the crime and the involvement of Subhash Kapoor. Kapoor is a second-generation art dealer. He moved to the U.S. in the 1970s. Through his gallery, ‘Art of the Fast,’ on Madison Avenue, he has sold artefacts to reputed museums. The Birmingham Museum of Art describes him as a “patron of arts" and “an advisor to many important collectors.”

When contacted, Kingston Jerold, legal counsel for Kapoor, said the police claims are unsubstantiated. “They are making false accusations that Kapoor had visited Chennai, met Sanjeevi Asokan at a five-star hotel and entered into a conspiracy. So far, they have not produced any evidence. Also, all antiquities that Kapoor has bought from India are legitimate new art objects, and they were exported only after obtaining proper clearances.” Asked about the transfer of Rs. 1.16 crore from Kapoor’s account in New York to that of Sanjeevi Asokan’s in Chennai, he claimed they were legitimate business deals.