

# U.S. team visits Puducherry to collect details of stolen idols

S. Prasad

**PUDUCHERRY:** A three-member team from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security Investigations (HSI), on the trail of an international antique smuggling racket, visited the French Institute of Puducherry (IFP) on Monday to collect details of bronze idols allegedly stolen from different temples in Tamil Nadu and other parts of India.

The IFP's archives contain over 1,60,000 photographs and are a unique repository of information on temple art and iconography in South India.

Sources said the team, comprising Brendon M. Easter, Senior Special Agent, Department of HIS; John Paul Labbot, Special Agent; and Rangarajan Gopalan, Investigator, shared with the Indology Department at least 50 photographs of various idols they had recovered from Subhash Chandra Kapoor's art gallery and other art museums in the U.S.

The samples provided by U.S. investigators included the photographs of the idols of Narthana Sambandar, Lord Muruga, Vinayaka, Vishnu Durgai and a bronze statue of Buddha, which are under their custody.

The samples are being cross-matched with the photo archives to verify the provenance of the smuggled idols



*Officials from the Homeland Security Investigation of the United States with Director of French Institute Pierre Gerard (second from right), in Puducherry on Monday. - PHOTO: S.S. KUMAR*

and correlate them with the temples from where they are believed to have been stolen.

Sources said the process was laborious, and it would take some time to arrive at a conclusion.

The U.S. team has indicated that the antiques recovered so far could only represent the tip of what could be a larger than estimated international racket.

The team, which had visited the temples in Ariyalur district on Saturday from where about 28 idols were stolen, has proposed to work in collaboration with the IFP. "The HSI was keen on a closer coordination with the IFP for identification and recovery of idols

stolen from various Indian temples," a source said.

In the past too, the institute has helped the Idol Theft Wing police of Tamil Nadu to identify bronze idols reported missing from the Sripuranthan and Suthamalli temples in Ariyalur district. The photographs provided by the institute, which has been documenting temples, helped the investigators trace a smuggled stone idol of Lord Arthanareeswarar and a bronze idol of Lord Nataraja to the National Gallery of Australia. Both were recently handed over by Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott to his Indian counterpart Narendra Modi.