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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

Bringing the Gods Home: Antiquities, Treaties and Soft Power

 THE HINDU

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Bringing the Gods Home: Antiquities, Treaties and Soft Power

The Hindu

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GS1

GS2

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THE LIFT LINE

A stolen idol does not merely leave a temple; it leaves a hole in a living practice, and returning it is the rare act of diplomacy that repairs something no treaty text can measure.

WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

The National Gallery of Australia has returned three antiquities to India: a ceremonial metal trident crowned with an image of Bhadrakali and a granite Nandi, both traced to temples in Tiruvarur district, and a rare six-faced granite Karthikeya, or Shanmukha, from the Naganatha Swamy temple at Manambadi near Kumbakonam. The pieces are datable across the Chola and later medieval periods, with the Karthikeya assigned to about the twelfth century CE. The recovery followed investigations by the Tamil Nadu Idol Wing CID and was executed through the Mutual Legal Assistance Treaty mechanism, with the handover taking place around the Prime Minister's visit to Australia. This single event lets you write both a culture answer and an international-relations answer.

GS Paper 1: Indian art forms and architecture from ancient to modern times; the Chola contribution to bronze and stone sculpture; preservation of cultural heritage.

GS Paper 2: **bilateral** (<https://ujiyari.com/vocab/bilateral/>) agreements involving India; international treaties and their domestic enforcement; institutional mechanisms for cross-border criminal cooperation.

For **Prelims**, hold the specifics: the Antiquities and Art Treasures Act, 1972, which bars the export of antiquities (broadly, objects over one hundred years old) except by the Central Government or its authorised agency and requires registration of specified antiquities; the Archaeological Survey of India under the Ministry of Culture, the nodal body for antiquity retrieval; the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act, 1958; the UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property, 1970, to which India is a party; the UNIDROIT

Convention on Stolen or Illegally Exported Cultural Objects, 1995; the Tamil Nadu Idol Wing CID, a specialised State police unit; and the lost-wax or cire perdue technique of solid-cast Chola bronzes. For **Mains**, argue that heritage repatriation (<https://ujjayi.com/vocab/repatriation/>) is now a working instrument of cultural diplomacy, and that its success rests on domestic documentation, forensic policing and treaty-based legal cooperation acting together.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The Chola centuries produced some of the finest metal and stone sculpture anywhere. Chola bronzes were solid-cast by the lost-wax method: the image was modelled in wax, coated in clay, fired so the wax ran out, and the resulting cavity filled with molten alloy, after which the mould was broken. Each image is therefore unique, since the mould cannot survive the casting. These were not gallery objects. Utsava murtis were made to be carried in procession, bathed, dressed and worshipped, and their value in a temple is liturgical before it is aesthetic.

That is precisely what made them targets. From the late twentieth century a trafficking economy grew around south Indian temples, many of them small, unguarded and poorly documented. Idols were lifted, given fabricated provenance (<https://ujjayi.com/vocab/provenance/>) and export papers, moved through dealers in Asia and Europe, and sold to museums and private collectors who often bought in good faith. The pattern was exposed on a large scale in the case of the dealer Subhash Kapoor, whose network supplied institutions across several countries and whose seized records became the evidentiary spine of many later restitutions, including from the National Gallery of Australia.

THE CORE ARGUMENT / ISSUE

Recovery is a police problem before it is a diplomatic one

Nothing comes home without evidence. The Tamil Nadu Idol Wing CID's contribution is the unglamorous part: matching temple photographs and old inventory records to auction catalogues, establishing that the object in a foreign museum is the object that left a named temple, and producing a case file that a foreign legal system will accept. Diplomacy can open the door, but only evidence can carry the idol through it.

The MLAT route is what turns a claim into a transfer

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INSTRUMENT	WHAT IT DOES	LIMITATION
Antiquities and Art Treasures Act, 1972	Bans unauthorised export; mandates registration	Domestic reach only; weak on objects already abroad
UNESCO Convention, 1970	Obliges states to prevent illicit import and export, and to cooperate on return	Generally prospective; not self-executing in most states
UNIDROIT Convention, 1995	Gives private owners and states a direct claim to restitution	Few major market states have ratified it
Mutual Legal Assistance Treaty	Formal state-to-state channel for evidence, seizure and transfer in criminal matters	Depends on a criminal case and a treaty partner's cooperation
Voluntary museum deaccession	Institution returns on ethical grounds	Discretionary; not enforceable

The 1970 UNESCO Convention supplies the norm, but it is largely prospective and needs domestic law to bite. The MLAT supplies the machinery. Because the Idol Wing built a criminal case, Australia could treat the objects as stolen property rather than as contested acquisitions, and a museum's board decision became a legal transfer.

Restitution as soft power

Returning cultural property costs a foreign government very little and buys a great deal of goodwill. For India, each handover is a visible statement that the country can now document, litigate and reclaim what was taken, a capability that did not exist for most of the twentieth century. Timing these transfers to leaders' visits converts an evidentiary success into a diplomatic one. That is not cynicism; it is how soft power works, and India has been steadily better at it, with retrievals from the United States, Australia, the United Kingdom, Canada and Germany over the past decade.

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS (ANALYTICAL FRAME)

Read every repatriation as a three-legged stool: documentation, enforcement and treaty. Remove any leg and the object stays abroad. Documentation means knowing what a temple owned, which is why the Antiquities Act's registration requirement and ASI's national register matter far more than they appear to. Enforcement means a specialised investigative capacity such as the Idol Wing. Treaty means a legal channel, MLAT or convention, through which a foreign court or institution can act. The transferable insight for the exam: India's cultural-property success is not a story about grievance well expressed, it is a story about state capacity built quietly, and the same three-legged frame explains why thousands of undocumented objects will never be recovered.

THE DIAGRAM IN WORDS

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Chola temple bronze or granite image (lost-wax cast, living object of worship) -> theft from an unguarded, poorly documented temple -> fabricated provenance and illegal export, breaching the Antiquities and Art Treasures Act, 1972 -> dealer network (Subhash Kapoor pattern) -> acquisition by a foreign museum -> Idol Wing CID matches temple records to auction catalogue -> criminal case established -> MLAT request, backed by the norm of the 1970 UNESCO Convention -> National Gallery of Australia transfers custody -> handover during a bilateral visit -> object returns to ASI, then to the temple -> soft power gained, worship restored

WAY FORWARD

- ❶ **Complete the national antiquities register.** Photograph, measure and digitally document every idol in every temple, especially the small unprotected ones, because an object that was never recorded can almost never be reclaimed.
- ❷ **Institutionalise the Idol Wing model.** Replicate Tamil Nadu's specialised investigative unit in other States with rich temple heritage, and link them to a central database and to Interpol's stolen works of art file.
- ❸ **Widen the treaty net.** Pursue bilateral cultural-property agreements and MLAT-based cooperation with major market states, and press for wider ratification of the UNIDROIT Convention, which gives restitution claims sharper teeth than the 1970 Convention alone.
- ❹ **Secure the objects that are still in place.** Fund physical security, custodianship and periodic audit at temples, since prevention is cheaper and faster than a decade of international litigation, and a returned idol placed back in an unguarded shrine is simply a future case file.

PYQ LINKAGE AND PRACTICE

UPSC has asked about the salient features of Chola art and bronze sculpture, about the preservation of India's cultural heritage, and about soft power and cultural diplomacy in India's foreign policy. This editorial links a current repatriation to all three, and offers concrete institutional detail that most answers lack.

Practice question: "The repatriation of stolen antiquities is less a diplomatic favour than a test of a state's investigative and legal capacity." Discuss with reference to India's recent retrievals, the Antiquities and Art Treasures Act, 1972, and the 1970 UNESCO Convention. (250 words, 15 marks)

Sources: The Hindu (<https://www.thehindu.com/>)

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