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History must return to its geography

Last week, a news brought cheer to heritage enthusiasts.



Published: 10th June 2018 05:00 AM | Last Updated: 09th June 2018 12:50 PM

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Over 50,000 Indian sculptures have been sold to collectors abroad

By Ananda Shankar Jayant

Last week, a news brought cheer to heritage enthusiasts. Two exquisite bronzes of the 11th century emperor, Rajaraja Chola and his queen Lokamahadevi, that were stolen from the Brihadeesvara temple in Thanjavur, returned home after 60

years. Back in Tamil Nadu, they are expected to be consecrated once again, and hopefully placed in the temple.

Quick on the heels of this small piece of good news, came the disturbing update of many more lost Tanjore bronzes. Experts estimate that over 50,000 Indian sculptures and artefacts have been stolen and sold to collectors abroad.

Every time, I visit a museum overseas and see one of our exquisite culture boxed up in a cold museum, my heart bleeds for the wilful destruction, dislocation and displacement of our civilisational inheritance. These antiquities belong to the place of their origin and consecration. They were created with great devotion, with inscriptions, manuscripts and collective memory delineating how they were to be worshipped.

#BringOurGodsHome is the hashtag of India Pride Project (IPP), a global volunteer organisation, that tracks and helps bring back India's stolen heritage.



IPP founder Anuraag Saxena says, "India's cultural treasures have been looted for centuries. Huge sophisticated criminal networks spanning across the globe have systematically plundered our history."

Of the 50,000 stolen artefacts, IPP has traced 2,800 to museums across the world by matching information on stolen goods with catalogues from auction houses. It is a unique voluntary global team exercise.

After Narendra Modi took over as country's PM in 2014, we saw a few countries returning some of these stolen artefacts, during his visits to those countries. In 2016, an offer to return 200 more was also received but two years have passed, and only 27 of these have been brought back to Delhi, and not one has been returned to its original home. This shows the apathy of the departments concerned. Can we not even bring back what is offered?

India's heritage cannot be in the crypts and chambers of Europe and America's museums. India's tangible culture belongs to its people. The Western world has a healthy museum culture, where people are exposed to 'Other cultures', with interesting display of antiquities taken from the colonised world. India and her antiquities is a jewel in the crown there, but, what about the Indian child here, who is deprived of any knowledge of his cultural inheritance?

Taking lead from French President Macron, recently promising to return all of Africa's artefacts, India must also up the ante, and seek a return of its civilisational legacy.

India must set up an Empowered Committee to negotiate with other nations to repatriate India's heritage. It's time for India to seek a restitution of all her antiquities and artefacts—whatever the provenance, and then ensure reinstating them at their place of origin—thereby bringing back to life not just our monuments, but our identity.

Jayant is a bureaucrat, classical dancer, choreographer and dance scholar
ananda.jayant@gmail.com

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Those who buy them will cherish them. In India they will be pulverised. History of alienated rulers has won and saga of destruction of one culture
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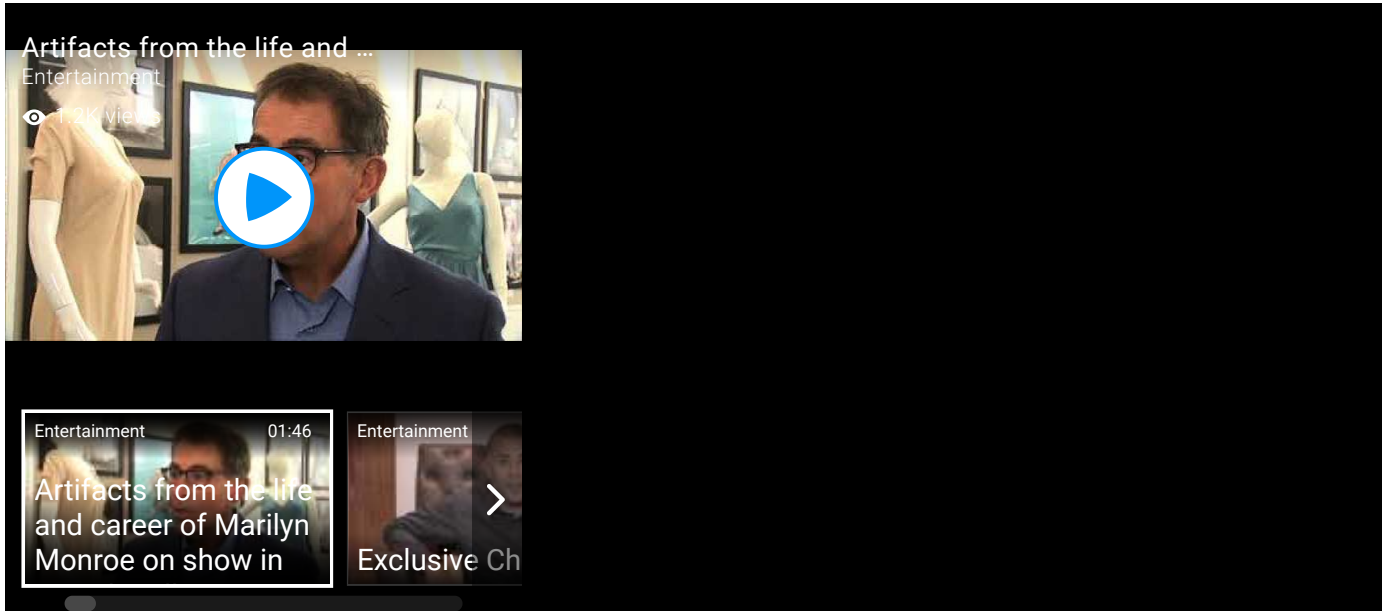
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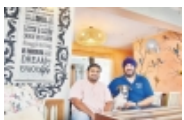
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