

Tamil village praying for return of bronze idols from Singapore

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BENGALURU – Barefooted and bare-chested, his forehead smeared with holy ash, farm labourer E. Batthan, 60, spends every Friday at the Shiva temple in Sivankoodal village.

At the hexagonal temple that stands in an oasis of rice farms amid the Sriperumbudur industrial estate in Tamil Nadu, he prays to a stone lingam of Shiva to bless his wife with good health.

But he also has an earthlier prayer. “I wait for the day the government will reunite us with our missing god,” he said in Tamil.

Decades ago – few know exactly when – the Somaskanda, a spectacular set of bronze idols, was stolen from the 900-year-old Sivakozhundeshwarar Temple, built by mediaeval king Rajendra Chola.

The three idols are Lord Shiva and his wife, Parvati, seated comfortably with their baby son, Skanda, in the middle.

Barely 54cm tall, the Sivankoodal idols have hooked noses, oval faces and supple anatomical proportions.

Those are classic features of bronze sculptures made during the rule of the Tamil-speaking Chola dynasty that reigned in southern India and parts of Sri Lanka, Cambodia and Indonesia from the mid-ninth to the 13th century.

Sivankoodal is home to 120 low-income families. Village milkman Sethu, 55, zoomed in on a photo of the idols he had on his phone, admiring Shiva’s almond eyes.

“Do you know where our beautiful Somaskanda is now? In Singapore,” he said.

Investigations by citizen activists and the Tamil Nadu Police's Idol Wing traced the Somaskanda in 2015 to the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM) in Singapore.

The museum's spokesman confirmed to The Straits Times that the Somaskanda – and two others highlighted by the police – is indeed in its collection.

India is now trying to retrieve the Somaskanda from Singapore and reinstate it for worship in the Sivankoodal temple, where it had been for hundreds of years.

In 2021, the ministries of Culture and External Affairs initiated efforts to bring the Somaskanda back by sending mutual legal agreement treaties (MLATs) to their Singapore counterparts.

“The Indian and Singapore governments are in contact through diplomatic channels about these sculptures,” the ACM spokesman said.

In anticipation, Sivankoodal residents have been sprucing up and repairing the temple, a protected monument since the 1980s, with help from the Archaeological Survey of India. Across the inner sanctum, a flex banner with the Somaskanda image serves as a reminder to worshippers of the unfinished task: bringing their god home.

Indian law defines an antique as any idol that is more than 100 years old or any historically important document more than 75 years old. Selling or taking antiques out of India has been illegal since 1972. But thousands of antiques were stolen or smuggled out long before.

In the past decade, India has been among many countries that have demanded that antiques looted during conflict or colonial rule be returned home.

It joins many nations, including Cambodia, Indonesia, Greece, Rwanda and Ghana, in asking museums and art collectors to repatriate artefacts that were stolen or whose history of ownership is unclear.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi said in a government address in June that stolen antiques may be “just idols” for countries that keep them, but they are “part of India’s soul and faith”.

“Antiques are a window into our history, and our own children in India should have access to them, whether to worship, study as art or history,” said Mr S. Vijay Kumar, an antique enthusiast and co-founder of India Pride Project, who helped find the Somaskanda in Singapore by matching the museum’s image to one in a seminal 1916 book.

The political effort to reclaim cultural treasures coincides with the growing crackdown on theft and illegal trading in the global black market for antiques.

Activists, the Interpol and the police from various countries have exposed huge hauls and international trafficking networks, triggering rare arrests of once-respected collectors, including US-based Subhash Kapoor (now jailed), who sold stolen heritage goods under faked or vague documents to reputed museums.

In shows of friendship and course correction, state-run museums in the US, Australia, Canada and Britain have returned at least 200 Indian antiques in the past few years. Until 2014, the Indian government says, only 13 idols were returned to India.

“When the idols come home, the mood is euphoric, emotions run very high and people are crying. They say, ‘The god that left our village 40 to 50 years back has come back – and all good things will now happen to our village,’” said director-general of police Jayanth Murali, who heads the Tamil Nadu Police Idol Wing.

The southern state is the only one in India to have a police department exclusively dedicated to finding stolen and smuggled antiques. Since 2014, the TN Idol Wing has secured the return of 22 antiques, including Hindu bronzes, standing Buddhas and the first Tamil Bible. Ten of them were returned just this year.

Police personnel accustomed to catching murderers, thieves and terrorists have long seen a job at the Idol Wing as “a punishment posting”.

The department solves decades-old cases of idol theft, hunts down broken idols and dusty documents, trawls through museum catalogues, and must constantly defer to huffy historians, archaeologists and forensic experts.

There are also few opportunities to demand bribes, some policemen rued.

But Constable Paranthaman, 36, who had officially requested to be deputed to the Idol Wing last year, said: “Idol Wing work can seem boring, all brain and Internet work, compared with chasing a drug dealer. But when you see what a lucrative crime idol theft is, you realise why it’s a huge international crime.”

The police found that the last known sale of the Somaskanda idol was at US\$343,000 (S\$484,100) some time between 1993 and 2000. They have yet to find out how the Somaskanda was stolen and smuggled out of India, who bought it, and how it got to Singapore and the ACM.

“A lot of the dots will be connected once Singapore joins the investigation,” Mr Murali said.

Despite the gaps in the crime story, Sivankoodal’s 120 families, all of them Dalits, formerly considered untouchable, hope for closure and full ownership of their temple. Their ancestors had laboured as bonded slaves for a powerful upper-caste landlord, who had illegally barred them from entering the temple.

Sivankoodal’s oldest resident, Mr Athikesavan Munisamy, 85, set foot inside the temple only 55 years ago, after the landlord’s educated children had quit the village for cities, and sold off their farmlands to upcoming factories.

The bronze Somaskanda was already missing by then.

If it finds its way home, Sivankoodal villagers say they will finally lay eyes on the idols, and on justice.