

# India stone-faced on US offer to return stolen Buddhist idols

TNN | Apr 29, 2014, 03.49PM IST

---

**By Kirit Mankodi**

The US immigration and customs department (ICE/DHS) has seized \$100-million worth antiquities from Subhash Kapoor who is undergoing trial in Tamil Nadu for stealing idols from a temple in Ariyalur. These antiquities were allegedly smuggled from many states in India and other Asian countries and recovered in raids on Kapoor's business in New York called Art of the Past.

ICE is keen to return the items but has been unable to find a matching interest on the part of Indian authorities. For instance, among the antique pieces, is a Chola-era stone sculpture of Buddha, likely stolen from Tamil Nadu. Another is a Bharhut Yakshi - worth \$15 million in the art market and the most expensive item so far found in the Kapoor catalogue -- stolen from a shrine in Madhya Pradesh.

The Mahakoka (the great bird-voiced goddess) sandstone sculpture was recovered from a 2,200 year-old Buddhist stupa excavated by Alexander Cunningham, pioneer of archaeology in India, at Bharhut near Satna in Madhya Pradesh in 1873. The family who inherited this sculpture had wisely registered it under the relevant act in 1977, when they also submitted its photographs to the archaeological authorities.

In July 2004, the Great Bird Goddess was stolen from the household shrine. The theft was reported to the police, the ASI was also informed. The owners declared a reward of Rs 50,000 for the recovery of what was for them their family deity.

With the lodging of the FIR, the matter seems to have rested in the files, for both the police and the ASI.

In June-July 2012, DHS agents sent to this writer several photographs of the Mahakoka sculpture that they had seized during their raids on Kapoor's Art of the Past. Kapoor had presented fabricated papers to show its provenance to be Khartoum in Sudan and for it to have been imported before the Indian antiquity laws came into operation.

Though no photograph of Mahakoka had ever been published, the statue's Prakrit language

inscription giving her name and that of the donor had been copied by Cunningham. The pictures sent by the agents had the same name "Mahakoka Devata" and the name of the donor. This writing matched the published record of Cunningham.

Personal exploration by this writer around Pataora, only a few kilometres from Bharhut, helped locate the family whose deity she was. The photographs submitted by the owner at the time of registration matched those sent by DHS, proving that what the DHS officials had intercepted was indeed the sculpture that had been stolen.

The ASI and culture ministry have been made aware of all this. Since the time the owner of the sculpture came to know about the sculpture's recovery in the US, he has made many visits to the ministry and ASI's offices.

In the case of the chola-era Buddha, the sculpture has been lying at the DHS warehouse. The officials want an explanation of how the Buddha got to Kapoor. The provenance of the Buddha as furnished by Kapoor is suspicious and similar to the provenance certificates he fabricated for other antiquities.

The state ASI told me that the Buddha is not from any of the sites under its protection. I have not received a response from the local archaeology department for my requests for cooperation.

*(Dr Kirit Mankodi is an independent archaeologist who campaigns for return of stolen Indian antiques. He maintains a record of these artefacts at [www.plunderedpast.in](http://www.plunderedpast.in))*