

## SIGNIFICANCE OF ARTEFACTS IN INDIA'S HISTORICAL MATERIAL CULTURE AND THE ISSUE OF ILLICIT TRAFFICKING OF CULTURAL PROPERTY

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**Abstract.** Artefacts, in conjunction with various archaeological sources such as coins, intricate inscriptions, exquisite sculptures, vibrant paintings, and impressive architecture, hold significant importance in the historical material culture of India. The discipline of archaeology is principally concerned with the narrative of human cultural development within the physical context of the land. In the preceding year, the President of the United States formally transferred 297 artefacts to India pursuant to the Cultural Property Agreement (CPA), which was executed on July 26, 2024, between India and the United States. Consequently, with the inclusion of these 297 antiquities, the total number of ancient objects recovered from the United States, according to official statements, will amount to 578. This figure represents the highest number of cultural antiquities returned by any nation to India. These artefacts exemplify the historical development of crafts and craftsmen, the arts, and artisans, as well as the cultural advancement of various regions in India, as they have originated from diverse parts of the country. This event signifies a substantial step towards preserving India's invaluable artefacts, diverse cultural heritage, and rich history. In our view, it should be regarded as an essential component of India's foreign policy. This paper examines the origin and history of Indian art and artefacts and the significance of these artefacts within the context of India's historical material culture. It emphasises the historical perspectives pertaining to the importance of archaeology and investigates the ongoing issue of illicit trafficking of ancient Indian artefacts. It also analyses the primary factors contributing to this phenomenon and discusses the agreements and laws established to prevent the illicit trade of historical materials.

**Keywords:** Indian Art, Artefacts, Archaeology, Heritage, Illicit trafficking of cultural property, Historical material culture.

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## **1. Introduction**

Recently, the Prime Minister of India visited the United States, where the president of the United States handed over 297 artefacts under the Cultural Property Agreement (CPA) signed on July 26, 2024, between India and the United States to prevent the illegal trafficking of cultural artefacts and ensure the return of looted antiquities to their origin countries. This agreement has significance as it marks a shift in the global development strategy, emphasising culture as a standalone goal. Now, with all these 297 antiquities, the total number of ancient objects recovered from the United States, as per officials' statement, will be 578, and this is the highest number of cultural antiquities returned by any country to India.

These antiquities have significant cultural and heritage value for the history of India. These artefacts are not only crucial for cultural and heritage value but along with these artefacts has great significance in India's historical material culture and also play an essential role in the formation of the inner core of India's civilisation and consciousness. These artefacts reflect the historical development of craft and craftsmen, art and artisans and the cultural progress of different parts of India as they have originated from different parts of India. Also, these objects are significant because they belong to the times precisely from a period between 2000 BCE and 1900 CE. As per the Government of India report, most of the artefacts are from eastern India and are made of terracotta, while on the other hand, some of the artefacts are also made from stone, wood, ivory and metal. That shows the intelligence of our artisans and craftsmen of a particular time. Some of the significant artefacts that have immense significance for India's historical material culture include the Apsara, made of Indian sandstone and the historical period between the 10th and 11th century CE. Another object is a Jain Tirthankar made of bronze from central India and the historical period of 15th-16th century CE, and a vase made of terracotta from eastern India and historical period of 3rd-4th century CE, among them one more artefact which has major significance is an anthropomorphic figure made of copper from north India and historical period of 2000-1800 BCE.

## **2. The Origins and Historical Developments of Indian Art and Artefacts**

India possesses a diverse, vibrant, and rich artistic history, regarded as one of the oldest in the world. The narrative of Indian art commences with the enigmatic prehistoric art found at Bhimbetka. These ancient rock carvings, located in central India, depict a vivid array of animals and humans, providing a captivating glimpse into prehistoric life. Inhabitants of the Indian subcontinent have engaged in artistic production from prehistoric eras to

contemporary times. While each period in Indian art history exhibits its distinct tone and style, recurring themes have significantly influenced Indian art and culture. Notably, Indian nomadic peoples were among the first to create artwork in the Indian subcontinent.

The evolution of Indian art is remarkably fascinating. Early Indian art encompasses various forms, including rock art, exemplified by the Bhimbetka cave paintings and metal casting, which features the earliest artefacts, including a figurine of a dancing girl from Mohenjodaro. The Indus Valley Civilization is regarded as the genesis of Indian art. Indian sculptures reached their zenith during the Mauryan dynasty. Large stone pillars frequently featured a lotus-shaped apex adorned with the figure of a lion. Throughout the Kushan Dynasty, Buddhism disseminated to regions beyond India. During this era, relief carvings began to depict Buddha in human form. During the Gupta period, particularly in northern India, representations of Hindu deities were intricately sculpted into rock within artificial caves or temples. Conversely, in southern India, bronze figures of Hindu deities were produced. During the Chola period, remarkable bronzes were produced, which served to adorn religious edifices. The Buddhist epoch is characterised by three significant architectural types: the Chaitya Hall (a place of worship), the Vihara (a monastery), and the Stupa (a hemispherical mound utilised for worship or memorial purposes). These architectural forms are exemplified by the magnificent caves of Ajanta and Ellora, as well as the monumental Sanchi Stupa. Temples were meticulously hewn from enormous rocks. The earliest rock-cut temples were excavated in the western Deccan during the initial years of the Common Era. The chaitya at Karle, featuring impressive tall halls and exquisitely polished decorative walls, stands as a noteworthy illustration of rock-cut architecture. Other notable examples include the Kailash temple at Ellora, constructed by the Rashtrakutas, and the Ratha temples of Mahabalipuram, built by the Pallavas. In southern India, the Pallavas, Cholas, Pandyas, Hoyshalas, and, subsequently, the rulers of the Vijayanagara kingdom were renowned for their temple construction. The Pallava dynasty is credited with erecting the shore temple at Mahabalipuram, in addition to other structural temples such as the Kailashnath temple and Vaikuntha Perumal temples located in Kanchipuram. Among the numerous temples erected by the Cholas, the Brihadeshwara temple at Tanjore is remarkably esteemed. The Chola dynasty formulated a distinctive style of temple architecture endemic to South India, known as the Dravida style. This style is characterised by features such as the vimana or shikhara, elevated walls, and gateways adorned with gopuram. Notable temples were erected in Belur and Halebid, where the artistry of stone engravings reached unprecedented heights. In contrast, in the northern and eastern regions of India, remarkable temples were also constructed, adhering to what is termed the Nagara style. The majority of these structures include elements such

as shikaras (spiral roofs), garbhagriha (sanctum), and mandap (pillared hall). The Solanki rulers built the Dilwara Temple in Mount Abu, Rajasthan, which is dedicated to Jainism Tirthankara.

During the medieval period, the mosque and the tomb served as prominent architectural masterpieces. Notably, during the Afghan rule, significant structures such as the tomb of Ibrahim Lodi in Delhi and the mausoleum of Shershah at Sasaram were constructed. The architecture from this era reflects the incorporation and adaptation of indigenous styles by the builders. With the rise of regional kingdoms in Bengal, Gujarat, and the Deccan, exquisite edifices characterised by unique stylistic elements were erected. The rulers of the Vijayanagar Empire significantly contributed to this architectural heritage by constructing numerous remarkable buildings and temples and achieving various accomplishments during their reign. The Mughal architectural style exerted a profound impact on subsequent constructions.

In the modern times, many skilled Indian painters have received training at various art institutions. In the early 1900s, a notable South Indian artist, Ravi Varma, produced large-scale oil paintings depicting Hindu deities. Conversely, the oil paintings of Amrita Sher-Gil continue to influence many contemporary Indian artists.

Traditional sculpture persists in being crafted in modern India, primarily for the international tourist market. Some sculptors have also embraced innovative styles and techniques. Indian art and architecture exemplify timeless aesthetic beauty and enduring creativity. Numerous inspirational and influential elements can be attributed to the rich tapestry of Indian art and architecture.

### **3. Significance of Indian Archaeological Material**

To explore the wonders of ancient India, we have a wonderful array of sources to delve into! Apart from texts, we can also discover fascinating coins, intricate inscriptions, beautiful sculptures, vibrant paintings, and stunning architecture. The texts of ancient India have given rise to various debates concerning chronology, geographical applicability, and even content. In the context of archaeological sources, geography and chronology are not among the prevailing issues. Inscriptions, akin to other textual compositions, allocate considerable space to conventional descriptions rather than to the enumeration of the events for which the inscriptions were initially intended. Coins predominantly originate from 'hoards,' and it is imperative to emphasise that a framework for the study of ancient Indian coins has undoubtedly emerged. On numerous occasions, the research into ancient Indian coins has not advanced beyond an examination of their design. This observation similarly applies to art and architecture, which are primarily concerned with the

religious life of their respective periods in different regions and less with matters of individual authorship and patronage — issues that could have rendered them more compelling as historical documents.

Archaeology, particularly concerning artefacts, significantly enhances the understanding of sources within the context of ancient India. Even in regions possessing a substantial quantity of detailed and thorough textual documentation, archaeological research frequently unveils previously unrecognised dimensions of the historical landscape. In the case of ancient India, where both the volume and rigour of textual documentation are relatively limited, archaeological research attains an extraordinary level of significance. Archaeology possesses the capability to profoundly change the nature of historical inquiries, thereby highlighting the second rationale for the significance of archaeology in historical research pertaining to ancient India. In this context, we would like to emphasise that, in relation to the ancient history of a region as extensive as the subcontinent, interactions among diverse areas within the subcontinent can foster the development of a historical framework that is acceptable to all segments of its population.

The artefacts are extremely important to preserve the history of a particular period. According to anthropologist Daniel Miller, “objects continually assert their presence as simultaneously material force and symbol. They frame the way we act in the world, as well as the way we think about the world.” To understand the past, we have to understand the artefacts of the past because they contain historical information, which is extremely important in historical study. Apart from this, they show the cultural development and nation-rich heritage which is also very pertinent for any nation. In historical study, artefacts, sculptures, and paintings are considered archaeological sources for the study of history and history-writing because archaeological sources do not have a problem of chronology and geography, which is a significant problem with literary or textual sources. Archaeology can change the nature of historical questions. Museum Director Elaine Gurian suggests that artefacts provide us with a way into history. “Objects, in their tangibility,” she writes, “provide a variety of stakeholders with an opportunity to debate the meaning and control of their memories.” Artefacts are the touchstones that bring memories and meanings to life. They make history real.

These artefacts received from the United States provide valuable historical information that can be very useful in reconstructing the story of the man-land relationship through the ages. What we want to emphasise in this context is that only through reconstructing the historical development of man-land interaction in different parts of the subcontinent will the framework of a past acceptable to all segments of its population emerge. We see that the academic interest in Indian antiquities began in the middle of the eighteenth century.

Before that, if we look into an account of the early 16th century, then we find that three groups of people were involved with interest in Indian archaeology. The first group of people were Goa's Portuguese residents, the second group of people was European sailors, and the last one was the occasional travelers. Principally they were just involved in two categories of monuments during this phase. First, the rock-cut caves of west India; second, the temples of south India. For example, the Elephanta caves and, in the eastern part of India, the black and white pagodas of the Konark and Jagannatha temple of Odisha. These were known as early as the seventeenth century. Further, in the middle of the 18th century, European familiarity with Indian monuments, artefacts and crafts was fairly broad-based. In the middle of the 18th century, the interest is correctly expressed in the accounts of the French language scholar Anquetil du Perron and Carsten Niebhur, a Danish engineer. Anquetil du Perron is best known for his translation of the Upanishads, and Carsten Niebhur is better known for his report on the archaeology of Persia and Arabia. These two scholars first focused on the very important question and emphasised the need for a systematic and scholarly study of Indian antiquities.

Here, we must emphasise that in the second half of the 18th century, we saw a considerable philosophical interest in the antiquity of India in Europe, especially among the philosophers of the French Enlightenment. There may be so many reasons behind their awakening and their interest according to various scholars. Some scholars may argue for reasons like Europeans' quest to move away from the dogmas of the tradition of the Bible. That's why they first looked towards China, and after some time, they looked towards India as the centre of civilisation and culture. But in my opinion, this will be just a generalised nervousness of scholarly statements. According to my understanding, they got a piece of information about the Indian civilisation and culture, and then they were completely mesmerised. The reason behind it is that the Europeans had no wonder before the 16th century. After seeing the Indian artefacts and antiquities they realised that they needed to learn the crafts and process of making such beautiful and mesmerising artefacts and antiquities which were being made in India since ancient times. For that, they needed to break their dogmatic beliefs in biblical tradition, and they had to move away towards India and gain knowledge from the artisans and craftsmen of India. To support the above argument, we quote one of the most important philosophers, Voltaire, who went to the extent of asserting that everything had come down from the banks of the Ganges.

In the late eighteenth century, we saw some significant changes in Europe, especially in the societal and cultural fields. During this time, various kinds of societies were being established and consolidated in Europe. Because they felt the great need to know systematically about the world, precisely the country they were to rule. They also realise the

great need to relate the Indian knowledge system to the contemporary framework of European knowledge of human history. In that process, they established the Asiatic Society in Bengal, India, which fits into the ethos of the age. The founder of the Asiatic Society, William Jones, and his Asiatic society did not take any initiative in archaeological research in India. Still, it acted as a kind of catalyst in the study of antiquities and found an institutional focus among Europeans in India. Jones's major area of focus was on the comparison of Indian history with universal history.

We see that during the colonial period and after the independence of India Europeans took away many priceless and valuable artefacts and objects from India which have significant cultural and heritage value as imperial subjugation. But there were mainly two reasons. First, for the economic benefits, because during the 19th and 20th centuries, Indian artefacts and antiquities were in high demand on the international market. Second, they wanted to preserve them in their museum and art gallery. They do so because they want to educate themselves and want to learn artistic intelligence. That's why they preserve all these artefacts and antiquities and are willing to show the world that they have such a rich cultural and artistic heritage preserved in their museum and art gallery. For example, we often read in the newspaper the synonyms of British museums such as *chor bazaar*.

Despite India's attainment of independence, the demand for Indian historical artefacts in the global market remains exceedingly high. This demand has resulted in the illicit smuggling of Indian artefacts into international markets. Additionally, during the late 20th century, the proliferation of the black market worldwide emerged as a significant concern, particularly for developing nations gaining independence in the latter half of the century.

In the 20th century globe, this problem has become a significant issue not only with India but with so many countries around the world. A plethora of people are involved in this smuggling from India and around the world. This issue became so pertinent that UNESCO had to hold a convention in 1970.

The 1970 convention of UNESCO is entirely in conformity with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) elaborated in the 2030 agenda of the United Nations. The main objective of this convention is to make an international alliance to strive against the illicit trafficking of cultural property. This convention can be described as a pioneering step for prohibiting and preventing the illegal import, export, and transfer of ownership of cultural heritage and property, which provides a similar framework for the countries on the measures to be taken to prohibit and prevent the import, export and transfer of cultural heritage and property. The central objective of this 1970 convention is to focus

on the return and restitution of cultural heritage and property under articles 07 and 13 of this convention. Where article 07 provides rights to countries to undertake appropriate measures to seize and return any cultural heritage and property that has been stolen and imported; on the other hand, article 13 of this convention states that parties are responsible at the national level in terms of restitution and cooperation. Further, one more article which is very important is Article 09 of this 1970 convention. Article 09 provides states parties to participate in any concerted international operation. Also, it provides for more focused and specific actions like the negotiation of bilateral treaties within the framework of international cooperation. For this specific negotiation of the bilateral treaties, the UNESCO intergovernmental committee (ICPRCP) can also be solicited between states. This convention focuses not only on return and remembering but also on safeguarding people's identity and history and promoting a peaceful society.

The first-ever cultural property agreement (CPA) results from year-long bilateral conversations initiated during the G20 convention in the post-2020 development framework, where the focus on protecting cultural property was a topmost focus area. The Cultural Property Agreement (CPA), which was signed between India and the United States this agreement aligns with Article 09 of the UNESCO Convention of 1970. This agreement restricts the importation of archaeological and ethnological material from 1.7 million years ago through 1947.

This is a milestone towards saving India's priceless artefacts, diverse cultural heritage, and rich history. In our opinion, it must be seen as an integral component of India's foreign policy.

#### 4. Conclusion

In conclusion, on analysing India's history, we see that the portrayal of India's history by colonial historians like James Mill and J.S. Mill sought to create a narrative of India as a land without a past or historical tradition—this colonial distortion aimed to fill a perceived historical vacuum, undermining India's rich heritage. However, through art, artefacts, and deeper historical inquiry, India's profound and glorious historical traditions are evident, challenging the colonial misrepresentation. The recent return of 297 artefacts under the Cultural Property Agreement (CPA) further demonstrates this, as these ancient objects stand as powerful symbols of India's rich and glorious past, now reclaimed and recognised on the global stage, reaffirming our historical legacy.

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