

Demand-Side Economics: Western Collectors and The Idol Trade- An Empirical Analysis

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Abstract: *The illicit trade in Indian temple idols has evolved from sporadic theft into an organised transnational market driven substantially by foreign demand. Ancient idols from rural temples, particularly those lacking digitised inventories or adequate security, have become vulnerable targets for theft networks catering to private collectors, auction houses, galleries and museums abroad. For the purpose of this research, an empirical method was followed and the data was collected through online survey forms. The SPSS software by IBM was used to calculate the statistics. The sample size is 30. Dependent variables are aspects of opinion of the experts in the field of law and investigation officers and the independent variables include occupation, experience of the respondents. The present study examines the demand-side economics of idol trafficking with specific emphasis on Western collectors, the prestige economy associated with rare antiquities, the role of auction houses in masking provenance, local intermediaries, and insider participation within temple ecosystems. The research argues that idol theft is not merely a property offence but a cultural and civilisational loss sustained through asymmetrical global demand structures. Weak documentation, poor temple administration, inadequate provenance verification and opaque auction practices contribute significantly to the continuation of the trade. The paper concludes with recommendations relating to digitisation, stricter provenance laws, international cooperation, community surveillance and accountability mechanisms for auction houses and collectors.*

Keywords: Arts and antiquities, private collectors, demand side economics, idol trafficking, vulnerability of rural temples.

I. INTRODUCTION

India possesses one of the richest collections of sacred art and temple antiquities in the world. Temple idols are not merely artistic objects; they are embodiments of faith, ritual continuity and civilisational memory. Yet over the last few decades, numerous idols from ancient temples particularly in rural areas of Tamil Nadu, Rajasthan, Odisha and Karnataka have disappeared and resurfaced in private collections, museums and auction houses abroad. The theft of temple idols has become a profitable transnational enterprise sustained by international demand for rare antiquities. The economics of idol trafficking cannot be understood solely through supply-side explanations such as poverty or weak policing. Increasingly, scholars and investigators have identified the importance of demand-side economics. Western collectors seeking exclusivity, prestige and cultural capital create sustained demand for rare antiquities. Unlike museums, which are increasingly subject to ethical scrutiny and provenance checks, private collectors often operate with greater secrecy and fewer accountability mechanisms. The symbolic prestige attached to owning ancient Indian bronzes or Chola sculptures transforms sacred objects into luxury assets. Rural temples are particularly vulnerable due to inadequate security, poor documentation and the absence of digitised inventories. In many cases, temple authorities themselves remain unaware of the historical or monetary significance of idols. Criminal networks exploit these vulnerabilities through local intermediaries, smugglers and corrupt insiders who facilitate theft and transportation.

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International auction houses and galleries further legitimise stolen artefacts through vague provenance descriptions such as “from an old European collection” or “private collection acquired before 1970,” thereby masking illicit origins. The issue has gained international attention following investigations into networks involving dealers such as Subhash Kapoor, whose galleries allegedly trafficked thousands of stolen antiquities across borders. Several idols have since been repatriated to India from institutions in the United States, Australia and the United Kingdom. Nevertheless, the market for illicit antiquities persists because the economic incentives remain strong. This study therefore seeks to examine idol trafficking through the lens of demand-side economics. It analyses how foreign collectors, auction houses, provenance laundering, temple vulnerabilities and local networks collectively sustain the illicit trade. It further evaluates the effectiveness of Indian and international legal frameworks in addressing this issue.

NEED FOR THE STUDY

The increasing theft of Indian temple idols threatens the preservation of India’s cultural and religious heritage. Foreign demand for rare antiquities has created a profitable international market for stolen idols. Weak administrative monitoring and inadequate coordination among authorities enable continuous trafficking. The study is needed to examine the role of collectors, intermediaries, auction houses, and insiders in sustaining the illicit idol trade.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The study helps in understanding the connection between global antiquities demand and idol theft in India. It highlights structural weaknesses in temple protection and heritage management systems. The research contributes to criminology, heritage studies, cultural policy, and international law. Its findings may assist policymakers and law enforcement agencies in developing stronger preventive measures.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

- **Isra Saymour (2025) Loot, legitimacy, and provenance: Intermediaries and the legitimation of looted cultural objects¹:** This study builds on literature on legitimacy and grey markets to investigate how intermediaries in the antiquities market use provenance to legitimize looted cultural heritage. Drawing on interviews with curators, dealers, and auctioneers and scripting analysis of institutional records, the study identifies three "legitimizing provenance practices": an accumulative market setting that encourages collection at all costs; exclusionary professional networks that protect permissive practices and everyday techniques that mask looted origins.
- **Donna Yates, Simon Mackenzie, Emiline Smith(2017)²:** The cultural capitalists notes on the ongoing reconfiguration of trafficking culture in Asia. Most analysis of the international flows of the illicit art market has described a global situation in which a postcolonial legacy of acquisition and collection exploits cultural heritage by pulling it westwards towards major international trade nodes in the USA and Europe through Asia.
- **Carsten Stahn (2023) Confronting Colonial Objects: Histories, Legalities, and Access to Culture³:** It shows that cultural takings were material to the colonial project throughout different periods and went far beyond looting. It relies on micro-histories and object biographies to trace recurring justifications and contestations of takings and returns, and the complicity of anthropology, racial science, and professional networks in colonial collecting. It demonstrates the dual role of law and cultural heritage regulation in enabling colonial injustices, and mobilizing resistance thereto.

¹Isra Saymour, Loot, Legitimacy, and Provenance: Intermediaries and the Legitimation of Looted Cultural Objects, 34 Int’l J. Cultural Prop. ____ (2025).

²Donna Yates, Simon Mackenzie & Emiline Smith, The Cultural Capitalists: Notes on the Ongoing Reconfiguration of Trafficking Culture in Asia, 24 Crime, L. & Soc. Change ____ (2017).

³Carsten Stahn, Confronting Colonial Objects: Histories, Legalities, and Access to Culture (Oxford Univ. Press 2023).



- **Karen Olsen Bruhns, Neil Brodie, Jennifer Doole, Colin Renfrew (2002) Trade in Illicit Antiquities⁴: The Destruction of the World's Archaeological Heritage:** This review discusses the continued destruction of archaeological heritage due to the illicit antiquities trade, highlighting contributions from an international symposium. It emphasizes the need for empirical evidence to spur political action, the threats faced by archaeological sites in different countries, particularly in Southeast Asia, and the impact of private collecting on the market for antiquities. The review also underscores the successes and challenges in efforts to combat this trade, reflecting on specific studies from Italy and Greece and noting the importance of educational initiatives and legal frameworks.
- **Patty Gerstenblith (2007) Controlling the International Market in Antiquities: Reducing the Harm, Preserving the Past⁵:** Examine the harms that the looting of archaeological sites imposes on society. Second, It discusses the responses to the problem, particularly in terms of the law that attempts to regulate this conduct, and some of the characteristics of the current legal regime and of the market in antiquities that prevent the law from achieving its full potential for deterrence. Third, this Article will examine and propose solutions to discourage site looting and encourage preservation of the remains of the past for the benefit of the future.
- **Staffan Lundén(2025) Perspectives on looting, The illicit antiquities trade, art and heritage⁶:** This article addresses the alarming rates of looting at archaeological sites globally, driven by market demand for antiquities. It argues that the trade of unprovenanced artifacts perpetuates social inequalities, benefiting affluent collectors and institutions while undermining the integrity of cultural heritage. The text explores the roles of looters, collectors, and cultural heritage professionals in this dynamic, emphasizing their responsibilities in mitigating the impact of the illicit antiquities trade.
- **Ignacio Rodríguez Temiño, Ana Vega (2023) Looting and Illicit Trafficking of Archaeological Heritage⁷:** After defining what is considered looting and illicit trafficking of archaeological heritage, this entry develops the cause-effect link between looting and illicit trafficking, reviews the current international regulations on the subject, and presents the state of the art of research on the major issues, as well as on the most important gaps that should be filled either by more research or by a change of approach.

RESEARCH GAP

The existing papers did not largely focus on foreign demand, particularly from Western collectors and private buyers, which contributed to the theft and trafficking of Indian temple idols associated with vulnerability of rural temples arising from poor security, lack of digitised inventories and weak administrative monitoring and the role of auction houses, provenance practices, local intermediaries and temple insiders in facilitating the illicit idol trade. This paper is an attempt to find the complexities and internal flaws in the system and structure.

RESEARCH PROBLEM

The continuing theft and trafficking of Indian temple idols reveal a structural imbalance between global demand for antiquities and local capacity for protection.

⁴Karen Olsen Bruhns, Neil Brodie, Jennifer Doole & Colin Renfrew, Trade in Illicit Antiquities: The Destruction of the World's Archaeological Heritage, 111 Am. J. Archaeology 343 (2007) (reviewing conference proceedings published in 2002).

⁵Patty Gerstenblith, Controlling the International Market in Antiquities: Reducing the Harm, Preserving the Past, 8 Chi. J. Int'l L. 169 (2007).

⁶Staffan Lundén, Perspectives on Looting, the Illicit Antiquities Trade, Art and Heritage, 15 Heritage 1 (2025).

⁷Ignacio Rodríguez Temiño & Ana Vega, Looting and Illicit Trafficking of Archaeological Heritage, in Encyclopedia of Global Archaeology 7421 (Claire Smith ed., Springer 2023).



RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- Whether foreign demand, particularly from Western collectors and private buyers, contributes to the theft and trafficking of Indian temple idols or not.
- Whether the vulnerability of rural temples arising from poor security, lack of digitised inventories and weak administrative monitoring as contributing factors to continuous theft of idols or not.
- Auction houses, provenance practices, local intermediaries and temple insiders in facilitating the illicit idol trade.

HYPOTHESIS

This research study is assigned to assess the relationship between International demand for rare Indian antiquities, particularly among Western private collectors and auction markets, functions as the primary driver of idol theft from rural temples in India and inadequate documentation, vague provenance practices, insider facilitation and weak international enforcement mechanisms contribute to the persistence of the illicit idol trade. Using a convenient sampling method, various dependent and independent variables have been used as stated above.

HO: There is no significant association.

HA: There is a significant association.

OBJECTIVES

- To examine how foreign demand, particularly from Western collectors and private buyers, contributes to the theft and trafficking of Indian temple idols.
- To analyse the vulnerability of rural temples arising from poor security, lack of digitised inventories and weak administrative monitoring.
- To study the role of auction houses, provenance practices, local intermediaries and temple insiders in facilitating the illicit idol trade.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The exploration strategy followed is empirical research. The information is gathered through a survey and the sample size is 30. The convenience sampling method is embraced in the review to gather the information. The samples were gathered from the experts in the field of law and investing agencies. The independent variables are occupation, experience of the respondents. The dependent variables are aspects of foreign demand, particularly from Western collectors and private buyers, which contributes to the theft and trafficking of Indian temple idols, the vulnerability of rural temples arising from poor security, lack of digitised inventories and weak administrative monitoring, the role of auction houses, provenance practices, local intermediaries and temple insiders in facilitating the illicit idol trade in Chennai. Graphs and various tests are used to analyse the data collected with Statistical Package for Social Sciences software by International Business Machines Corporations.

SCOPE OF THE STUDY

The study focuses primarily on the trafficking of Indian temple idols and antiquities with emphasis on demand-side factors. It covers thefts from rural temples, the role of collectors and auction houses, provenance laundering, and international cultural property laws.

LIMITATIONS

One of the major limitations is the use of convenience sampling method that give a biased output which cannot be avoided. And there was a very short span of time to conduct and complete the research . Another limitation is we can't be able to assume the thoughts of the entire samples in Chennai with a limited sample. Limited access to confidential investigative records restricts empirical analysis, auction house documentation is often incomplete or inaccessible and



the secretive nature of trafficking networks creates evidentiary limitations are other such limitations faced while conducting the study.

II. CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS

2.1 DEMAND-SIDE ECONOMICS

Demand-side economics in illicit antiquities markets refers to the influence exerted by collectors, dealers, museums and auction houses in creating and sustaining demand for rare cultural objects. Unlike ordinary commodities, antiquities derive value from rarity, historical significance and exclusivity. In many elite circles, ownership of rare antiquities functions as a marker of prestige and cultural sophistication. Indian temple idols, especially Chola bronzes, occupy a unique place in global art markets because of their artistic excellence and spiritual symbolism. The demand for such artefacts often exceeds legal supply. Since most genuine antiquities are already protected under heritage laws, criminal networks turn toward illicit acquisition methods including theft, smuggling and forged provenance documentation. The economics of idol trafficking therefore resembles luxury black markets where scarcity increases value. Rural temples become vulnerable because they possess authentic artefacts but lack adequate security infrastructure. International buyers indirectly incentivise theft by creating profitable markets for stolen idols.

2.2 RURAL TEMPLES AND THEIR VULNERABILITY TO THEFT

Rural temples across India contain centuries-old idols that remain undocumented or poorly protected. Unlike major temples with surveillance systems and administrative oversight, smaller temples frequently rely on local caretakers and minimal infrastructure. Many temples do not maintain updated photographic or digital records of idols. Consequently, thefts may remain unnoticed for months or years. Even when idols are recovered abroad, proving ownership becomes difficult due to absence of documentation. Numerous rural temples lack CCTV cameras, alarm systems or secured sanctums. Criminal networks often survey temple locations before executing thefts.

Temple administrations frequently underestimate the market value of idols. Antique idols may be replaced with replicas without proper verification. Remote locations reduce the likelihood of immediate detection or law enforcement intervention. The theft of idols from Tamil Nadu temples has repeatedly demonstrated how criminal networks target vulnerable rural shrines rather than heavily guarded urban temples.

2.3 PRESTIGE ECONOMY AND WESTERN COLLECTORS

The international antiquities market is deeply influenced by notions of prestige and exclusivity. Ownership of rare antiquities is often associated with elite cultural identity. Wealthy collectors seek unique artefacts that distinguish their collections from others. Private collectors differ from museums in several respects:

- Museums increasingly face ethical scrutiny and repatriation demands.
- Private collections remain less transparent.
- Collectors may intentionally avoid detailed provenance inquiries.
- Antiquities may be treated as investment assets.

The prestige associated with possessing sacred Indian bronzes creates sustained demand. In some cases, collectors prioritise rarity over legality. This dynamic transforms temple idols from sacred objects into commodities circulating within global luxury markets. The activities of dealers such as Subhash Kapoor exposed how collectors across Europe and North America acquired stolen idols through apparently legitimate channels.

2.4 ROLE OF AUCTION HOUSES AND GALLERIES

Auction houses occupy a critical position in the antiquities trade because they confer legitimacy upon artefacts. Once an idol appears in a reputable auction catalogue, buyers may assume lawful ownership despite incomplete provenance



histories. Although major auction houses claim to follow ethical standards, provenance verification often remains inconsistent. In several repatriation cases, stolen idols were sold despite red flags relating to ownership history. Auction houses effectively transform illicit artefacts into marketable commodities. The publication of catalogues increases perceived authenticity and value. Critics argue that auction houses prioritise profit over cultural preservation. The absence of strict liability for suspicious provenance contributes to continued trafficking.

2.5 TEMPLE INSIDERS AND LOCAL INTERMEDIARIES

Idol theft networks rarely function without local assistance. Temple insiders, artisans, transporters and intermediaries often facilitate thefts.

Caretakers or administrative personnel may knowingly assist traffickers by providing access to sanctums, suppressing complaints, replacing originals with replicas and sharing information about valuable idols. Local agents connect international buyers with rural theft networks. They identify vulnerable temples and coordinate logistics. Idol trafficking increasingly resembles organised transnational crime involving multiple actors across jurisdictions. Smuggling routes often include forged customs documents and transit through intermediary countries.

III. LEGAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 INDIAN LEGAL FRAMEWORK

3.1.1 The Antiquities and Art Treasures Act, 1972⁸

The principal legislation governing antiquities in India is the Antiquities and Art Treasures Act, 1972. The Act regulates export, registration and trade in antiquities. This Act discusses enforcement mechanisms, adequate digitisation, conviction rates and coordination among agencies.

3.1.2 Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act, 1958⁹

The Act primarily protects monuments and archaeological sites but indirectly contributes to heritage preservation.

3.1.3 Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023¹⁰

Offences involving theft, criminal conspiracy, cheating and organised crime may apply in idol theft cases under the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023.

3.1.4 Customs Act, 1962¹¹

The Act penalises illegal export of antiquities and enables confiscation of smuggled objects.

3.1.5 Role of Idol Wing-CID

Tamil Nadu's Idol Wing- CID has played a significant role in recovering stolen idols and tracing trafficking networks. Several idols have been repatriated through coordinated international investigations.

3.2 INTERNATIONAL LEGAL FRAMEWORK

3.2.1 UNESCO 1970 Convention¹²

The UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property, 1970 is the principal international instrument addressing cultural property trafficking. It obligates State Parties to prevent illicit trade and facilitate restitution. However, implementation varies significantly across countries. The Convention also faces criticism because it largely depends upon domestic enforcement.

⁸The Antiquities and Art Treasures Act, No. 52 of 1972, India Code (1972).

⁹The Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act, No. 24 of 1958, India Code (1958).

¹⁰Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, No. 45 of 2023, India Code (2023).

¹¹Customs Act, No. 52 of 1962, India Code (1962).

¹²UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property, Nov. 14, 1970, 823 U.N.T.S. 231.



3.2.2 UNIDROIT Convention 1995¹³

The UNIDROIT Convention strengthens private law remedies for recovery of stolen cultural objects. It places obligations upon buyers to exercise due diligence while acquiring antiquities. India is not a party to the Convention, limiting its utility in domestic recovery proceedings.

3.2.3 INTERPOL Mechanisms

INTERPOL maintains databases of stolen cultural objects and facilitates international cooperation. Nevertheless, underreporting and poor documentation weaken effectiveness.

3.2.4 UNITED NATIONS CONVENTION AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL ORGANISED CRIME¹⁴

The Convention indirectly assists in combating organised trafficking networks through mechanisms for extradition and mutual legal assistance.

IV. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS WITH FOREIGN COUNTRIES

4.1 ITALY

Italy has one of the strongest cultural property enforcement systems in the world. The Carabinieri Command for the Protection of Cultural Heritage maintains specialised investigative units and comprehensive databases of stolen artefacts.

FEATURES

- Dedicated heritage police,
- Advanced digitisation systems,
- Strict provenance checks,
- Strong museum accountability.

4.2 GREECE

Greece adopts stringent export controls for antiquities and aggressively pursues repatriation claims. Greek law treats antiquities as part of national heritage regardless of private ownership claims.

4.3 UNITED STATES

The United States relies upon import restrictions and bilateral agreements under the Cultural Property Implementation Act. However, private collectors and museums historically acquired artefacts with limited provenance scrutiny. Recent repatriation efforts indicate increasing recognition of ethical responsibilities.

Compared with Italy and Greece, India lacks comprehensive digital databases, specialised heritage enforcement infrastructure nationwide, mandatory provenance transparency requirements, and effective inter-agency coordination.

V. CASE LAWS

¹³UNIDROIT Convention on Stolen or Illegally Exported Cultural Objects, June 24, 1995, 2421 U.N.T.S. 4.

¹⁴United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime, Nov. 15, 2000, 2225 U.N.T.S. 209.



State of Tamil Nadu v. Subhash Chandra Kapoor & Others¹⁵

This is one of the most significant idol trafficking prosecutions in India involving the theft of Chola-era idols from temples in Tamil Nadu and their illegal export to international buyers through the New York gallery “Art of the Past.” The case exposed the role of foreign demand, fake provenance certificates, international auction networks, and local intermediaries. Investigations revealed that poorly monitored rural temples lacked proper inventories and photographic documentation, enabling thefts to remain unnoticed for years. The case also highlighted the role of temple insiders and local agents in identifying vulnerable temples. In proceedings relating to Subhash Kapoor¹⁶, the Supreme Court refused to quash the non-bailable warrant issued against the accused in connection with temple idol thefts in Tamil Nadu. The matter demonstrated the transnational nature of idol trafficking and the involvement of overseas antique markets. The case also reflected weaknesses in enforcement and monitoring mechanisms that allowed idols to be smuggled abroad.

Sripuranthan Idol Theft Case (Australia Repatriation Case)¹⁷

The theft of the Nataraja idol from the Brihadeeswarar Temple at Sripuranthan became internationally significant after the idol was sold to the National Gallery of Australia using fabricated provenance documents. The case demonstrated how auction houses, museums, and collectors relied on weak provenance verification systems. It also exposed how international demand for Chola bronzes encouraged organised theft from neglected rural temples lacking digitised records and security systems.

US Recovery and Repatriation Proceedings Involving Indian Idols¹⁸

Several idols stolen from temples in Tamil Nadu were recovered in the United States after investigations by Homeland Security Investigations (HSI). These proceedings revealed that museums and private collectors abroad acquired idols without adequate provenance scrutiny. The cases illustrate the role of global demand and weak enforcement of cultural property norms in facilitating trafficking.

¹⁵State of Tamil Nadu v. Subhash Chandra Kapoor, Special C.C. No. 1 of 2015 (Special Court for Idol Theft Cases, Kumbakonam Nov. 1, 2022).

Bobins Abraham, Idol Smuggler Subhash Kapoor Sentenced to 10 Years in Jail for Trafficking of Chola Artifacts, [IndiaTimes](#) (Nov. 2, 2022).

A. Selvaraj, Idol Talk? Kapoor Loot Was Huge, Sold Across World, [Times of India](#) (Mar. 17, 2014).

¹⁶Subhash Chandra Kapoor v. State of Tamil Nadu, (2012) (Supreme Court of India) (non-bailable warrant challenge dismissed).

Dhananjay Mahapatra, SC Refuses to Quash NBW Against US-Based Indian Antique Dealer, [Times of India](#) (June 21, 2012).

¹⁷Vijay Kumar, The Idol Thief: The True Story of the Looting of India’s Temples 112–30 (2018).

Idol Thief Subhash Chandra Kapoor Declared by the US as One of the Most Prolific Commodities Smugglers in the World, Reddit, [Reddit IndiaSpeaks Discussion](#) (Aug. 29, 2019).

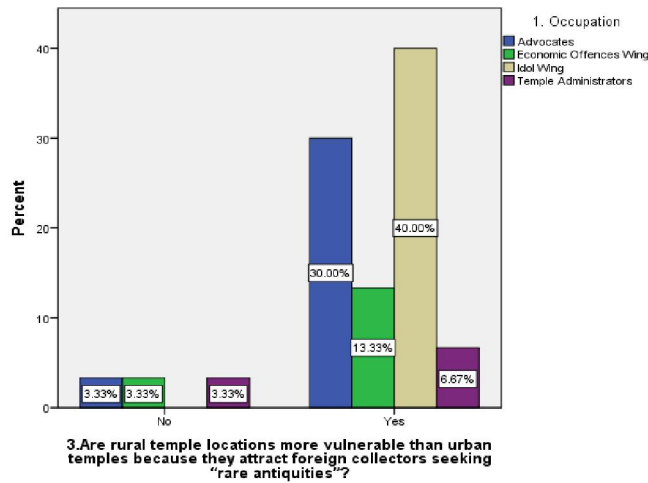
¹⁸US Authorities Recover Idol Stolen from Temple in South India, [NDTV](#) (Nov. 18, 2015).

US Authorities Recover Stolen Idol from South Indian Temple, [Business Standard](#) (Nov. 18, 2015).



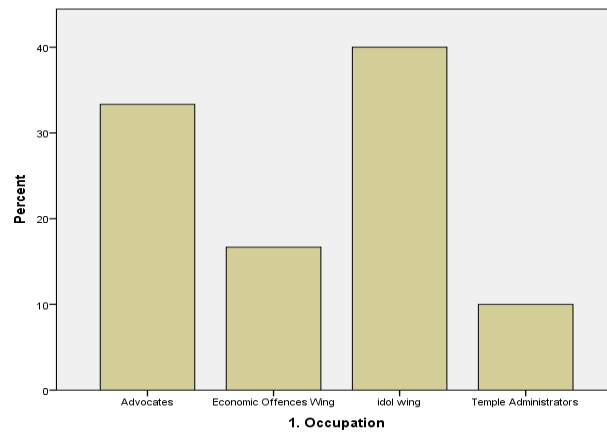
VI. FIELD STUDY ANALYSIS

FIGURE 1



Legend: Figure 1 shows the cluster bar graph on the responses towards rural temple locations being more vulnerable than urban temples because they attract foreign collectors seeking "rare antiquities" compared with the occupation of the respondents.

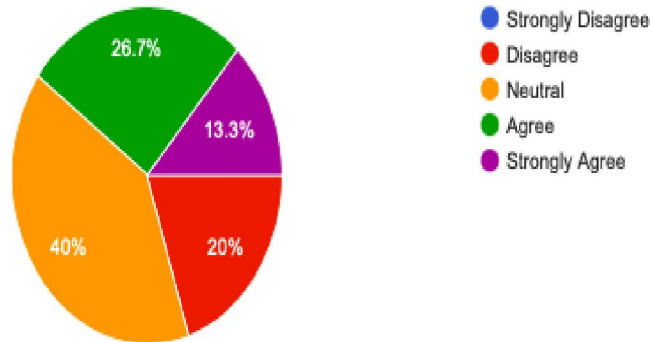
FIGURE 2



Legend: Figure 2 shows the simple bar graph on the occupation of the respondents with percentage as statistics.

FIGURE 3





Legend: Figure 3 shows the pie chart on the agreeability of the respondents on prestige associated with owning rare antiquities encourages collectors to acquire temple idols with percentage as statistics.

TABLE 1

One-Sample Statistics

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
11.Ethical acquisition policies adopted by museums today significantly reduce illegal idol trafficking.	30	3.17	1.117	.204

One-Sample Test

	Test Value = 2					
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
11.Ethical acquisition policies adopted by museums today significantly reduce illegal idol trafficking.	5.722	29	.000	1.167	.75	1.58

Legend: The descriptive statistics showed that respondents generally agreed with the statement that ethical acquisition policies can help reduce illegal trafficking.

TABLE 2

One-Sample Statistics

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
15.Stronger international cooperation between source countries and market countries can reduce demand-driven idol trafficking.	30	3.00	1.083	.198



One-Sample Test

	Test Value = 2					
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
15. Stronger international cooperation between source countries and market countries can reduce demand-driven idol trafficking.	5.058	29	.000	1.000	.60	1.40

Legend: The descriptive statistics showed that respondents generally agreed with the statement that stronger international cooperation between source countries and market countries can reduce demand-driven idol trafficking.

TABLE 3

Case Processing Summary

	Cases					
	Valid		Missing		Total	
	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent
1. Occupation * 7. Does lack of digitised temple inventory in certain states contribute to increased theft for international markets.	30	100.0%	0	0.0%	30	100.0%

1. Occupation * 7. Does lack of digitised temple inventory in certain states contribute to increased theft for international markets. Crosstabulation

Count

		7. Does lack of digitised temple inventory in certain states contribute to increased theft for international markets.		Total
		No	Yes	
1. Occupation	Advocates	1	9	10
	Economic Offences Wing	0	5	5
	Idol Wing	1	11	12
	Temple Administrators	2	1	3
Total		4	26	30



Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	8.510 ^a	3	.037
Likelihood Ratio	6.356	3	.096
N of Valid Cases	30		

a. 6 cells (75.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .40.

Legend: The above table shows the relationship between the lack of digitised temple inventory in certain states contributing to increased theft for international markets and the occupation of the respondents.

TABLE 4

Paired Samples Statistics

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1 4.Private collectors in western countries contribute significantly more to demand than museums.	1.23	30	.430	.079
15.Stronger international cooperation between source countries and market countries can reduce demand-driven idol trafficking.	3.00	30	1.083	.198

Paired Samples Correlations

	N	Correlation	Sig.
Pair 1 4.Private collectors in western countries contribute significantly more to demand than museums. & 15.Stronger international cooperation between source countries and market countries can reduce demand-driven idol trafficking.	30	-.074	.697



		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	4.Private collectors in western countries contribute significantly more to demand than museums. - 15.Stronger international cooperation between source countries and market countries can reduce demand-driven idol trafficking.	-1.767	1.194	.218	-2.213	-1.321	-8.102	29	.000

Legend: The above table compares the fact that private collectors in western countries contribute significantly more to demand than museums and the need for stronger international cooperation between source countries and market countries can reduce demand-driven idol trafficking.”

VII. RESULTS

Figure 1 40% of the respondents are from idol wing followed by advocates, economic offences wing and temple administrators with 35%, 18% and less than 10% respectively.

Figure 2 40% of the respondents from the idol wing, 30% of advocates, 13.33% from economic offences wing and 6.67% of temple administrators agreed that rural temple locations are more vulnerable than urban temples because they attract foreign collectors seeking “rare antiquities” whereas 3.33% of advocates, 3.33% of economic offences wing and 3.33% of temple administrators disagreed.

Figure 3 13.3% of the respondents strongly agreed, 26.7% agreed, 40% stayed neutral while 20% disagreed that prestige associated with owning rare antiquities encourages collectors to acquire temple idols.

Table 1 Since the p-value (.000) is less than 0.05, the result is statistically significant. Hence the alternate hypothesis is accepted rejecting the null hypothesis.

Table 2 The One-Sample Test table reveals a calculated t-value of 5.058 with 29 degrees of freedom and a significance value (p-value) of 0.000. Since the p-value is less than the standard significance level of 0.05, the result is statistically significant. Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected. This means that the respondents’ average opinion differs significantly from the test value, supporting the view that stronger international cooperation can play an important role in reducing demand-driven idol trafficking.

Table 3 The Pearson Chi-Square value of 0.037 is less than the standard significance level of 0.05, the result is statistically significant. Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected, and it can be concluded that there is a significant association between occupation and respondents’ opinions regarding the impact of lack of digitised temple inventories on increased idol theft for international markets.

Table 4 Since the significance value is less than 0.05, the null hypothesis is rejected and the alternative hypothesis is accepted.



VIII. DISCUSSION

Figure 1 Rural temples often lack advanced security systems and proper monitoring, making idol theft easier for trafficking networks targeting rare antiquities. Many rural temples preserve ancient and unique idols, which attract foreign collectors seeking culturally valuable artefacts for private collections. Whereas, urban temples are also vulnerable because they are closely connected to transport networks, dealers, and international smuggling routes. Idol trafficking depends more on international demand, insider involvement, and organised crime than on whether a temple is located in a rural or urban area.

Figure 2 The majority of respondents, especially 40% from the Idol Wing and 30% of advocates, agreed that rural temples are more vulnerable due to weak security and poor monitoring systems. Respondents also believe that rural temples contain rare and ancient idols which attract foreign collectors and increase the risk of trafficking and illegal export. Some respondents from advocates, the Economic Offences Wing, and temple administrators disagreed, indicating that urban temples are also vulnerable to organised idol theft networks. The disagreement suggests that idol trafficking is influenced more by international demand, insider involvement, and illegal market networks than by temple location alone.

Figure 3 The combined 40% of respondents who strongly agreed and agreed indicates that many believe social prestige and status motivate collectors to acquire rare temple idols. Rare antiquities are often viewed as symbols of wealth, exclusivity, and cultural sophistication, increasing demand among private collectors and traffickers. The 20% of respondents who disagreed suggest that collectors may acquire idols for historical, artistic, or investment purposes rather than prestige alone. The high neutral response of 40% indicates uncertainty among respondents regarding whether prestige is the primary factor driving the acquisition of temple idols.

Table 1 The findings support the hypothesis that ethical acquisition policies adopted by museums can significantly reduce illegal idol trafficking. Respondents believe museums have a responsibility to verify provenance, ensure lawful ownership, and avoid undocumented antiquities before acquisitions. Strict ethical standards and compliance with international conventions help reduce opportunities for traffickers to sell stolen idols through legitimate markets. The study also highlights concerns regarding vague ownership records, forged provenance documents, and unethical acquisitions by museums and auction houses.

Table 2 The findings support the alternate hypothesis that stronger international cooperation between source countries and market countries can significantly reduce demand-driven idol trafficking. The statistically significant result indicates that respondents strongly believe coordinated global efforts are essential in combating the illicit idol trade. International cooperation through information sharing, restitution agreements, stricter import regulations, and monitoring of auction houses can help disrupt trafficking networks. The results also reflect the transnational nature of idol smuggling, where stolen idols are moved across borders through organised criminal channels.

Table 3 The findings support the alternate hypothesis that the lack of digitised temple inventories contributes to increased idol theft for international markets. The statistically significant chi-square result shows that respondents across different occupations believe poor documentation and inventory management increase the vulnerability of temple idols to trafficking. Without digitised records, stolen idols become difficult to trace, enabling smugglers and illegal dealers to circulate them through international markets using false provenance documents. The study also suggests that inadequate inventory systems weaken investigation and recovery efforts by law enforcement agencies.

Table 4 The findings show that private collectors in Western countries are perceived as a major force driving idol trafficking through sustained demand for rare antiquities. Respondents believe that prestige, investment value, and



private ownership encourage collectors to acquire stolen temple idols. The study also highlights the importance of international cooperation, stricter import regulations, and provenance verification in reducing illicit trafficking. Concerns regarding auction houses, insider involvement, and poor digitisation of temple inventories further contribute to idol theft.

IX. SUGGESTIONS

- All temple idols should be photographed, geo-tagged and digitally catalogued.
- India should establish a centralised database linked with INTERPOL systems.
- Auction houses and galleries should be legally required to disclose complete ownership histories.
- Local communities should be trained to monitor temple heritage assets.
- Collectors and museums should face penalties for negligent acquisition practices.

X. CONCLUSION

The trafficking of Indian temple idols represents a profound assault upon cultural heritage, religious continuity and historical identity. Although theft occurs locally, the underlying economic forces are global. Western collectors, private galleries and auction markets create demand structures that incentivise organised theft from vulnerable rural temples. The prestige associated with owning rare antiquities transforms sacred cultural objects into commodified luxury assets. The study demonstrates that idol trafficking cannot be addressed merely through punitive criminal laws. Effective prevention requires comprehensive documentation, international cooperation, transparent provenance systems and accountability within global art markets. Auction houses and collectors must no longer be permitted to rely upon vague ownership histories that conceal illicit origins.

India's legal framework provides an important foundation, yet enforcement gaps continue to undermine heritage protection. Comparative experiences from Italy and Greece reveal the importance of specialised heritage policing and digitised cultural databases. Ultimately, protecting temple idols requires recognising them not as ordinary commodities but as living embodiments of collective memory and civilisational continuity.

The findings emphasise the importance of digitisation, proper documentation, and technological monitoring in preventing idol theft and protecting cultural heritage highlighting that collaborative legal and enforcement mechanisms are necessary for protecting cultural heritage and preventing illegal trafficking of temple idols. The study also highlights concerns regarding vague ownership records, forged provenance documents, and unethical acquisitions by museums and auction houses. Overall, transparent acquisition practices, stronger accountability, and international cooperation are essential for protecting cultural heritage and preventing illicit idol trafficking. Overall, the research concludes that international market demand plays a crucial role in sustaining the illegal idol trade.

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