Safehouses turn death chambers for Tamil Nadu’s temple treasures - Times of India

Jaya Menon | TNN | Dec 19, 2018, 11:11 IST

An idol with the markings of exquisite craftsmanship passes hands at the icon centre inside the Thiyagarajar Swami temple in Tiruvarur town of Tamil Nadu. As more idols are pulled out of the musty strong room, measured for height and weight and passed on to the team of archeologists to check for their age and antiquity, fresh concerns emerge.
SPOTTING AN ANTIQUE

PERIODS WHEN SCULPTING THRIVED

While the Pallavas preferred to chip away at stones, high quality metal bronzes were crafted during the Chola period.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pre-Pallava</th>
<th>Pallava</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3rd to 7th century</td>
<td>7th to 9th century</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Later Nayaka and Maratha</td>
<td>Chola</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16th to 19th century</td>
<td>9th to 13th century</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vijayanagara and early Nayaka</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14th to 16th century</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
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ORNAMENTS

Most Pallava women wore big and heavy 'makara kundala' shaped like a wheel. The Yadava women wore the long 'patra kundala', which nearly touched their shoulders.

CRAFTY

A Pallava-era Mahishasura Mardini idol

METAL OR STONE

The five-metal alloy include a large quantity of bronze (copper and tin) and brass (copper and zinc) with lead, which made casting easier. Some studies show additional traces of gold and silver; Pallavas mostly worked with stone.

WAX TECHNIQUE

Chola bronzes were created using the lost wax technique. A figure was sculpted with wax, then coated with clay to form the mould and heated to expel the wax. The molten metal was then poured into the hollow.

BODY FEATURES

Statues of women of the Chola and Pallava period had well-shaped hips with slim bodies. The idols were sculpted in a ‘tribhanga pose’ (three bends in the body — at the neck, waist and knee). The royal women were depicted as small and delicate, while the working-class women were more heavy-set. The women of the Vijayanagara period were heavy and decked with jewellery.

ONE-OF-A-KIND

Chola bronze idol Queen Sembiyam Mahadevi is believed to be made using the lost wax technique.

FOR THE RICHES

A heavily ornamented idol of Sita from the Vijayanagara period.

FOR THE RECORD

- Despite claims of the HR&CE department, several instances show poor protection of idols in TN temples
- No. of registered idol theft cases: 1,200 in 25 years
  - Solved: 56
  - Returned: 18
- In July 2018, Madras high court ordered construction of strong rooms to preserve idols by December 2019
- By December 2021, 3,100 strong rooms should be built, along with 34 high security icon centres

EXPRESSIONS

The Chola idols looked divine, while the Pallava statues had a proud visage.

SACRED THREAD (POONOOL)

Palava figurines have a round, thick thread over the stomach from the left shoulder and also draped over the right shoulder. The Cholas kept it thin and falling over the left shoulder and stomach.

FOCUS AREA

A Pallava era Ganesha idol with a thick sacred thread.
Some of the idols with a green patina, corroded in places, sport gaping holes in pedestals, their beauty blunted forever. An Archaeological Survey of India official, in a white coat, cleans the idols with sodium citrate using a tooth brush, hoping to work a miracle and bring back the shine of the corroded antique, encrusted with sand particles. A photographer places them on a makeshift table with a blue backdrop to record them for posterity.

But, many of the idols have lost their sheen, the graceful curves that set apart their pedigree. “We noticed the affliction in a few idols that we checked. We call it bronze disease or cancer,” former deputy director of Tamil Nadu archaeology department M Chandramoorthy told TOI. He is a member of the Madras high court-appointed team comprising ASI officials and archaeology experts. Over nearly five decades, the icons have piled up in icon centres inside temple premises or pulled out of the earth where they were buried for two to three centuries, fearing Muslim invasion and destruction, said Chandramoorthy.

Presence of chlorides and salts are common if the artefacts are recovered from underground. This is likely with some of the icons retrieved from hoards that were buried, said Bengaluru-based Sharada Srinivasan, a member of the advisory board of the Institute of Archaeometallurgical Studies, London. The progress of bronze disease can be halted, but cannot be totally reversed, said professor Srinivasan.

What has shocked and evoked concerns, however, is the manner in which the idols have been conserved in the icon centres across Tamil Nadu. The idols from temples in the region were locked up for safe-keeping after temple festivals. But many remained in the strong rooms, were afflicted with disease and wasted away. “Corrosion is primarily because of the hostile environment and the reaction of the metal chemically and electrochemically with the environment,” said B Venkatraman, director of Health Safety & Environmental Group-Indira Gandhi Centre for Atomic Research. His team has been screening the ancient temple idols for chemical composition.

The archaeological experts have been more focused on determining the antiquity of the idols and ensuring there have been no thefts and replacements in connivance with temple officials and idol smugglers.

While a heated debate is on about fanning public support for vigilantism to protect the scores of temple treasures, the spotlight for now is on the utter disregard for conservation of artefacts lying in the 19 ‘high security’ icon centres in renowned shrines in Tamil Nadu.

“These are idols to be worshipped in temples and not kept in vaults. They have been utterly neglected,” said former historian, archaeologist and epigraphist R Nagaswamy.
With the debate veering back to the upkeep of the icon centres, experts say vaults and temples, which are not waterproof and which do not have controlled atmospheres as in the museums, pose inherent problems in the conservation of metal artefacts.

“Perhaps we have to think of ways whereby conservation facilities can be made available to such vaults as well as in temples with regular monitoring,” said Srinivasan, dean of the School of Humanities, National Institute of Advanced Studies, suggesting the provision of museum-like storage spaces or display cabinets with controlled environments, whereby the relative humidity and atmosphere can be monitored.

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