

## Praise for the Book

'India has suffered a lot in the last one thousand years. And yet, we are one of the few major ancient civilizations that has survived the invasions that wiped out most other cultures that began the path to civilization with us. This was because our ancestors cared for our heritage. They fought to protect it. Sadly, modern Indians have not cared with as much passion for our national inheritance. One of those who have not cared has been the art dealer Subhash Kapoor, who, Indian courts say, collaborated with many to steal large numbers of our idols and sell them in foreign lands. Sadly many Indians appear to have collaborated with Subhash in this crime against our heritage. But some have fought these defilers. Vijay is one of them. Read this book to know what we can do, and how we can fight, to keep our culture alive. Buy this book and read about the struggle to bring our Gods home. It's the least we can do for our precious heritage.' **Amish**

'An absolutely gripping crime thriller, except it is based on true events. Written by one of the key protagonists, it tells us of the international criminal networks that have stolen millions of dollars worth of Indian antiquities, and of the extraordinary individuals that are hunting them down. One of the best books I have read in years.' **Sanjeev Sanyal**

'A fascinating, captivating book. Reads like the script of a suspense thriller film. True crime at its best.' **Hussain Zaidi**

'Lifts the veil on a sordid but fascinating world . . . a page-turner'  
*Mint*



# The Idol Thief

S. Vijay Kumar

 Juggernaut

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## Cast of Characters

**Subhash Kapoor** – A celebrated art dealer based in New York. He is currently in jail in Chennai awaiting trial for the theft of idols from temples in Tamil Nadu. After his arrest, the American authorities recovered stolen Indian art worth \$100 million from Subhash's warehouses and galleries, and named him 'one of the most prolific commodities smugglers in the world'.

**Sushma Sareen née Kapoor** – Subhash Kapoor's sister. She has been taking care of Subhash's art business and other affairs after he was arrested in 2011.

**Sanjeevi Asokan** – An art dealer based out of Chennai who supplied idols to Subhash Kapoor. Sanjeevi's arrest and subsequent ratting on Subhash led the authorities to him.

**Deendayal** – Another art dealer based out of Chennai who also supplied idols to Subhash Kapoor. The octogenarian

Deendayal was arrested in 2016. Over 200 objects were recovered from his home and warehouse in Chennai.

**Shantoo** – An associate Subhash Kapoor knew he could always count on. After he was arrested, Subhash asked Shantoo to try blackmailing a corrupt police officer to secure his release.

**Selvaraj** – A heroic police officer of the Idol Wing in Chennai and a dogged idol-thief hunter, Selvaraj managed to nab Sanjeevi Asokan and, therefore, Subhash Kapoor.

**Kader Batcha** – Selvaraj’s deputy in the Idol Wing.

**Indy** – A brilliant US law enforcement officer who is investigating and maintaining a comprehensive dossier on Subhash Kapoor. The Indian authorities managed to nab Subhash before Indy could.

**Jason Felch, Michaela Boland and Dr Kirit Mankodi** – Associates of the author of this book, S. Vijay Kumar, who, along with him, have been helping law enforcement agencies crack down on idol theft.

**Grace Paramaspry** – Subhash Kapoor’s ex-girlfriend and former business associate who runs an antiques shop in Singapore. Grace and Subhash had a bitter break-up which is why Grace ratted on Subhash, helping the Indian authorities get to him.



**Selina Mohamed** – Subhash Kapoor’s girlfriend and business associate. Selina used to prepare false provenances and paperwork for idols Subhash would try to sell to museums and galleries. After he was arrested, Subhash sent a secret note asking Selina to hold on to two priceless Natarajas and two Sivakamis for him.

**Aaron Freedman** – Subhash Kapoor’s assistant and gallery manager. He is now cooperating with the US authorities in their case against Subhash.



## Prologue

Be safe, my Lord, within this earth

**Somewhere in a small village near Ariyalur in Tamil Nadu: circa eleventh century CE**

The artisan's deep voice reverberated around the room as he began the chant. Seated cross-legged on the floor, with both hands he held up over his head a taut loop of white holy thread. He let one end fall on his dark left shoulder, and the other passed under his right arm. Two more loops of thread lay stretched across his thighs. The chant continued as he bent to take the spoon and tip a few drops of water on his right hand and proceeded to don the rest of the threads in similar fashion.

He closed his eyes and invoked the powers of his first ancestor – Vishwakarma, the divine architect. The aroma of the kungiliyam, the sap of the sal tree, being stirred over the clay stove filled the air as he opened his eyes and gestured to his son to pour in the fine beeswax. The heat melted the golden wax, mixing it with the darker kungiliyam. He motioned for some more wax to be added

so that the ingredients were in equal proportions. He was to fashion the main torso today.

He knew just by looking at the boiling mixture that it had reached the desired consistency and signalled for the pot of cold water to be brought in. The hot mixture was strained into the water, instantly solidifying with an audible hiss. His son looked up at him, his eyes asking if he would like to test the result; the head-shake indicated that it was not needed.

The auspicious hour was upon them and a large pot of fresh water was set on the fire to boil. Several lumps from the cooled wax mixture went into it, slowly losing their shape. His eyes closed again as he invoked the *dyana shloka* – the Vedic chant of the Lord of Dance, *Nataraja* – and his hands pulled out the softening wax. In his mind's eye he could clearly see the image he was to fashion: the three-eyed one, Lord Shiva, twirling around, his *jatas* flowing behind him, his upper arms stretched out sideways, with a *damaru* or drum in one hand and the other holding fire. The left leg went up and then the two lower hands formed their *mudras* – the left hand forming the *gaja*, that mimics the trunk of an elephant, with the fingers pointing gracefully downwards towards the raised foot, signifying the Lord's capacity to remove obstacles and hindrances; and the right hand displaying the *abhaya*, where the fingers point upwards and the palm is facing the viewer, symbolic of the Lord telling the devotee not to fear because he is there to protect him. He smiled as he envisioned the brilliant aureole that encloses the entire composition burst into flames. A dazzling light

seemed to emerge from the Lord's nabhi, or navel, slowly growing in luminosity, permeating the entire room with its radiance. His ears picked up the sound of his Lord's anklets jingling in perfect rhythm with the beat of the primordial drum as his fingers worked to fashion the wax.

His eyes became moist with emotion as he stood back to review his work, before realizing that he had merely repeated what had been handed down to him through the ages – a thousand years of knowledge flowed through his hands, the accumulated wisdom of his ancient, unbroken bloodline coursed through his veins. This would be his best creation and he would make it unique with his signature embellishments. But for that he needed a different consistency of the mixture. He gestured to his son to add more wax to make it one and a half parts of wax to one part kungiliyam.

Outside, the donor waited anxiously. He had commissioned the bronze sculpture and paid for the metal, but today was extra special. His wife had good news for him – she was pregnant, and she assured him that it would be a boy. He had brought four of her heaviest gold chains as an offering. They would be melted and go on to make his resplendent Lord glitter and, in turn, make his progeny's fate glitter as well.

But first, the artisan had to make a clay cast of the wax Nataraja into which would be poured the molten metal.

Ten days later, at the appointed hour, they assembled in front of the garbhagriha or the sanctum sanctorum, and he placed his masterpiece on a raised platform. As the lamps were brought in closer, the play of light and

shade seemed to bring the statue to life, the Lord of Dance, Natesa.

### **Sometime in 1311 CE**

It was not yet light, but that the village was already up was evident from the unusual and frantic sounds at that early hour. Urgency spread through the priest's hands as he grappled with the thick coir rope, knotting it over the neck of a brass pot. He gave a final tug to the ends to ensure the knots were tight and sent it over, into the temple well, and waited for it to hit the water. His hands alternated as he pulled the pot up, the well-oiled mechanism of the wooden pulley hardly making any sound. He uttered the Lord's name as he poured the water on his head, his long tresses falling over his eyes. He brushed them aside and dropped the pot into the well once again. The cold water helped calm his nerves. He repeated this ten times and then emptied the pot into a larger brass drum. He bent low into the drum to use the water to rinse its sides clean and poured out the contents. The pulley was worked another ten times before the drum was full and he turned his attention to the smaller silver pot next to it. He meticulously cleaned it too, before filling it up. His hair had dried by the time he was done, though his dhoti, still wet, clung to him. He twisted his locks into a knot behind his head.

He picked up the brass drum and the silver pot. Filled with water, they were heavy, but his heart was heavier.

He had consulted all his charts the previous night.

The news of the evening correlated with the stars. Saka year 1232 (1311 CE) was not easy to read. He tried to see his future but a dark cloud shrouded it. He tried to read the chart for his son, but it just refused to speak to him.

He had made his decision then. He knew that the day had finally arrived. It was the day of supreme sacrifice. His grandfather had told him about it when he was very young, and his father after that, several times, so that he would know exactly what to do. Every step had been clearly laid out. It was all preordained.

He had the large key to the temple's main door tied in a thick red thread around his waist. There were a few smaller locks to open as well, and an iron crossbar to remove, so he left the vessels near the door and pushed the long-necked ancient key into the thick wooden wicket door – the small door within the door. He stooped low as he passed through the small opening and reached for the massive crossbar that barricaded the main door of the temple. There was a single lamp still burning at the side of the garbhagriha. He walked towards the lamp, added another wick to it and topped up the oil from the container by the side. He opened the door of the garbhagriha and lit a few more lamps before going back to fetch the vessels. Usually he would head straight inside to the main deity, but today was different. He would break tradition.

In the fifteen-odd years he had been the head priest and the fifteen years he had been his father's apprentice before he passed away, and for generations before him, it had never been done. He turned to where the utsava murthis, or processional idols, were stored. In south

India, the main deity is fixed in one place inside the sanctum sanctorum and cannot be moved. The deity, usually made of stone, is called the moola murthi, moola bera, or moolavar. Moola literally translates to main or principal. In Shiva temples the moola murthi is generally a linga. During festivals and on special occasions, the various avatars of Shiva or Vishnu are displayed before the public in the form of bronze idols which are taken out in a procession. These are the utsava murthis and on specific days specific avatars of the gods are brought out on wooden vahanas or vehicles. Even when not in procession these utsava murthis are treated as living beings. They are taken at night to their sleeping room called palli arai (palli means sleep and arai room) to the accompaniment of ritual music and lullabies. In the morning, they are woken up lovingly with similar songs, bathed, attired in fresh clothes and fed before being placed in front of the moolavar.

As the priest opened the small grille door, he started singing to his gods – a waking-up hymn. He brought in the silver pot and slowly poured water from it over his dancing Lord, the Nataraja, his consort Sivakami (Parvati is called Sivakami when she is witnessing the dance of Shiva), then on the divine family – Shiva, Uma (another name for Parvati) and Skanda – as Somaskanda, then the ever-present form of Appar with his signature tool to clean temples – the uzhavaram, and lastly the large Ganesha. He took out the pulp of the tamarind he had brought with him and used it to scrub the idols before washing them again. He continued to sing to his gods



even as his hands worked. Then he untied the cloth around his waist and dried them individually, taking care to wipe under their arms, in the back and in the niches between the locks of the Nataraja. His hands felt the cheeks of his Lord as he wiped the drops of water that had fallen on his neck and chest.

He did not realize how long he had been there until he heard his men assemble near the main door of the temple. They could not be here so early! His young son was also with them and he came into the temple bleary-eyed, half-awake due to being woken up so early.

The men were tense and it showed in the way they carried their tools. There were eight of them and they carried an array of crowbars and spades. The boy ran up to his father and held his hand. He wiped the moisture off the idols one more time and stood straight to offer his prayers. He turned and walked outside with firm steps. The men followed in silence now.

He walked along the tall outer wall of the temple, all the while counting his steps and looking at the sculptures carved on the pillars, till he came to one which showed a lady dwarf blowing into a conch. He stopped and took three steps to his left. He was standing on top of a heavy granite slab which appeared to be no different from the rest that were laid to form a pathway around the temple. He motioned to his son to come near and whispered something in his ear before calling the men. They used a small crowbar to prize out the stone block. Surprisingly, after only a few nudges it came loose. They slipped a stout rope under it and pulled to slide it to the side. Only then

did they notice that the slab was only half the thickness of the adjoining ones.

Immediately, they took their spades and started digging out the soil underneath. Very soon, four of them were up to their waists in the pit. They looked up to check if they should stop, but he shook his head and indicated they should dig up to their necks. The pit had to be over five feet deep.

When they had finished, they placed a large granite slab at the base of the pit and spread kusa grass evenly over it. He had prepared the granite slab and the kusa grass the evening before, just as his manual had stated. He sprinkled water on the grass and invoked the protection of Mother Earth. Finally, the idols were carried, reverentially, one by one, and placed carefully over the grass.

Far away in the distance, dark smoke rose and the air was filled with the odours of death.

They took turns to put earth into the pit and then replaced the stone to cover it. By the time the excess earth and sand were dumped into the well, there were no telltale marks of their morning's labour.

The air had grown thicker as the shouts became shrieks. The men held their crowbars and spades and positioned themselves outside, against the temple's main door.

The sound of galloping horses made him run to the garbhagriha. He prayed for the final time, not for himself but for his son to survive, not out of love but so that he would be able to find the spot and restore his Lord to his rightful abode. The invading armies of Alauddin Khilji, led by Malik Kafur, had taken temples ten times the

size of his in no time. They were here. The twang of the enemy's bows and the whizzing of arrows accompanied the cavalry's frenzied cheers outside as the archers killed the assembled men within minutes, and opened the temple's doors. They did not waste time breaking anything that was not of value. They tested their metal weapons on the stone sculptures. He pleaded with them to spare the gods, but to no avail.

They dragged him by his hair into the street, to the commander who was dressed in full armour. The entire village had been laid to waste already. Next to him was the village elder, his face a bloody mess. They asked him where the gold was, by showing him a bag of gold ornaments – loot from the previous day's plunder. They cut off the elder's ears and then his nose, yet he did not speak. So they took out his tongue and threw it to the dogs. Then they turned to the priest.

They wanted gold or any metal idols that they could melt. They dragged him back into the temple and took turns to slam his head against the stone pillars. They bound his legs and tied him to a horse and dragged him out onto the street where he saw his young son's body, struck with countless arrows, lying face up. In his dying breath he managed a final prayer.

'Be safe, my Lord, within this earth as long as it pleases you.'

A few seconds later his body lay on the ground as his soul merged with his Creator.



Did this really happen? I'm not sure. But it is how I imagine the histories of our idols. How they were made with deep devotion; how several were destroyed; and how a number of our gods came to be buried deep inside the earth. For more on the burying of gods when there is a threat to them, see Appendix 1.

# The Glamorous Life of Subhash Kapoor

**March 2007**

‘\$8.5 million for the pair!’

That’s what Subhash Kapoor, a prominent art dealer who ran a gallery called Art of the Past in New York, was selling two incomparable Chola-era idols of Nataraja and Sivakami for – the kind temple priests would readily give up their lives to protect.

From 850 CE to 1250 CE the Chola dynasty witnessed the building of many elaborately carved stone temples all over Tamil Nadu, which, as mentioned in the Prologue, housed the main deity made of stone along with a number of processional bronze idols adorned with sumptuous silks and dazzling jewels. These fine Chola bronzes are highly coveted by museums and collectors. They are the star attractions of the India collections in many art institutions around the world. What Subhash

Kapoor was selling in March 2007 for \$8.5 million was a 3.5-foot-tall and approximately 150 kg Nataraja – Lord Shiva performing the bewitching dance of creation and destruction, surrounded by an enormous circle of flames and his much shorter and lighter consort, also surrounded by a stunning oval of flames, the beautiful Sivakami. The pair dates back to the twelfth century CE.

Subhash frequently conducted sales meetings in one of the fancy steakhouses on Madison Avenue in New York. It wouldn't be surprising if a buyer responded with bewilderment at the price Subhash Kapoor was quoting. Such prices were unheard of even for the best of Indian art. But then this was no ordinary sales pitch for an ordinary piece of art. This pair was incomparable, the likes of which had never come up for sale in the art world. At this point the pair was still in India, and Subhash had a photograph of the idols with him.

In recorded public history, there has only been one other instance of a matched Nataraja bronze with his consort Sivakami outside India and even in that case the Nataraja was gifted to the Metropolitan Museum of Art (MET), New York, by Robert Ellsworth in 1987, but he sold off the Sivakami to a private collector in 1990 and it disappeared from public view for a long time after that.<sup>1</sup> The Ellsworth Sivakami was later offered for sale again in 2013 by Sotheby's auction house and it went for \$137,000.<sup>2</sup> But Kapoor's matched pair was far superior to Ellsworth's and was expected to fetch a hell of a lot more.

For one, the Nataraja and Sivakami that Kapoor was trying to sell had a rare inscription on their pedestals

and it is extremely unusual to find inscribed Chola bronzes. That increased their importance since it showed unambiguously that they were a matched pair – that is, they were from the same temple. The inscription read ‘Suthamalli’ in the Tamil script, which is the name of the village they are from. But there was a problem. Yes, the Suthamalli bronzes were in a league of their own but the pair had never been exhibited, studied, or included in art books or catalogues before. Where had



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*Suthamalli Sivakami*



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*Suthamalli Nataraja*

they suddenly appeared in New York from? This could be a pressing question for a buyer because, according to an Indian law passed in 1972, any antiquity older than 100 years cannot be taken out of the country. If such an antiquity is discovered to have been taken out of India after 1972, then, under the terms of a UN convention, the recipient country has to forfeit it without compensation. This would have been a stumbling block for a museum interested in buying the pair from Kapoor. But the



art dealer had his distinct ways of sweetening deals to overcome such speed bumps. A lavish private viewing for a museum acquisitions committee and its major patrons, authentication by a prominent academic art historian, and a few free paintings and artefacts as well would not be unheard of for a sale of this value.

Indeed, Kapoor knew how to close deals. Just recently, the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM) in Singapore had booked a spectacular Chola Uma, another name for Goddess Parvati, that he was selling. And in what should give you an idea of how significant an art dealer Kapoor was and the rarity of the works he offered for sale, he had another Chola era Nataraja, from the same temple in the village of Sripuranthan in Tamil Nadu. Subhash managed to pull off several art world coups in terms of the exquisite pieces he offered for sale. He hadn't been able to find a buyer for the Sripuranthan Nataraja yet, though. And so if the Suthamalli pair – at \$8.5 million – was too expensive he could offer a buyer the Sripuranthan Nataraja instead. The price tag? Just \$5.1 million. That Nataraja would later be scooped up by the National Gallery of Australia (NGA) in Canberra.

Born in 1949, Subhash had an older brother, Ramesh, and a younger sister, Sushma. Their family had moved from Lahore to Jalandhar prior to Partition when his father realized there was a business opportunity in dealing in rare books and manuscripts left behind by families fleeing the horrors of the divide. By 1962, the family had moved to Delhi where Kapoor's father started a gallery that specialized in Pahari paintings. Kapoor studied at



*Subhash Kapoor*

DAV School in Delhi and along with Ramesh he helped with the family business. In 1974 Kapoor left for the US where he continued in the same line of work, and in 1976 he married his wife, Neeru. Ramesh and Sushma also moved to the US by 1976, and by 1981, they had all become US citizens.

That a child, whose father was a small-time art dealer, had become one of the most prominent figures of the international art circuit was no small achievement.

Kapoor's gallery, Art of the Past, was located on the corner of Madison Avenue and 89th Street, in the moneyed Upper East Side of Manhattan and very close to the MET, the Guggenheim and the Cooper-Hewitt – the top art institutions of our time. He was no stranger to the world of oysters, rare beef steaks and even rarer wines. Slightly round around the middle, and balding, he dressed

impeccably in fine suits and silk ties and wore rimless spectacles. He was well heeled enough to effortlessly fit into the champagne-and-caviar world of Manhattan art parties and museum galas, as well as at blue-blood auction houses and in haughty academic circles.

Take a walk in the Smithsonian and you're likely to encounter Subhash Kapoor's name on a plaque more than once. He had worked hard to edge his way into the museum circuit, often gifting extremely valuable works of art, such as the Shunga period (200 BCE–50 CE) pot that he gave to the MET in the name of his daughter.<sup>3</sup> The exponential increase in one's brand value and public profile by having a plaque next to the opening exhibit of the MET's India collection that says 'Gift of Subhash Kapoor, in honour of his daughter, Mamta Kapoor, 2003' cannot be underestimated. It greases the path to being viewed sympathetically by museum acquisitions



The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

*Subhash Kapoor's gift to the MET in honour of his daughter*

committees in the future. When his father died in 2007, Kapoor again gifted the MET a group of artworks in memory his father from whom he had learned his trade. And who, according to the *Indian Express*,<sup>4</sup> had been tried for art theft in the 1970s. He also loaned artefacts to hotels such as The Pierre, New York, where the super wealthy were sure to encounter them and his name on a plaque next to them.

So how had Subhash Kapoor risen to such impressive heights? Till 1994, Subhash had been a small-time gallery owner in New York. At some point he had started selling terracotta artefacts from Chandraketugarh – a much vandalized 2500-year-old site in West Bengal, India, that had been continuously occupied from the pre-Mauryan era (around 600 BCE) through to the Pala–Sena era in the twelfth century CE. The site was originally excavated by Calcutta University in the mid-1950s but then it was effectively abandoned in the mid-1960s. In the 1950s there was already a law in place ‘forbidding export of archaeological material. So any material from the region up for sale has been illegally excavated and exported.’<sup>5</sup>

These artefacts filled Subhash’s coffers for several years, thanks to the steady market for the small, delicate terracottas. Subhash was able to sell and even donate hundreds of them to collectors and museums. The Shunga era pot that Subhash gifted to the MET, for instance, is from Chandraketugarh.

Around 1994, Subhash was able to take a small step forward in his business. He managed to sell to the prestigious Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW)

two terracotta artefacts from Chandraketugarh. The AGNSW finalized the acquisition of the two terracottas with scant paperwork or provenance and transferred the agreed sum of \$14,500 to his company, Art of the Past. The items entered the AGNSW collection as terracotta numbers 1376 and 2131.

This was the start of a long association with the AGNSW. Subhash ensured his gallery assistants sent regular portfolios to the museum, predominantly dealing with paintings. He had regular sales with them, including two paintings in 1995 for \$62,500, a Kerala dance mask in June 1998 for \$7,500 and a Mewar school miniature painting of Shiva for \$3,500.

But Subhash still needed the big break, the big-ticket sculpture sale that would catapult him into the top league. And for that he had to wait for help from the man with the golden touch.

This person was a frequent visitor to his gallery and someone who had helped in a big way to bring Indian art to American shores, not as an art scholar like Ananda Coomaraswamy, but as a catalyst for collectors, virtually putting a price tag on every Indian art item – Chola bronzes, Gupta stones and so on. He had billionaires and Hollywood celebrities eating out of his hand, buying stuff for their personal collections and donating a part to the museums which he recommended. An associate of a major art magazine, he was a leading historian and a celebrated scholar. One of his books on Indian art has generous references to items that have passed through Subhash's hands.