

The Plunder of National Treasures

In the May and June 1975 issues of the *Economic Review* we had two incisive columns on the antiques drain from Sri Lanka. These two articles directly or indirectly led to a series of newspaper articles and reports, broadcasts, seminars and academic resolutions in the months and years that followed. It was in this sense of the verbal response created that these turned out to be among the most influential pieces this journal produced that year. However, at the level of action those two articles, as well as numerous other responses thereafter continue to remain ineffective. Hence this attempt to re-emphasise the seriousness of the problem.

Following on our May 1975 article, the newspapers reported that a Three-man Committee consisting of the Commissioner of Archaeology, the Director of Museums and the Commissioner of National Archives was engaged in drafting recommendations for a check on the traffic in antiques. Numerous newspaper reports subsequently have repeated that legislation was around the corner and recently a Cultural Delegation from India (which is far more advanced in these matters than Sri Lanka) assured the Sri Lanka authorities that India would be giving us as much technical help as possible in stemming the flow of antiques.

Judging from the record of the last three years of implementing some sort of regulation on the outflow of antiques, it becomes clear that what is required is not so much foreign assistance, although this would be valuable, but a will to do what needs to be done. Our own lethargy takes place within the context of much international success in stemming the flow of antiques in other countries. The current issue of *Courier*, the UN organ on cultural matters, devotes a high degree of attention to these successes, not only in stemming the outflow but even of returning antiques already spirited away. Thus the Director General of UNESCO has made a stirring appeal "for the return of an irreplaceable heritage to those who created it." Several countries even without a long recorded heritage and authen-

ticated antiques that we are heirs to, have taken steps in this direction. For example, one African country is attempting to recover four ivory masks removed in 1897 by members of a punitive expedition. The articles that follow, as well as our photo coverage draw attention to some of these facts. We also have included some previous correspondence in the national newspapers on this matter to highlight some of these facts.

HOW IT WAS DONE THEN Through the Archaeological Commissioner himself

The following appeared in the "Ceylon Standard" dated 15th June, 1903:-

"..... A few days ago Mr. Bell, Archaeological Commissioner had allowed the District Engineer to remove certain stones from the buildings which are recognized as ancient Buddhist Colleges. A complaint regarding this was made by the High Priest before Mr. Brayne, Police Magistrate, who ordered the work to be promptly stopped, but after communicating with the Archeological Commissioner who said that the High Priest had no right whatever to the land in question or the stones there and that they were the property of Government and that he would personally hold himself responsible for the removal of the stones presumably for mending roads, the District Engineer was allowed to resume the removal of stones, which was done in such a manner as to cause annoyance to the Buddhist Community. The stones were broken up into small bits on the spot and then removed by cart-loads. This has caused great dissatisfaction among the resident Buddhists as they found that they were quite powerless to check this act of vandalism owing to the high official status of the officers concerned".

"The Ceylon Morning Leader" in its editorial of the 14th September, 1907, on "The Archaeological Commissioner" says:

"The Commissioner is in the unfortunate position of having no restraints of that kind, — if we exclude the Buddhists, who from time to time, raise the cry in the wilderness that their sacred cities are being unnecessarily invaded....

The work of the Archeological Commissioner has been a terra incog-

nita to the Government and the public alike.

We want a return for the expenditure of over Rupees 900,000/- something the wide world is expecting from the favoured spot of Archaeological work — we want the detailed report of the Archaeologist with all its invaluable sidelights on the history of Ancient Ceylon".

In the midway between the Dagoba and the bund there lie the ruins of Mahapaduma and Sunhat; Pirivenas or Oriental Colleges.

It was from this precincts of the former that the coolies of the Public Works Department removed stones; and those shown in Plate XLIV are some that were left unbroken through the interference of Buddhists. These were photographed by a representative of Messrs. F. Skeen & Co., Colombo, on the 17th November 1907, at our request. From the words of the Archaeological Commissioner in page 78 you could very well understand the despotic attitude this servant of His Majesty has assumed. His authority appears to be something higher than that of the Court of Law! We know that he is one of the oldest civil servants; but it is gross violation of British Justice to reduce these sacred stones to metal and to say that the remains of religious edifices in the Sacred City do not belong to the Buddhists.

If the sacred precincts are allowed to be devastated in this manner, in a short time the Buddhists will have very little evidence to maintain their long enjoyed rights and privileges, and the lovers of antiquities who visit this city of Shrines and Ruins will be disappointed".

HOW IT IS DONE NOW Through the Tourist Trade

Many of those vendors who up to a few years ago were selling books for local pilgrims (Vandana Poth) at the main centres of pilgrimage — namely the ruined cities — have now switched over to selling antiques to tourists. Among these antiques are some very rare specimens (judged on stylistic grounds) which have been obtained from temples throughout the island. According to information supplied by these vendors themselves there is a systematic ring of suppliers — at least three mudalalis — who comb the country's temples and supply the tourist trade with antiques. There is also a brisk sale of rare palm leaf manuscripts (Pus Kola Poth). This latter trade has reached such ridiculous heights that instead of

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palm leaf books being sold whole, pages are cut into small strips and sold to tourists as souvenirs for about Re. 1/- per small strip.

At these traditional centres of pilgrimage antiques are openly sold for foreign currency by these vendors and there is a considerable profit in this business. A former General Manager of the Anuradhapura Preservation Board who visited Anuradhapura a few weeks ago after an absence of nearly five years found that there has been a sharp rise in the standards of living of these vendors arising from this trade.

The sale of antiques also goes on either directly or indirectly at almost all the leading hotels in the country. Thus the foyer of the Inter Continental Hotel has a very prominent display and advertisement for a well known antique dealer in Colombo. Similarly there are antique boutiques at many of the leading hotels in Anuradhapura, Colombo, Bentota and Negombo. In the rare event of antiques not being sold in the hotel premises itself, there are often shops adjoining the hotels (and which form part of the hotel complex) which specialise in this trade.

Most of the antique shops in Chatham Street and Queen Street in the Colombo Fort area specialise almost exclusively in the sale of antiques to tourists.

Men in robes whom he would hesitate to call bhikkhus were behind some of the antique rackets discovered recently, the Secretary to the Ministry of Cultural Affairs told a press conference recently. He said that stringent measures would be adopted to arrest the outflow of antiques from Sri Lanka.

A few months ago the Police in Anuradhapura arrested a dealer on suspicion of possessing stolen antiques. Inquiries, however, revealed that the antiques were sold to this dealer by the Chief Priest of a not so remote temple. There is also evidence to indicate that tourists are made offers of antiques even from well known temples, as well as from museums.

Apart from sales to tourists who come to the country for a few weeks, there is a much more systematic sale to foreign experts, diplomats and the like who are here for a longer stay.

It is worth repeating, in the present context what the *Review* urged in June 1975 when we stated "clearly a very broad policy on antiques must be evolved. This should include not only new legislation and tighter methods of control but also a complete re-appraisal of what is historically valuable. The development of popular awareness through education and propaganda and the establishment of

local antiquities registers are vitally necessary. The registration of dealers, the encouragement of local collections and the formation of small provincial museums should be combined with a renewal of craft skills and the reproduction of antiques for sale and export. Incidentally, much of this is already being done. It only needs systematisation and encouragement".