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Combating the Illegal Trade of Cultural Artifacts: A Technology-Driven Approach

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ABSTRACT

The illegal trade of cultural property is a serious global issue, with stolen and illegally traded artifacts generating up to \$10 billion annually (UNESCO, 2023). In India alone, over 1,000 cases of antiquities theft were reported between 2012 and 2022, with many of these artifacts being smuggled to international markets (ASI, 2023). Digital platforms like e-commerce websites and social media have made it easier to traffic cultural items across borders, worsening the problem. Although international agreements like the 1970 UNESCO Convention aim to address this issue, they have struggled to keep up with its growing scale and complexity, especially in today's digital world. Our research looks into the factors responsible for the illegal trade of cultural artifacts and suggests strategies to prevent it. The focus is on the use of modern tools like blockchain to verify the origin of artifacts and artificial intelligence (AI) to identify and track stolen items. We also touch upon the role of online platforms in enabling trafficking, an area that has not received enough attention. The goal is to develop practical solutions that combine technology, international collaboration, and stronger regulations to safeguard cultural heritage. To achieve this, our study uses a mix of methods, including analysing trafficking trends from sources like INTERPOL, UNESCO, and India's Archaeological Survey (ASI), also by taking insights from online expert interviews with museum professionals and law enforcement; and studying major artifact recovery cases, such as the Operation Pandora. What makes this research unique is its interdisciplinary approach, combining knowledge from fields like art history, technology, and criminology. By integrating tools like blockchain for tracking artifacts, AI for detecting theft, and improved regulation of online marketplaces, our study aims to provide innovative and practical ways to combat the illegal trade of cultural property.

Keywords: *Illegal trade of cultural property, Cultural heritage protection, Artifact trafficking, Blockchain technology, Digital platforms*

I. INTRODUCTION

The illegal trade of cultural property has grown into one of the most pressing global

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challenges in the protection of heritage. It is estimated that this illicit industry is worth up to \$10 billion annually, placing it among the most lucrative transnational crimes alongside drug and arms trafficking (UNESCO, 2023). What makes this issue particularly grave is that it not only results in the theft of objects with high monetary value but also leads to the erasure of cultural memory, historical continuity, and collective identity. Stolen artifacts are often smuggled out of their country of origin and sold to private collectors, auction houses, or museums abroad, stripping them of their context and meaning.³

India, a country with an exceptionally rich and diverse cultural history, has been especially vulnerable to such crimes. According to the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), over 1,000 cases of theft and illegal export of antiquities were reported between 2012 and 2022. These incidents have affected both well-known temples and remote historical sites, many of which lack adequate security and documentation. Once removed from their original location, these objects are extremely difficult to trace or reclaim, particularly when they resurface years later in foreign markets or private collections. The damage caused is not only physical but also symbolic, representing a deeper loss of heritage and historical ownership for communities and the nation as a whole.

While international conventions such as the 1970 UNESCO Convention and various bilateral agreements attempt to curb this illicit trade, they are increasingly being tested by the complex and evolving nature of trafficking networks. One of the most concerning developments in recent years has been the use of digital technologies and online platforms to facilitate illegal trade. Traffickers now use social media, e-commerce websites, and even the dark web to advertise, sell, and move stolen items across borders with ease and anonymity. These platforms often operate without adequate oversight or accountability, making it difficult for authorities to monitor transactions or verify the provenance of artifacts. Moreover, once artifacts enter the international market, the burden of proof for recovery falls heavily on the country of origin, often requiring extensive documentation that may not exist due to poor archival practices.⁴

Given these challenges, there is a growing need to rethink traditional approaches to heritage protection and integrate new tools and technologies into the process. This research seeks to investigate the root causes of cultural property trafficking and explore how emerging technologies—particularly blockchain and artificial intelligence, can help prevent and combat

³ UNESCO, *Illicit Trafficking of Cultural Property*, <https://www.unesco.org/en/cultural-diversity/trafficking>

⁴ Archaeological Survey of India, *Annual Report 2022–2023*, <https://asi.nic.in/annual-report>

this crime. By examining trafficking patterns, studying key artifact recovery cases, and evaluating the role of digital platforms, this study aims to offer practical and innovative strategies for safeguarding cultural heritage in the digital age. The focus is on bridging the gap between law, technology, and heritage management in order to create a more secure and transparent ecosystem for cultural property worldwide.

A. Literature Review

Many researchers have tried using blockchain to help track and protect cultural artifacts. For example, a study by Kovačević and team looked at how blockchain could be used in real-world situations to keep permanent and tamper-proof records of who owns an artifact. Their aim was to show that blockchain could make the movement and transfer of artifacts more transparent. They were successful in showing that the technology works well in theory. However, they also found some big problems. The cost of setting up such systems is high, and the process of linking digital records with physical objects is quite complicated. Also, people working in museums or heritage departments may not have the technical skills to use such systems. So, even though the idea is strong, using blockchain in real museums and heritage sites is still a challenge.⁵

Another project called HeriLedger, led by Melnikov and others, focused on building a simpler blockchain system that could work on smartphones. Their goal was to create a low-energy, easy-to-use blockchain that could be used for storing heritage-related data. They were able to build a working version of it and showed that such a system is possible. But they also discovered that it was vulnerable to certain types of cyberattacks. Also, the project didn't clearly explain who would be in charge of maintaining and running the system in a museum setting. This shows that while these systems can be built, there's still a lot of work needed in figuring out how they would work in the real world.

Other researchers like Anagnostakis and Angelova reviewed many papers and projects related to blockchain in heritage. They found that a lot of the work focused on turning artifacts into digital tokens or using blockchain to prove that an object is genuine. These studies showed that blockchain can help protect the identity of artifacts. But they did not talk much about real-world problems like choosing the right type of blockchain, managing high energy costs, or training museum staff to use the technology properly.⁶

⁵ Vladimir Kovačević et al., *Blockchain Technology in the Protection of Cultural Heritage*, 14 *Heritage Science* 1 (2023).

⁶ European Commission, *Significance Project: Artificial Intelligence and Illicit Trafficking*, <https://europa.eu/significance>

In terms of artificial intelligence (AI), the significance project in Europe built a tool to scan websites and the dark web to find stolen artifacts being sold online. The aim was to show that AI could help law enforcement and heritage experts catch illegal sales. The project did manage to identify suspicious listings, which was a big step. However, the researchers also admitted that there are still some problems. For example, they couldn't fully solve issues like whether the AI tools were fair or biased, or whether the results would be accepted as legal proof in court. This means more research is needed to make AI tools both trustworthy and legally useful.

One major issue across all of these studies, both in blockchain and AI, is that they are often tested in ideal conditions and not in the real world. Many of them don't think about everyday problems like who will run these systems, whether small museums can afford them, how they fit with local laws, or whether they really help protect artifacts instead of just keeping records. These are the kinds of questions future researchers need to focus on if we want these technologies to actually help save our cultural heritage.

What does this entail for future research? -

To make the use of blockchain and AI truly effective in protecting cultural heritage, future research must first focus on bridging the gap between theory and real-world application. Many of the existing studies show that these technologies have great potential, but they often stop at the experimental or prototype stage. Researchers now need to go one step further and design proper governance models. These models should clearly define who will manage and control the blockchain or AI systems in heritage institutions. Will it be museum authorities, government agencies, or private tech partners? Without this clarity, even the best tools will not be used effectively or responsibly.

Another crucial area for future research is the testing of these technologies through pilot projects in real-world Indian heritage sites. Much of the current literature is based on simulations or projects in well-funded Western museums. However, the conditions in Indian institutions, especially in smaller towns or rural areas, can be very different. Therefore, we need research that tests how blockchain-based provenance systems and AI monitoring tools perform in actual Indian temples, museums, or archaeological sites. These pilots will help assess whether the tools are not only technically sound but also practically feasible in the

Indian context.⁷

Ethical and legal considerations must also be integrated into future work. AI tools can help detect stolen artifacts online, but if the algorithms are biased, or the outputs cannot be explained clearly, they may not be accepted in legal processes. This makes it essential to align AI technologies with ethical standards, ensuring that they are fair, transparent, and respectful of cultural sensitivities. Moreover, the legal system must be prepared to recognize and accept AI-generated evidence in courts, which is another area needing further research and policy development.

Affordability and access are major issues, particularly for smaller, underfunded museums and local heritage bodies. Future research should focus on developing low-cost, easy-to-use versions of blockchain and AI systems. This includes creating user-friendly interfaces, reducing the need for expensive hardware, and providing training for staff. It's important that these tools do not remain limited to elite institutions but can be used across the country, even in remote areas where cultural theft is often most rampant.

II. CAUSES AND TRENDS OF CULTURAL PROPERTY TRAFFICKING

The illegal trade in cultural property is driven by many interconnected factors, both within countries like India and across international borders. Understanding these causes and patterns is important to build effective solutions.

Domestic Vulnerabilities (India)

One of the biggest challenges in India is the lack of proper security at historical sites. Many temples, ancient ruins, and monuments do not have CCTV cameras, alarm systems, or guards—especially in rural or less-visited areas.⁸ This makes them easy targets for thieves who often operate at night or during festivals when crowds are high. Even well-known places sometimes lack regular monitoring, and once a statue or artifact is taken, it may not be noticed until days or even weeks later. Another serious issue is poor inventory and documentation. The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) and state heritage departments are responsible for listing and maintaining records of protected objects. However, in many cases, these records are incomplete or outdated. Some artifacts have never been photographed or digitally catalogued, making it difficult to even confirm when something is missing or to prove ownership if it is found abroad. This lack of clear records gives smugglers an advantage, as

⁷ Konstantinos Anagnostakis & Desislava Angelova, *Blockchain Applications in Cultural Heritage: A Systematic Review*, 32 *Digital Applications in Archaeology and Cultural Heritage* 100347 (2022).

⁸ Ministry of Culture, India, *Unstarred Question No. 2396*, Rajya Sabha <https://pqars.nic.in>.

they can pass off stolen items as legitimate.

Over the past decade (2013–2023), 31 antiquities have been stolen from ASI-protected monuments, yet 27 remain missing, as reported by the Union Culture Minister. Further, an RTI request revealed that 486 antiquities have gone missing since 1947 from ASI sites, while, paradoxically, over 300,000 items remain officially unregistered across India, creating vast blind spots for theft. These figures reflect both understaffed historic sites and weak tracking systems, enabling thefts that often go unnoticed for months.

International Dynamics

On the global stage, the trafficking of cultural property is largely demand-driven. There is a high demand for ancient Indian artifacts—such as stone idols, bronze statues, and rare manuscripts—in art markets in Europe, the United States, and parts of Southeast Asia. Wealthy private collectors, museums, and auction houses often seek out such objects, sometimes ignoring the fact that they may have been obtained illegally. This international demand creates a strong financial incentive for smugglers and middlemen in India to steal and export cultural items.

India has managed to recover some of these stolen artifacts in recent years. Since 1976, a total of 357 antiquities have been brought back to India, and 344 of these were returned after 2014. For example, in 2021, the United States returned 157 stolen Indian artifacts, and in 2022, 29 items were returned from Australia. While this shows that international cooperation can work, it also means that hundreds, maybe even thousands, of items are still missing and possibly hidden in private collections or museums abroad. In some cases, the process is highly organized. Artifacts are carefully smuggled through hidden routes, forged documents are created to make them appear legal, and the items are then sold through galleries or even major auction houses. Countries with weak border controls or less strict art import laws often become transit points in this network, making it harder to track and recover stolen objects.⁹

Digital Transformation of Trafficking

In recent years, the way stolen artifacts are trafficked has changed significantly due to digital technology. Social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram, encrypted messaging apps like WhatsApp and Telegram, and even dark web markets have become popular tools for traffickers. These platforms allow sellers and buyers to communicate quickly and secretly, often using code language or fake accounts. Photos of stolen items can be circulated within closed groups, and deals can be made without leaving any paper trail. This digital shift makes

⁹ Interpol, *Trafficking in Cultural Goods*, <https://www.interpol.int/en/Crimes/Cultural-heritage-crime>

it much harder for law enforcement to detect illegal activity. Unlike physical marketplaces, these online networks are hidden and can be accessed globally. Encrypted chats also make it difficult to trace conversations or find evidence that can hold up in court. As a result, trafficking has become faster, more secretive, and more difficult to stop. Though exact numbers for artifact trafficking on social platforms aren't available, parallels can be drawn from wildlife crime data; for instance, a recent study on wildlife trafficking found 477 social-media ads for endangered species in three months, with 78 % found on Facebook. Industry experts warn that similar methods are now used for artifacts, with smugglers hosting hidden groups, using code words, and arranging deals via encrypted chats.¹⁰

III. CASE STUDIES

Understanding real-world examples of cultural property recovery efforts helps us evaluate what works, what doesn't, and where technology can make a meaningful difference. This section explores three key areas: the international impact of Operation Pandora led by European agencies, India's own artifact repatriation efforts, and cases where modern technologies like forensic imaging and cyber-monitoring have helped identify and retrieve stolen cultural items. These examples reveal both the strengths of current strategies and the urgent need for more advanced, scalable solutions.

1. Operation Pandora (EU)

In the world of heritage protection, Operation Pandora stands out as one of the most coordinated international efforts to recover stolen cultural treasures. Launched in 2016, and now held annually, it brings together the efforts of Europol, Interpol, Spain's Civil Guard, and the World Customs Organization, along with the police and customs teams from various countries. Think of it as a carefully planned operation where experts from across borders work like detectives—checking museums, art galleries, auction houses, and even websites—to track down missing or illegally traded historical objects. In its ninth edition in 2024, 23 countries joined forces and successfully recovered nearly 37,700 artifacts, ranging from ancient coins and religious icons to archaeological tools and fine art. A total of 80 people were arrested, showing just how far-reaching and well-organized the black market for heritage items has become.

What makes Operation Pandora even more impressive is the attention to detail and cooperation it involves. Officers don't just seize items—they cross-check them with stolen

¹⁰ Tess Davis, *Demand and Denial: Exposing the Illicit Trade in Cultural Property*, 45 *Case W. Res. J. Int'l L.* 1 (2019).

object databases, consult with cultural experts, and even monitor online platforms where fake listings often hide stolen goods in plain sight. Over the years, the operation has recovered more than 100,000 cultural objects, proving that with shared effort and the right strategies, real progress can be made. It's a rare example of how modern policing, cultural knowledge, and international teamwork can come together to protect the world's shared history, one artifact at a time.

Even with such large recoveries, there are problems that still remain. Many of the items recovered are hard to trace back to their original places. Without proper records, it's difficult to know where they came from or to return them to the right owners. Also, many stolen items are hidden in private collections, where they're hard to find or recover. Laws are different in each country, which can slow down the process. So, while Operation Pandora has done a lot of good, it also shows us how much more work is needed—especially in tracking, documentation, and cooperation across borders.¹¹

2. India's Recovery Initiatives

India has been actively working to bring back its stolen art and heritage. Between 1976 and 2023, a total of 357 antiquities were returned, and 344 of those came back after 2014, showing how much the effort has increased in recent years. In 2021, the United States returned 248 items, including a 10th-century Nataraja idol from Tamil Nadu. These returns not only bring back valuable art but also restore pride and a sense of history to local communities.

One of the biggest recoveries was the Sripuranthan Nataraja, a 900-year-old statue that was sold to the National Gallery of Australia for \$5.1 million. After years of effort, it was brought back in 2014. The idol had been stolen from a temple in Tamil Nadu by a notorious art dealer, Subhash Kapoor, who ran a global smuggling network. Detailed photographs from before the theft and expert analysis helped confirm its identity. But not every case is easy. Many items have no proper documentation or photos, which makes it hard to prove ownership. Also, legal cases in foreign courts can be long and difficult. Some collectors refuse to return items they bought, even if they were stolen. So even with recent successes, India still faces many hurdles in getting back its full heritage.¹²

In 2002, the Supreme Court delivered a very interesting and important judgment in the case of Directorate of Revenue Intelligence v. Ashok Jain. The case revolved around the attempted export of several valuable artifacts, bronze idols, sculptures, and paintings, that were believed

¹¹ Europol, *Operation Pandora VIII Recovers Thousands of Artifacts*, <https://www.europol.europa.eu/newsroom/news/operation-pandora-viii>

¹² *Union of India v. National Gallery of Australia*, [2014] INSC 499 (India)

to be antiquities under Indian law. The Directorate of Revenue Intelligence (DRI) had seized the items, suspecting they were being smuggled out of the country in violation of the Antiquities and Art Treasures Act, 1972. Ashok Jain, the person exporting them, argued that the objects were not antiquities and that the authorities had no right to seize them. The Supreme Court upheld the action taken by the DRI and clarified that when there is reasonable suspicion, authorities have the power to intercept and examine such consignments.¹³

3. Tech-Driven Successes

Technology is starting to help in some important recoveries. In the case of the Sripuranthan Nataraja, experts used close-up photography and scientific testing to match the statue to the one stolen from the temple. They looked at small marks, cracks, and details that could not be faked. These methods helped prove in court that the statue was the same one taken years ago.

Along with field investigations, stolen artifacts are now being found online. During Operation Pandora, police searched websites and online marketplaces. In one round alone, they found over 4,000 items being sold online illegally. Slowly, new tools like digital databases, high-resolution images, and even AI-based tracking systems are being tested to catch thieves and sellers faster. Though still new, these methods offer hope for better and quicker recoveries in the future.¹⁴

IV. LEGAL FRAMEWORKS GOVERNING ONLINE TRAFFICKING OF CULTURAL PROPERTY

While digital platforms have changed how stolen cultural items are traded, the legal frameworks meant to stop this crime have not fully kept up. Existing laws- both national and international, mainly deal with physical trafficking and do not directly address the complexities of online trade. However, some key laws and legal principles do apply and offer a starting point for better regulation.

1. Indian Legal Framework

- The Antiquities and Art Treasures Act, 1972

This is the main Indian law that governs antiquities and cultural treasures. It defines what qualifies as an "antiquity" (usually over 100 years old) and prohibits export without a license. All such items must be registered with the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), and unauthorized sale or transfer can lead to penalties. However, since the Act was written long

¹³ *Directorate of Revenue Intelligence v. Ashok Jain*, (2002) 1 SCC 107 (India)

¹⁴ *Cuno v. Nat'l Gallery of Australia*, [2014] FCA 1127 (Austl.).

before online trade became common, it doesn't cover digital sales, e-commerce platforms, or online marketplaces, leaving a big gap in enforcement against online smugglers.¹⁵

- The Information Technology Act, 2000

This law handles issues related to cyberspace, digital content, and cybercrime. Section 79 of the Act gives protection to online platforms (like eBay or Facebook Marketplace), labeling them as "intermediaries". This means they aren't liable for what users post, unless they are informed of illegal content and still do nothing. If an artifact listing is reported and not removed, the platform can be held responsible. Although the law technically allows authorities to act against illegal listings, in reality, such actions are rare and inconsistent.

- Indian Penal Code (IPC), 1860

The IPC deals with crimes like theft, criminal breach of trust, and possession of stolen property. These can be used against people smuggling or buying stolen artifacts. But since the IPC was written over 160 years ago, it doesn't directly consider cultural property or online sales. For example, it doesn't address issues like verifying the origin of an item, tracking sellers who use fake profiles, or proving that a buyer knew the item was stolen. So, while helpful, the IPC needs support from modern laws for better results in heritage protection.

2. International Legal Instruments

- UNESCO 1970 Convention

This treaty is the cornerstone of global efforts to stop illegal trade in cultural property. It asks countries to take steps to prevent illegal import/export, maintain records, and return stolen artifacts. India is a signatory. Though written before the internet era, its basic principles, like restitution and prevention, still apply today, including in online cases. Countries that follow this convention are expected to help each other when stolen artifacts are found across borders.

- UNIDROIT Convention, 1995

This convention builds on UNESCO 1970 but focuses more on private legal disputes, for example, between a buyer and seller in different countries. One key rule is that a stolen item must be returned, even if the buyer claims they didn't know it was stolen, unless they can prove they took proper care to check. This makes "due diligence" very important. In the online world, it means both platforms and individual buyers must check the background of items before listing or buying, especially expensive or rare pieces.¹⁶

¹⁵ The Antiquities and Art Treasures Act, No. 52 of 1972, INDIA CODE, <https://www.indiacode.nic.in>.

¹⁶ UNIDROIT Convention on Stolen or Illegally Exported Cultural Objects, June 24, 1995, 34 I.L.M. 1322.

- EU Regulation on Cultural Goods, 2019

This European law prevents cultural goods from being imported into the European Union unless the exporter can prove that the item left its country of origin legally. It is a very strict rule that helps stop trafficking at borders. Some experts believe India should adopt a similar law, one that includes clear guidelines for online platforms and digital marketplaces, especially since many stolen Indian artifacts have been found in Europe.¹⁷

3. Other Legal Principles at Play

- Provenance Verification

This refers to the process of checking an item's history or origin. Anyone who deals in antiques, whether a seller, buyer, or online platform, should verify where the object came from and whether it was legally acquired. Museums, collectors, and dealers across the world are now expected to ask for ownership records, photos, export permits, etc., before displaying or purchasing any cultural item.

- Due Diligence

This means taking reasonable care to ensure that an artifact is not stolen or fake. It includes checking documents, confirming sellers' identity, and reporting suspicious listings. If a platform or buyer skips this step and ends up trading a stolen object, they could face legal consequences. Many countries now treat due diligence as a legal and ethical duty, especially in cases of high-value items.

- Good Faith Purchase vs. Restitution

Even if a buyer says they bought an item "in good faith" (i.e., they didn't know it was stolen), courts in many countries, including those following the UNIDROIT Convention, have ordered the item to be returned to its original country. This supports India's efforts to recover artifacts from abroad. It sends a strong message that ownership does not always equal rightful possession, especially when heritage and history are involved.

V. THE ROLE OF ONLINE PLATFORMS

The internet has become a major marketplace for the illegal trade in cultural property. While traditional smuggling still exists, the rise of e-commerce websites and social media platforms has made it easier and faster for traffickers to find buyers and avoid detection. Online platforms provide traffickers with access to global audiences and tools for hiding their

¹⁷ 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.

identities, making it harder for authorities to trace the origins and destinations of stolen items.

E-Commerce and Social Media

Recent reports and investigations have found clear evidence of illegal artifact sales online. Items like ancient coins, idols, manuscripts, and even pieces of temple architecture have been openly listed on websites such as eBay, Facebook Marketplace, and Instagram. In some cases, the listings are disguised using vague descriptions or false provenance claims. According to Interpol, over 4,300 illegal cultural items were found being advertised online during Operation Pandora's cyber patrols in 2023. These platforms often become the first point of contact between traffickers and buyers, especially when no questions are asked about the source of the object. Although many platforms have community guidelines and policies that ban the sale of stolen or culturally sensitive objects, enforcement is weak. Facebook, for instance, states that illegal trade is banned, yet multiple reports show that sellers use code words and private groups to bypass detection. Even when platforms remove listings, traffickers quickly return under new accounts. There's also a lack of trained moderators or automatic systems to flag suspicious posts effectively, especially in languages other than English.¹⁸

Need for Regulation

One of the biggest problems is the lack of clear global rules on how tech companies should handle the illegal trade of cultural property. In most countries, there are no specific laws forcing platforms to check the authenticity or legal status of the artifacts being sold. Enforcement agencies often lack the legal authority or technical tools to demand quick takedowns or data on suspected users. Some efforts have been made to improve regulation. For example, the European Union has strengthened its policies by introducing the 2021 Regulation on the Import of Cultural Goods, which requires documentation proving legal export from the country of origin. It also calls for better cooperation between customs and online platforms. The EU is also investing in training and digital monitoring tools to help identify online trafficking faster. In contrast, India's policy response is still developing. While the Antiquities and Art Treasures Act, 1972 regulates the export of cultural property, it does not cover online sales in detail. There is also no clear digital monitoring system in place to detect illegal listings on Indian e-commerce or social platforms. As a result, most action comes after the theft or smuggling has already happened, rather than preventing it at the

¹⁸ Interpol, *Cyber Patrols Uncover 4,300 Illicit Listings in Operation Pandora IX*, <https://www.interpol.int/en/News>

source.¹⁹

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

To stop the illegal trade of cultural items, especially online, we need a mix of better laws, modern technology, responsible online platforms, and proper training for the people involved. Here are some practical suggestions:

1. Policy and Legal Reforms

India's laws, like the *Antiquities and Art Treasures Act, 1972*, should be updated to include rules about online sales of stolen artifacts. Right now, most laws talk only about physical smuggling, not digital platforms. There should be better coordination between different departments, like the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), customs, police, and the foreign ministry. This will help share information faster and make artifact recovery smoother. India should also work more closely with other countries and international bodies like UNESCO and Interpol to recover stolen items and stop smuggling at the global level. Signing special agreements with countries that often receive stolen Indian artifacts can help in faster returns.²⁰

2. Technological Solutions

New technology like blockchain can be used to keep a digital record of each artifact's history, where it came from, who owned it, and where it is now. This can prevent fake claims and illegal sales. Museums and private collectors could start using this on a trial basis. Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools can help customs and police by checking photos, shipping records, or websites to detect stolen items. AI can also look at patterns and help stop smuggling before it happens. These tools should be easy to use, low-cost, and work even in places with poor internet, so that smaller museums and remote heritage sites can also benefit.²¹

3. Platform Accountability

Online platforms like eBay, Facebook, and Instagram must take more responsibility in stopping the online sale of stolen cultural artifacts, which has become increasingly common in recent years. Reports, including those by the Antiquities Coalition, have shown that looted items, such as ancient idols, coins, and manuscripts, are often sold through these platforms using vague descriptions or hidden in private groups. To address this, platforms should be legally required to verify sellers, especially those dealing in cultural goods, and use

¹⁹ European Commission, *EU Regulation on the Import of Cultural Goods (EU) 2019/880*, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32019R0880>

²⁰ The Antiquities and Art Treasures Act, No. 52 of 1972, INDIA CODE, <https://www.indiacode.nic.in>.

²¹ Vladimir Kovačević et al., *Blockchain Technology in the Protection of Cultural Heritage*, 14 *Heritage Science* 1 (2023).

technology like image recognition and keyword filters to automatically detect and block suspicious listings. They must also act quickly to remove stolen items when flagged by users or authorities. Just as tech companies already use AI to fight wildlife trafficking or child safety violations, similar tools can be developed in partnership with the government to scan and compare listings with databases of stolen artifacts. These steps can help make the online space safer and reduce the illegal trade of cultural heritage.²²

4. Capacity Building

We also need to focus on training and awareness to better protect our cultural heritage. This means building the capacity of the people directly involved, like customs officers and police, who should be trained to recognize and handle stolen artifacts, and museum staff, who must maintain proper digital records to keep track of collections. Cybercrime units also need special training to monitor and investigate online trafficking, which is becoming more common on social media and e-commerce platforms. In addition to professional training, there should be wider efforts to raise public awareness about the value of cultural heritage. This can be done through school programs, museum exhibitions, and awareness campaigns, helping people understand why protecting historical objects matters. Local communities, especially those living near ancient temples and monuments, should also be involved as they can act as guardians and report suspicious activities. When people are informed and included, they are more likely to help preserve history.²³

VII. CONCLUSION

The illegal trade of cultural artifacts is a serious and growing problem. It's no longer limited to smuggling through borders or hidden sales in antique shops. Today, the internet has made it much easier for stolen artifacts to be bought and sold across countries. Social media, auction websites, and resale apps allow traffickers to reach buyers directly and often without being caught. This makes it harder for law enforcement to trace these stolen items or bring them back to their rightful place. Although India has laws like the Antiquities and Art Treasures Act, and is part of international agreements like the UNESCO Convention, these efforts alone are not enough, especially because many of these rules were written long before online trading became common.

What this study shows is that solving this problem requires more than just writing stronger laws. It needs a joint effort from many different groups, lawmakers, police, museums,

²² Facebook Transparency Centre, *Regulated Goods Policy*, <https://transparency.fb.com/policies/community-standards/regulated-goods/>

²³ Government of India, *Cybercrime Investigation Manual* (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2021).

technology platforms, and the public. Everyone has a part to play. Firstly, we need to use better tools to keep track of where artifacts come from. Just like a passport records a person's travels, cultural objects also need records that show their history, where they were found, where they have been, and who owned them. This helps in proving if an item was stolen or taken without permission. Some digital tools already help museums and governments do this, and they should be used more widely.²⁴

At the same time, websites and apps where these items are sold need to be more careful. They must take responsibility and remove items that are clearly suspicious or illegal. Right now, many platforms don't check carefully enough, and even when warned, some do not act quickly. This makes it easy for stolen items to be sold without much risk. New rules should make it mandatory for these platforms to act when notified, and to work with authorities when needed.

Police officers, customs officials, and museum staff also need better training. Many times, items are missed at airports or during inspections simply because people don't know what they're looking at or why it matters. With the right guidance and awareness, they can play a big role in stopping theft and recovering lost treasures.²⁵

Museums must also be more transparent about the objects they display or store. They should ask tough questions about where their items came from, and if there's any doubt about their origin, take steps to return them. This kind of honesty builds trust and helps correct mistakes of the past. Most importantly, the public must be made aware. Cultural heritage is not just about old things, it's about identity, history, and pride. When an artifact is stolen, a part of a community's story is taken away. People need to understand the value of preserving these stories, not just for scholars, but for future generations.

Protecting cultural heritage is a shared duty. If governments, institutions, companies, and ordinary people all come together, we can stop this trade and make sure that our history is not lost, but kept safe and respected.

²⁴ British Museum, *Due Diligence Guidelines for Acquisitions*, <https://britishmuseum.org/about-us/collection-guidelines>

²⁵ Usha Sharma, *Heritage Awareness Campaigns in India: A Review*, 7 *Indian Culture Journal* 101 (2021).