

EOW-I - Idol Wing recovers stolen idols of 16th century temple.

Narambunathaswamy Temple was built by King Veera Marthanda Varma in the 6th century and nestles in a remote location of a sleepy village named Palavoor, in the southern district of Tirunelveli, in Tamil Nadu. On the evening of June 18, 2005 thieves posing as pilgrims entered the temple and hid themselves inside until midnight, after stealing 13 metal idols of Nataraja, Sivagami Amman, Karaikkal Ammaiyyar, Manickavasagar, Narumbunathar, Vinayagar, Valli, Krishnan, Bala Vinayagar, Veilukatha Amman, Komati Amman, Asthrathevar and Subramaniaswamy, they made good their escape.

Based on a complaint from the temple's Executive Officer, K Velusamy, a case under section 457 & 380 of the IPC was registered (Crime No. 114/05) at the Palavoor Police Station. This case was transferred to the Idol Wing – CID, Chennai on 20th August of 2005 for special investigation.

The Idol Wing has a SP, DSP and 5 Inspectors only to tackle crime in temples of which Tamil Nadu has some 38,000 small, medium and large ones. The team has to work against great odds. The cases are referred to them after several months, sometimes even a year after the theft, leaving a cold trail, forgotten clues and no scientific documentation or photographs.

Relying mainly on intelligence gathered and using the informant network and unconfirmed reports on the grapevine, the Idol Wing personnel narrowed down on Arunachalam, Shahjahan and Murugan alias Saudi Murugan of Madurai as suspects.

The Idol Wing was convinced about their involvement in the crime and after close investigation managed to detain Arunachalam and Shahjahan on 13th September 2006. The interrogation of the accused led to the recovery of 5 metal idols (Subramaniaswamy, Krishna, Asthirathevar, Veilukuthi Amman and Sivagami Amman).

The Idol Wing personnel tightened their net around Saudi Murugan and finally on 4th May 2007 after a long but relentless chase, the Idol Wing personnels arrested him along with another accused Balaji son of Shakti Mohan of Madurai.

Shakti Mohan a small gold merchant and his acquaintance Arumugam –a pick pocket both from Madurai, traced the temple and stole the idols believing them to be gold. They had made their getaway on two motorcycles but on the return journey Arumugam's motorcycle met with an accident. So, with the help of Balaji son of Sakthi Mohan, and Saudi Murugan they hid the idols in a farm known to Murugan. Here they cut open some idols in to several pieces, seeking to find gold. Finding no gold they damaged some more idols trying to discover if it contained gold. Disappointed in not finding any gold, they sold the remaining idols to one Dhinakaran a merchant of Karaikudi, using the help a person named Arunachalam; Saudi Murugan used the help of Shajahan to complete this part of the operation. By this time Deenadayalan of Chennai had purchased the idols from Dhinakaran. Several arrests followed: Kumar alias Arumugam was arrested on 10th July 2007, and Dhinakaran was secured on 1st August. From Deenadayalan's shop in Chennai 4 metal idols of Nataraja, Valli, Manickavasagar and Kariakal Ammaiyyar were recovered.

The Idol Wing team not only cracked the case and arrested all the culprits, also they recovered the original antique idols.

T Pudur village in Kattumannarkoil Taluk of Cuddalore District is famous for its Vanmeegamanathar Sivan Temple. This ancient temple is under private management. The night of July 01, 2007 unknown persons scaled the walls, broke into the unguarded temple, broke the inner locks and made a getaway after stealing four metal idols of Nataraja, Vinayagar, Poonkali Amman and Sivagami Amman.

A case under section 457 & 380 of the IPC was originally registered on June 2nd 2007 at the Pudur Police station. Seeing reports of the theft and receiving an alert over the State Police wireless, the Idol Wing-CID activated their informant network. The special team collected some information, based on which they sent a decoy team disguised as traders, pretending they required specific type of idols for a customer building a temple.

The initial contacts turned out to be some underworld dons of Udaiyarpalayam. Going by a verbal agreement, the criminals who were completely taken in and believed the drama being played by the police in the 'sting' operation was real. This acceptance and belief made them agree to bring the idols to Chennai to meet 'some merchants from Mumbai'.

Finally on June 15th they arrived at Chennai with the idols; the police team surrounded them at the CMBT at Koyambedu and detained Gangachalam, Vaidyanathan, Rajini, and Periyasamy all of Udaiyarpalayam in Perambalur District of Tamil Nadu. The four stolen idols were recovered from their possession.

A confession by the culprits revealed their game plan. Gangachalam was the mastermind and leader of the gang; he also turned out to be an ex-convict. Posing as a daily wages worker he worked in the fields of Pudur. All the while he was closely observing the temple, the movements of the people, entry and exit points, and the idols in the temple. He planned the crime and with a rabble of other culprits he committed the theft.

Running through sugar cane fields to avoid detection and lose anyone who may chase them if discovered, they reached a canal where they hid the idols at a secret spot and escaped from the area. Next evening, Rajini and Vaithi returned to the canal and picked up the four idols which they now hid under some garbage in Gangachalam's house.

The criminals were only planning to wait to find the right buyers, but in their greed they accepted the first offer and fell victim to the police trap. The Idol Wing, cracked this case in just one week and nabbed all the culprits and the four stolen idols.