
A Late Medieval Temple at Thora Near Jewar and Its Lost Paintings

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Abstract: This paper discusses the important finding of a late medieval temple from village Thora in Gautam Buddha Nagar district of Uttar Pradesh. The finding is more important because the village lies quite close to the upcoming Noida International Airport and the temple has some unique paintings on its ceiling and walls. The temple originally seems to have been dedicated to Lord Krishna and has beautiful sculptures of various avatars of Lord Vishnu. The ceiling has a beautiful depiction of maharasa event and some other episodes which are hitherto unknown in the pictorial art of Braj region and even in the paintings of Rajasthan which form a great school of miniature and mural paintings.

Keywords: Paintings, Krishna, Siva, Parvati, Vishnu, Maharasa, Thora

Introduction

Thora (28.1407972° N, 77.63862292° E) is an ancient site cum modern village located about 9 km to the north-east of Jewar town, slight off the Jewar-Khurja road. The ancient mound is quite extensive and dates back to the Painted Grey Ware culture period if not earlier and continues during the succeeding periods of Northern Black Polished Ware culture, Sunga, Kushan, Gupta and medieval periods. The most significant discovery at this site was of a late medieval temple (Figure 1) with exceptional mural paintings on temple walls and ceilings.

The temple is a privately owned property and is situated in an old enclosure on the outskirts of the village Thora. As per the information board placed in the temple premises by the owners (Figure 2), the temple was constructed in 1840 by the forefathers of Shri Purushottam Agrawal but this may actually be the year when the temple was renovated and its principal deity was changed from a Vaishnava deity to Saivite. It cannot be accepted that the temple was originally dedicated to Siva because the temple *sikhara* has sculptures of incarnations of Vishnu in niches in various cardinal directions and four Garuda figures seated in a row on the parapet of the *ardhamandapa*. Even in the *garbhagriha*, there is space marked to house the idols of deities. In all

probability, the owner of the temple for some reasons changed the deities in the *garbhagriha* and enshrined *Siva-parivaradevatas* and a *Siva-linga*.



Figure 1: The old temple at Thora village

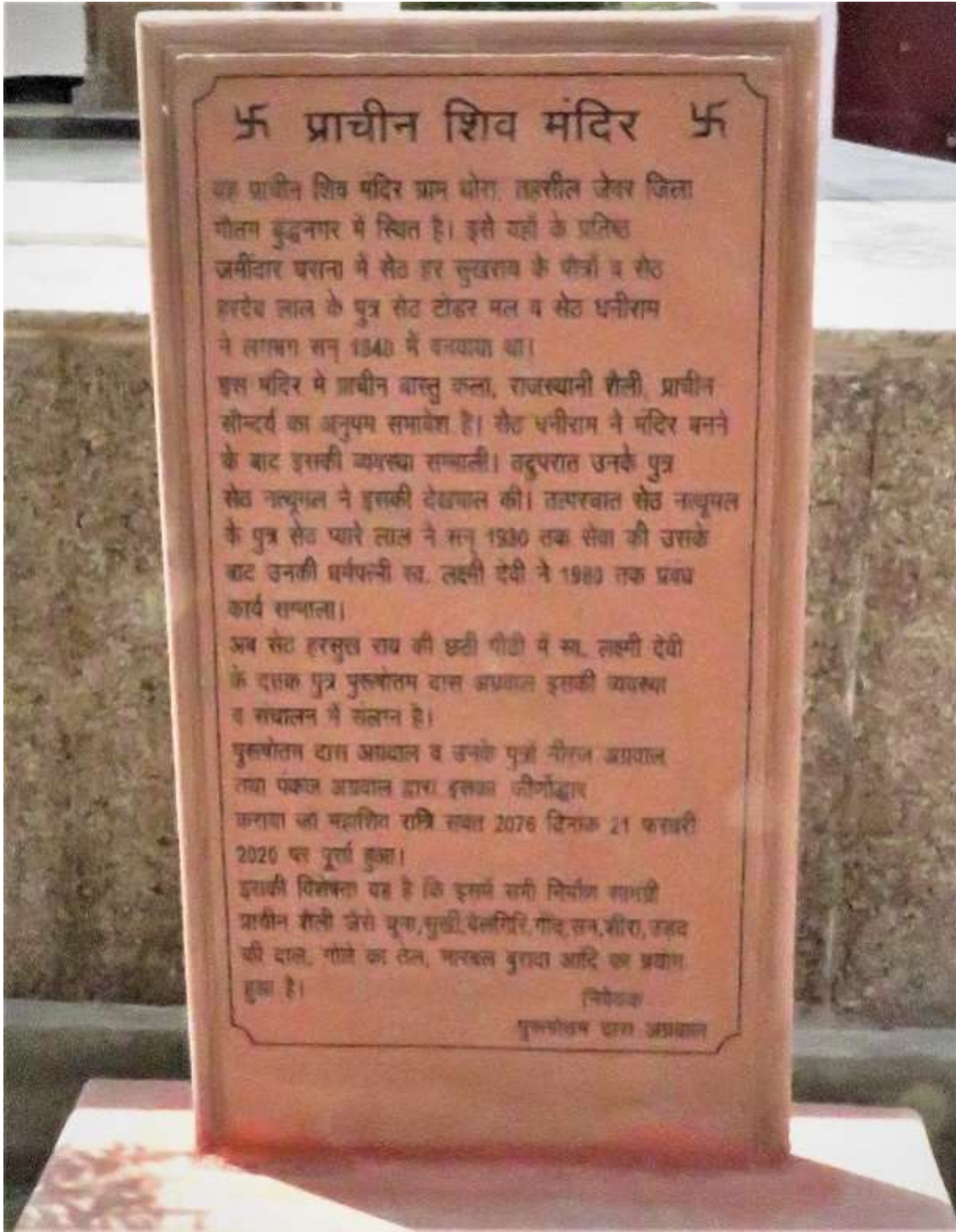


Figure 2: The information board put up by the owners

The east facing temple built on a *jagati* has an *anardhamandapa* with three cusp-arched frontal and one rear arched opening on either side, a curvilinear *sikhara* as its superstructure and is constructed of *lakhori* bricks with lime plaster veneering and sandstone veneering in certain parts. The *sikhara* has a number of *angasikharas* and a *sukanasika* with a niche opening. In all probability, there was some Vaishnavadeity's

image placed inside the *sukanasika* niche but is missing at present. A lion sculpture adorns the *prastara* of all four cardinal *angasikharas*. The top of the central *sikhara* is adorned with three-tiered *amalakas*.



Figure 3: Krishna lifting Govardhana



Figure 4: Varahavatara

The frontal or the eastern side niche of the *sikhara* has a sculptural slab still surviving. During my earlier visit, the slab had fallen down but was re-fixed during renovation work of the temple. The buff colour sandstone slab (Figure 3) represents a figure of Lord Krishna standing cross-legged and lifting the mount Govardhana with a finger of his right hand above his head. Two trees are also shown growing over the hill. His left hand holds a flute or *vamsi*. He is shown wearing dhoti and *uttariya* and is adorned with a *mukuta*. On the southern face, there are images depicting the Varahavatara and Krishnavatara Kamsavadha episode in the lower and upper niches respectively. The Varaha avatara episode (Figure 4) depicts four-handed Bhagavan Varaha uplifting the Earth goddess on his tusks and trampling upon the demon Hiranyaksha in the nether world. The Earth is shown as an elliptical mass with various buildings and monuments on her surface. Bhagavan Varaha is holding a *gada* (mace) and *chakra* (discus) in his upper right and left hands respectively whereas his natural left hand holds a *sankha* (conch) and with his natural right hand he is holding the hair knot of Hiranyaksha who is shown lying under the god's feet. The right and left legs of the god are about to trample upon the demon. Bhagavan Varaha is depicted in a theriomorphic form having a human body and boar's face. The head of Varaha is crowned. Bhagavan Varaha is adorned with *keyuras* and *kanganas* in all his hands and a *kanthahara*. The figure is a fine example of late medieval Mathura art.

The slab in the upper niche (Figure 5) represents the episode of the killing of Kamsa, the tyrannical ruler of Mathura. Three human figures occupy the whole composition; the figure to our left is Samkarshana/ Balarama identified as holding a *halayudha* (plough) in his right hand and a small *musala* (pestle) in his left hand. The central figure

is of Bhagavan Krishna who is holding the hair knot of Kamsa with his left hand whereas his right hand is holding a *musala* with which he is about to attack Kamsa. Kamsa, a moustached man, is shown seated on a throne and is holding a sheathed sword in his hands. Both Krishna and Balarama are shown wearing similar crowns whereas Kamsa is not wearing a crown.



Figure 5: Kamsavadha



Figure 6: Seshasayi Vishnu

On the western side in the upper and lower niches, slabs depicting Seshasayi Vishnu and Nrisimha avatara respectively are fixed. The upper slab represents the popular theme of reclining Vishnu on Seshanaga (Figure 6). The four-handed deity is resting on the body of serpent Sesha and goddess Lakshmi is pressing his feet. The tetracephalic God Brahma is shown coming out of the navel of Bhagavan Vishnu through a lotus flower. Only the frontal three heads of God Brahma are visible on the slab. The lower slab depicts the episode of Nrisimhaavatara (Figure 7). The sculptural representation is quite unique as it shows the lion-man incarnation of Vishnu appearing from within a pillar. At the base the pillar is one but on top the pillar is divided into two parts moving apart between which the avatara appears to protect his child *bhakta*, i.e., Prahlada who is standing at lower left end with folded hands and holding an object. The avatara God is having two lower legs as that of human and two upper legs as that of lion. With his two human hands, he is killing the demon Hiranyakasipu by tearing apart his belly with his long nails. Hiranyakasipu is lying in a helpless condition in the arms and lap of roaring and violent Nrisimha and is holding a sword in his right hand hanging down overpowered by the God. The lion face of the God is shown quite ferocious.



Figure 7: Nrisimhavatara



Figure 8: Matsyavatara

The upper and lower niches on the western wall of the temple house the sculptural reliefs depicting the episodes of Matsyaavatara and Trivikrama avatara respectively. The Matsyaavatara relief (Figure 8) represents four-handed Bhagavan Matsya coming out from the body of a fish. In his two upper hands he is holding a *chakra* and *gada* whereas his natural left hand holds a *sankha* and his natural right hand is holding the tuft of the demon named Sankhasura. The two-handed demon is shown coming out from the body of a conch and has two horns on his head as well as large ears. Both his hands hold a horizontally kept sword. Above the right shoulder of the Bhagavan Matsya a *yantra* is shown which is in the shape of a square subdivided into four small squares, four Sanskrit letters are written in each square possibly reading Sri Ramaji. In the earliest representations in sculptural art, Matsya incarnation is shown in a complete fish form and no demon is shown with it. In the earlier texts too, there is no mention of Sankhasura but the popular stories of Matsyaavatara mention Sankhasura as is shown in this sculpture. I have not come across any other sculptural

representation where Sankhasura demon is represented except for the twentieth century paintings. In this aspect, this sculpture relief might be one of the rare representations of this theme.



Figure 9: Trivikram Avatara

The sculptural relief in the lower niche of the western wall represents the theme of Trivikrama/ Vamanaavatara (Figure 9). Here the four-handed Bhagavan Vishnu in complete human form is measuring three *lokas*. Bhagavan Vishnu is holding a *gada* in

his upper right hand and *chakra* in his upper left hand, though it is hanging down. The natural hands are holding some indistinct objects, though in all probability these should be *sankha* and *padma*. Raja Bali is shown with folded hands in a leaning position. His back is facing Bhagavan Vishnu. Both the deity and Raja Bali are wearing similar type of *mukuta*. The overall representation gives enough importance to Raja Bali, possibly as a positive character unlike other demonic figures shown in other reliefs of the temple.

The Paintings

Tradition to paint temple walls and palaces is quite old in India. Cave temples of Ajanta are renowned for their beautifully painted walls and ceilings. Medieval temples of northern and southern India also had beautiful depictions related to respective deities and patrons. The ceiling and walls of the Thora temple have some finest murals done in Ala-Gila or Araish style of Rajasthan. Ala-Gila or Araish is very similar to dry Fresco techniques as it is done on the wet lime plaster.



Figure 10: Krishna and gopis are performing the *rasa*

Paintings are unique in nature as various subjects are depicted on the ceiling and walls. Main subject of the painting is Vaishnavism (Figure 10) as a full blossomed Lotus

flower with eight petals is depicted within three painted circles. Petals are depicted in red with partially white colour in the middle. Lord Krishna is playing “*rasa*” or cosmic dance with Radha and *gopis* in pair of ten. Background of the *rasa* is completely white and reminds a full moon night. Lower part of the dome has various depictions and some part of it is damaged. This depiction is probably inspired by the classical reference mentioned in the *Garg-Samhita* where Lord Siva is trying to enter in the “*rasa*” but stopped by *gopis* (Pandey and Sharma 2019-20).



Figure 11: Siva stopped by *gopis* or *sakhis* at Vrindavan under Vansi Vata (Banyan tree)

Lord Siva is seated under a *Vata* or banyan tree (Figure 11). Few female figures probably *gopis* are depicted there. A story is mentioned in the *Garg-Samhita* according to which Lord Siva was performing penance at the mountain Kailasa but he got disturbed with the sound of flute and music. He traced the music and reached Vrindavan. Krishna was performing *rasa* with other *gopis*, so Siva was stopped by the *gopis* and *sakhis* as only Lord Krishna could be the only male in the *maharasa* event.

Siva is depicted with his common attributes: third eye, coiled snakes around hands and neck and a figure of scorpion on right hand. Flies and insects are moving between Siva and *sakhis* (female companions). Here probably *sakhis* or *gopis* did not allow Siva to take part in the *rasa* and kept him waiting under the banyan tree. *Sakhis* or *gopis* are mentioned in Devanagari on the top as “*saheligairki*”. Interestingly “*gair*” dance is still

played by tribal community in Rajasthan on the occasion of “Janmashtami” and “Holi” festivals. A dog is standing below and Nandi, the *vahana* of Siva is standing behind. Near the *sakhis*, different gods are depicted with their *vahanas* as they also witnessed the divine “*rasa*” dance. A rat is depicted in dark grey colour as symbol of Ganesa. A *hamsa* or swan is the *vahana* of goddess Sarasvati. A black buck is mount of Soma (Moon God) and seven-trunked elephant Airavata who had emerged after churning of the ocean is the mount of Indra. Seven-headed horse is related to the Sun God (Surya). Tiger is the mount or *vahana* of Goddess Durga. In the next panel, various gods like Indra, Surya and other divinities are shown standing behind Krishna. Krishna is portrayed with a peacock crown and carrying a sword. A parrot is flying in between theseated Krishna and various gods. Many Vaishnavite sites are having paintings related to Krishna theme and most of them have depiction of parrot. These paintings inspired by the *Bhagavata Purana* have depiction of a parrot. Even now-a-days, during the *bhagavatakatha*, an idol of parrot is placed. The parrot symbolizes “Sukadeva”, the son of Sage Veda Vyasa as he was the orator of the *Bhagavata Purana*. Attendants and several “*apsaras*” are standing in front of Krishna figure. Brahma and Goddess Durga are also seated and facing towards Krishna (Figure 12).



Figure 12: Gods such as Sun, Moon and fairies are depicted with their *vahanas*

After this depiction a palace scene with procession is painted. Green colour is used in the background and style of painting resembles the “Tanjore” and south Indian school where big eyes and broad faces are portrayed dominantly. After this depiction a palace scene with procession is painted. Green colour is used in the background and style of painting resembles the “Tanjore” and south Indian school where big eyes and broad faces are portrayed dominantly.

Another panel (Figure 13) is showing Lord Shiva and Parvati seated adjacent to a palace which is depicted in three tiers. A female attendant is standing behind and

moving “*chanvara*” (flying whisk) on them. A bunch of banana leaves is visible within the palace. The palace has typical medieval architecture where brackets and railings are shown prominently. In the lower part of the palace a royal person is seated with few attendants. The middle floor depicts seven female figures standing on the terrace and one of them is moving a manual fan over Goddess Parvati. An inscription is written below the figure of Parvati. It is written in Devanagari as “*Parvati*”. Another inscription is written near the figure of Siva which reads “*Mahadeva Baithe Pranama*”. It is interesting that Siva is depicted untraditionally clothed. He is not depicted with Tiger hide, or third eye or with coiled snake but he wore traditional medieval clothing with orange tunic and turban. His neck is surrounded by green golden halo and a peacock crown is depicted on the head. He is folding both his hands in *anjali mudra* and paying homage to someone. That person could not be identified as surface is damaged and plaster has peeled off from the surface. A procession scene is depicted with camel, horses and elephant behind the palace. Seven musicians are playing long trumpets, drums and cymbals as most of the instruments are used in “*Naubatkhana*”. The term “*Naubat*” is coined because nine instruments were used to play at the entrance gates of palaces and forts.



Figure 13: Palace and procession scene with Siva and Parvati

The lower part of the ceiling has an array of multiple small niches and most of them are having depictions of ten incarnations or “*Dasavatara*”. Other niches are having Hanuman, Ganesa and other deities. These panels had become dark and paintings were damaged due to the course of time. One of the niches can be identified with Krishna-Sudama story. Vishnu inside a shrine could be identified as Badrinatha shrine, other niches with Hanuman along with Rama and Lakshmana and another one with Radha-Krishna couple.



Figure 14: Niches with Avatara Panels



Figure 15: Radha-Krishna

In these niches various *avataaras* (Figure 14) are depicted with Lord Jagannath on left followed by Radha-Krishna (Figure 15), Ram-Lakshmana with Hanuman and Nrisimha slaying the demon King Hiranyakasipu (Figure 16).

In continuation of the earlier plate number 14, Nrisimha *avatara* is depicted in the second niche from left (Figure 17), then Parasurama*avatara* is depicted chopping the head of Sahastrabahu (Figure 18) and is followed by Varaha*avatara* (Figure 19) rescuing the Earth from the ocean of the mud.



Figure 16: Nrisimha slaying the demon King Hiranyakasipu



Figure 17: Avatara panels

A few niches depicted in the figure 20 are depicting Hanuman carrying "Sanjivanibuti". Next is a human figure which could be depiction of Lord Buddha. Face and attributes are not clear. Next depiction is probably a goddess and depicted with a parrot. Goddess "Matangi" has same iconography but identification needs more proofs. Next panel is probably "Krishna-Sudama" story where two figure are hugging

each other. One figure could be identified as Lord Krishna as he is depicted with peacock feather crown. Another person could be identified as “Sudama” as an inscription written on the top.



Figure 18: Parasuramaavataara is depicted chopping the head of Sahastrabahu



Figure 19: Varahaavataara



Figure 20: Other panels

Kalki Avatara: This niche is not clear and paint layers are probably overlapped but a figure of horse is easily noticeable. He is standing with a green background. A small “*chhatra*” or parasol is depicted with horse. Tenth incarnation of Vishnu is “Kalki” also known as “Nishkalanka” incarnation that is depicted with horse (Figure 21). Kalki incarnation is also symbolized in the paintings and visual art by the winged horse (Figure 22). This divine horse was given by the Lord Siva to Kalki. This divine horse can travel beyond the limitation of time and space. This divine horse was manifested from the “Garuda” (Das 2006) and it can go anywhere. A parrot was also offered by Lord Siva as he knows past, present and future. Then Lord Siva told “Kalki” that I would like to give you a strong and sharp sword and with help of it you would be able to carry the burden of the earth.



Figure 21: Kalki Incarnation

Gradually in later part of 19th century only horse figure is depicted to symbolize the Lord Kalki. In some of the paintings and sculptures Lord Kalki is not depicted but his horse is depicted instead (Figure 23).

Lord Kalki is forthcoming incarnation of Vishnu and depicted with a sword and his horse. Apart from incarnations few niches are dedicated to various stories related to Lord Krishna. An interesting panel is showing the story of "*Parijat*" tree and demon Narakasura (Figure 24). *Parijat* was an aboriginal tree of heaven and flowers of these trees are aromatic. Narada gave few flowers to Krishna and which were given by Krishna to his wife Rukmini. Satyabhama, another wife of Krishna became unhappy with this act of Krishna and asked whole tree, hence, Krishna went to heaven and asked Indra to give him the *Parijat* tree. Indra, the king of heaven denied and Krishna forcefully took the tree after defeating Indra and carried it to heaven and again fought with Narakasura, the king of Pragjyotishpura and installed that tree in his garden.



Figure 22: A miniature of 19th century is showing Kalki or “Nishkalanka” incarnation (Courtesy: Alwar Museum)

After upper niches, walls of this temple had big panels where mixed scenes were painted. First depiction which could be easily identified is Goddess Durga (Figure 25) with multiple hands and carrying various weapons and Bhairava is running ahead of Lion and carrying a *dhvaja* or banner.

Next panels (Figure 26) are dedicated to Krishna where he is depicted riding on a *gopa* boy and stealing the butter (*makhana*) and breaking the pitcher. *Gopa dvarapalas* are also

depicted as standing on either side of this panel. In another panel, Yasoda is churning the butter milk to take out butter and small Krishna is standing and waiting for the butter (Figure 27).



Figure 23: Depiction of incarnations of Vishnu as relief on doorjamb of 19th century Thikana Kala Hanuman temple, Jaipur



Figure 24: Krishna and Satyabhama with *Parijat* tree and demon Narkasura



Figure 25: Goddess Durga

An interesting panel is depicted on the niche of temple where a lady is charming a snake (Figure 28). This is very interesting depiction of probably Raga/Ragini Asavari. This Ragini could be identified as in Ragini Asavari, a lady of jungle habitat plays or

charms a snake. As *Ragamala* was very common subject and was depicted by most of miniature schools in India. The iconography of this lady is found on colophon of miniature where she sits on rocky platform and barely clothed but her body is adorned with jewels. She only wore a skirt made of peacock feathers. She holds or charms snake in most of the depiction.



Figure 26: Krishna with *gopa* boys



Figure 27: Yasoda churning the butter milk with child Krishna standing

In this panel (Figure 28) too she is charming the snake with help of musical instrument similar to “bin” or “Alghoja”. “Bin” has only one flute at the end but “Alghoja” has two pipes at the end. She wore a short skirt which is not clear as colours are faded but it could be made of peacock feathers. A coiled snake is depicted in front of her and she is probably seated on her knees.



Figure 28: A lady is charming a snake

Above the head of lady figure an inscription is written in Devanagari script which is not clear but Nagari alphabet “पसावरी” (Pasavari) is written. Alphabet ष (Pa) is used for अ (A) so it could be confirmed that this depiction belongs to Ragini Asawari.



Figure 29: Female Version of Krishna

Is Ragini Asawari is related somehow with Krishna or she could be identified as the female version of Krishna (Figure 29). She is depicted with dark complexion and some time in blue colour. She also plays with snake and wore skirt of peacock feather. Lord Krishna also wore peacock feather. This is an area of further research.

Unfortunately, all the paintings of this beautiful temple have been lost forever. The temple was discovered by the first author sometime in 2017 and at that time, the overall condition of the temple was a bit deteriorating. The owners of the temple thought of renovating it and when they failed in preserving the old paintings, they thought it better to re-plaster the whole temple after making conservation related interferences in the building and then whitewashed the whole temple from inside and

outside. The first author revisited the temple in 2020 to take better pictures of the paintings but learnt of total disappearance of all the old paintings. Now, an option is that good large pictures of the paintings are developed and displayed in the temple premises with all necessary precautions. The close proximity of the temple to the Noida International Airport and the uniqueness of the temple and the paintings warrants such an exhibition. The Noida International Airport Authority in consultation with the owners of the temple can take such an initiative. Even, there is an option to display large photographs of these paintings at the upcoming airport building as it would give the airport a unique look. The first author would feel quite happy in sharing all the pictures which are available with him.

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