For the royal patrons

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The murals of an 18th century temple in Karnataka reveal an interesting stage in the development of the art.

ABOUT 35 km from the town of Tumkur, on NH4 that leads to Pune, is a small but magnificent 18th century temple. Located in a village, "Chikka Sibi" (Small Sibi in Kannada) the temple is called Sibi Narasimha Swamy temple. Nallapa, Tipu Sultan's revenue officer, built this temple in the memory of his mother Alamelu. A close associate of both Hyder Ali and Tipu Sultan, Nallapa is also credited with having written Hyder Nama, Hyder Ali's biography in 1784.

Unlike many that boast a mythological past, this temple makes no such claims. Being a fairly new temple whose land records are well documented, the temple is unique for showing a whole new facet to the history of shared tradition. The murals in this temple record the extremely interesting culmination of more than one style.

Various genres

Mural art in south Indian temples dates back to the 13th century. The most famous genre of narratives in mural art stuck to re-telling epics like the Ramayana or the Mahabharata. Other themes included depictions of various incidents from the Puranas, Upanishads and folktales.

The other main genre was semi-biographical sketches of the kings and rulers. Most dealt with wars, stories of their chivalry, heroism and other such incidents from their lives or couples in various erotic poses. This genre of paintings was clearly patronised by the royalty and the artistes got rich gifts for their effort.
Many murals in the Sibi temple are about the lives of the kings of Mysore state and closely resemble the murals found in the Dariya Daulat Bagh in Srirangapattanam. One possible conclusion is that the artistes at both sites were the same, because both structures were built in the same decade and were patronised by Tipu Sultan.

The biggest, and probably the most interesting, panel is on the ceiling right at the entrance of the main gateway, which is now in a highly dilapidated and ruined condition. Since it is right in the middle of the ceiling, this large rectangular mural seems to have been well protected from inclement weather and harsh sunlight. Faint traces are still visible to the naked eye. This mural bears a close resemblance to a huge forest scene. This probably highlights the importance of the area, which was a forest when the temple was built.

Tipu Sultan is the central figure in the panel. Whether this heroic depiction of Tipu was because the king was actually involved in commissioning the portrait is highly debatable.

The figures are dexterously drawn and well composed when viewed separately. But when seen as a narrative, they do not seem to be part of one story. For example, a sage performs penance inside a snake hill while just above Krishna is shown playing on his flute as his shepherd friends look on.

Central figure

Just beside this is a scene where Tipu stands in the middle of a forest. He is shown fighting a pouncing tiger with a sword in his right hand and stabbing a boar with a long spear held in his left hand. Apart from this, he is also stamping a snake with his left foot. The artist and the person who commissioned these paintings obviously had a very high opinion of Tipu's courage. Tipu's figure is distinctive and easily recognisable. It is possible that he frequented this place for his favourite tiger hunts. The other "scenes" from the panel are all clearly separate from each other and do not make much sense when taken together: Cowherds grazing cattle, young women collecting flowers, and so on.

Surrounding this large mural are four beams, one on each side that depict scenes from a royal procession. The procession does not seem to be dated; so it is debatable whether this is a procession of Tipu Sultan or somebody else. There are also erotic depictions on some panels.

Intricate designs

Past this main gateway is a large courtyard with the main temple. The courtyard is lined on all the four sides with small arches on top of the wall. Each arch is intricately designed and tells a particular story from Hindu mythology.

In the courtyard are two big structures — the main temple and a smaller one. Above this are two spires with arches, again with intricate sculptures. These seem to have been done with a great sense of artistry and show details like the designs on the clothes.

The temple is testimony to yet another face of the Tiger of Mysore. The temple and its murals are however, in a sad state of affairs. Most of the structures have been ravaged by weather conditions or vandalised. Many of the murals have been destroyed — whitewashed by careless authorities who possibly feel they are unnecessary.

There is a strong need for bodies like the ASI to step in and conserve the remains before all is lost.

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How to get there

Take a bus from Bangalore to Tumkur at Rs. 40 a head. From Tumkur, take a taxi to Chikka Sibi. This costs anywhere between Rs. 1000-1500. Bargain with the taxi driver for reductions. The best time is early in the day. Photography and video are strictly prohibited.

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