



# *Kīrtimukha* in the Art of the Kapili-Jamuna Valley of Assam: An Artistic Survey

RESEARCH PAPER

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## ABSTRACT

The figure of the *kīrtimukha* or ‘glory- face’ is an artistic motif that appears on early Indian art and architecture, initially as a sacred symbol and then more commonly as a decorative element. In Assam, the motif of *kīrtimukha* is seen crowning the stele of the stray icons of the early medieval period. The motif also appeared in the structural components of the ancient and early medieval temples of Assam. The Kapili-Jamuna valley, situated in the districts of Nagaon, Marigaon and Hojai in central Assam houses innumerable rich archaeological remains, especially temple ruins and sculptures, both stone and terracotta. Many such architectural components are adorned by the *kīrtimukha* figures, usually carved in low relief. It is proposed to discuss the iconographic features of the *kīrtimukha* motif in the art of the Kapili-Jamuna valley of Assam and also examine whether the iconographic depictions of the *kīrtimukha* as prescribed in canonical texts, such as the *Śilpaśāstras* are reflected in the art of the valley. Pan Asian linkages of the *kīrtimukha* motif will also be examined.

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Quite inextricably, art in India, in its early historical period, mostly catered to the religious need of the people. Artistic activities are often seen to be associated with religious structures. This closer interaction of art and religion may be perceived in the development of monumental structures which are often religious in nature. It is in such places of religious architecture that we find the earliest evidences of sculptural activities. When H.D. Sankalia observed, 'Indian sculpture is rarely found alone, it had to serve architecture chiefly as ornament of the latter', he meant that the sculptures mainly served as the decorative parts of the temple, adorning the temple walls, ceilings, pediment, doorway lintel etc (as cited in Choudhury 1985: 186). Evolving from single-cell, flat roofed structure to a more elaborate and monumental buildings, many new architectural and sculptural elements were added to the temple structure in course of time.

The art of Assam in its early historical period, similar to the dominant artistic tradition of India, is primarily religious in nature. It is on the ruins of the early medieval temples of Assam that sculptural depictions of various figures, both divine and secular, may be found. The Kapili-Jamuna valley, situated in the present districts of Nagaon, Marigaon and Hojai in central Assam, has a number of archaeological sites that include ruins of several temples of the pre-Ahom period, i.e. prior to the thirteenth century, built mostly under royal patronage. The sculptures, adorning the temple complexes (now only the plinths and portions of the walls survive), primarily depicts gods, goddesses, semi-divine and secular figures as well as floral and faunal elements. One of the prominent motifs used extensively in the art of the Kapili-Jamuna valley is the *kīrtimukha*. The figure of the *kīrtimukha*, also ascribed as 'glory- face' is an artistic motif that appears on different parts of temples, initially as a sacred symbol to ward off evil and then more commonly as a decorative element. In the Kapili-Jamuna valley of Assam, the *kīrtimukha* may be seen carved on the structural components of the temples as well as on stone icons, crowning the stele and flanked by flying *vidyadharas*. Massive stone blocks, forming part of the temple *sikhara*, as well as sculptures from different archaeological sites of the region like Rajbari, Na-Nath, Doboka, Mikrati, Shimpur, Akasiganga, Amtala etc depicts the *kīrtimukha*, usually carved in low relief (**Figure 1**). It is proposed to discuss the iconographic features of the *kīrtimukha* motif in the art of the Kapili valley region and interpret its significance in temple complexes through the use of sacred texts and iconography. The research examines the prevalence of the *kīrtimukha* motif in others parts of India as well as in South-Asia. The study is primarily based on field survey, supplemented by secondary literature.



**Figure 1** Kirtimukha on architectural component of a temple, Rajbari, c.11<sup>th</sup> century CE.

The *kīrtimukha* is a grotesque creature said to have been born out of Siva's wrath from between the lord's eyebrows to annihilate evil forces. According to Puranic myths (as narrated in *Padmapurāna* and *Skandapurāna*), its birth is associated with the story of a powerful *asura*, the king of demons called Jalandhara who have acquired the 'sovereignty of the three worlds'. Arrogant and lustful, Jalandhara sent his messenger, Rahu to humiliate Siva who was about to marry the beautiful Parvati, the 'moon-like' daughter of the mountain king, Himalaya. Rahu was to tell the great God that 'the beggar Siva' was not a worthy spouse for the beautiful princess, who was only destined to be the queen of Jalandhara (Gangoly 1920: 12). The impudent demand of Jalandhara infuriated Siva. Out of Siva's terrific rage was born a 'horrendous lion, lion-headed demon'. The ghastly creature emerged from the terrific burst of power from between the lord's eyebrow, the spot called the 'the Lotus of Command' or *ājñā-cakra*, signifying the divine wrath of the supreme power (Campbell 1990: 180). The body of the monster was lean and emaciated, symbolising its insatiable hunger, yet its strength was resilient and irresistible. The apparition's throat roared like thunder; eyes burnt like fire; the mane, dishevelled, spread far and wide into space (Campbell 1990: 180). Being terrified at the sight of this gruesome creature, Rahu sought Siva's protection; he took refuge at the feet of the great god and was thus saved from being devoured. Such benevolence symbolised fatherhood and the 'all-protecting' nature of the almighty. Being unable to devour Rahu, the monster was left with a painful hunger. Hence, due to its insatiable hunger, the *kīrtimukha* began to eat its own body and limbs, leaving only its face intact. This earned the admiration of Siva who was delighted by the vivid manifestation of its self-consuming power. Pleased at this act, Siva thus addressed the monster face, "you will be known henceforth as *kīrtimukha*, and I ordain, you shall always remain at my doorway. He who fails to worship you, shall never be able to acquire my grace" (Gangoly 1920: 12). As such the *kīrtimukha* is referred to as the 'face of glory' and, like the Greek Gorgons serve as an apotropaic demon-mask, a gruesome, awe-inspiring guardian of the threshold and is an active portion of the substance of the divinity himself, a sign and agent of his protective, fiend-destroying wrath (Campbell 1990: 182). Hence the *kīrtimukha* may be seen carved on the lintel of doorways to Siva temples. It is carved on the threshold of the *garbhagriha* marking the passage into transcendental nature (Kramrisch 1946: 330). The monster head functioned as a propitious device, protecting the holy shrine from evil forces. The *kīrtimukha* is also known as *kāla* head as it symbolises time or nemesis which inevitably consumes everything, hence the devourer. The auspicious *kīrtimukha* motif began to be used indiscriminately on various parts of the temple as decorative element. In art, the *kīrtimukha* is characterised by projecting horns, fangs, frowning eye-brows, protruding eyes and fan-shaped ears. Such iconographic features are consistent with *śilpaśāstra* texts such as the *Manasara*, *Kaśyapa-śilpa* and the *Aparājita-prccha*. Often, the *kīrtimukha* is associated with the *makara* (crocodile) motif. Such association with the *makaramukha* is especially evident in the sculptural representations of the Orissan temples. The aquatic *makara* symbolises water, which signifies life and growth and hence is the antithesis of the destructive nature of the lion-mask or *kīrtimukha* (Donaldson 1976: 420).

According to a different version of the story mentioned in *Padma Purāna* (Uttara Khanda, ch.11), Siva rewarded the *kīrtimukha* by placing the monster face inside his matted locks; as such in art, the *kīrtimukha* also sometimes appears in Siva's *jatamukuta* or crown of matted hair. In this positioned it developed into an ornamental finial for the decoration of the images and henceforth appear on the apex of the stele or at the summit of the aureole (*prabhamandala*) of sculptures of Siva (Campbell 1990: 182). In course of time the *kīrtimukha* transformed into an ornamental motif that was found at the apex of the stele of other icons as well. Also, by the sixth century C.E., as a result of its popularity, the *kīrtimukha* motif seemed to surpass its Saivite character and was used indiscriminately as an auspicious symbol at the entrance of the temples of other deities as well (Gangoly 1920: 13–14). This is in conjunction with texts such as *Śilpa Prakāśa*, which states that the *kīrtimukha* functions as an apotropaic device to repel evil spirits and protect the temple structure from lightning (Boner and Sarma 1966: 22). The *kīrtimukha* found in the literary narratives are conventionalised in the art forms of the Indian subcontinent as well as in South-East Asia. Used popularly in art and architecture from the Gupta period onwards, the *kīrtimukha* functions both as an auspicious motif as well as an ornamental design.



The *kīrtimukha* motif is quite common in the sculptures of the Kapili-Jamuna valley of Assam. The valley is dotted with a number of archaeological sites housing ruins of several pre-Ahom temples (c. 6<sup>th</sup> century CE to c. 12<sup>th</sup> century CE), majority of which are temples dedicated to Śiva. The temples of the Kapili-Jamuna valley are stylistically similar to the *Nagara* style of temple architecture with *tri-ratha* or *pañca-ratha* ground plan. The valley, rich in material remains in the form of temple ruins and sculptures, first finds mention in the Allahabad Pillar inscription of Samudragupta, datable to the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE. The inscription refers to the kingdom of *Devāka* along with the kingdom of *Kamarūpa*, *Nepāla*, *Samatāṣa* and *Kartripura* existing on the eastern frontier of the Gupta Empire, and whose rulers paid allegiance to the reigning Gupta monarch. The *Devāka* of the Allahabad Pillar Inscription may be identified with the place Doboka (situated in present Hojai district of Assam) of the Kapili-Jamuna valley of Assam which have an abundance of rich archaeological remains, standing mute testimony to the existence of a strong political centre in the region. The valley also served as a flourishing socio-cultural zone and an important administrative centre, especially from c. 4<sup>th</sup> to c. 12<sup>th</sup> century C.E. That the rulers of the region were actively engaged in temple building activities is evidenced by the innumerable temple remains that lie scattered in the area. Sculptures, both in terracotta and stone, mostly adorning the temples, indicate that the rulers of the region actively patronised artistic activities.

Amongst the various sculptural depictions, the motif of *kīrtimukha* may be seen commonly in the sculptures of this region belonging to the period 9<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> century CE. The *kīrtimukha* is found adorning the apex of the stele of deities such as Śiva, Viṣṇu, Śūrya, Gaṇeśa, Tripura-Bhairavi etc. In the early sculptures belonging to 9<sup>th</sup>–10<sup>th</sup> century C.E. the stele is devoid of any decoration. It is usually cylindrical in shape, adorned only by a flat band all around and crowned by the *kīrtimukha*. A rock-cut sculpture of Uma-Maheśwara from Kasosila Pahar in Marigaon exhibits this feature (**Figure 2**). This sculpture depicts Śiva embracing his consort Uma and has a *kīrtimukha* carved on the top of the stele. The latter is devoid of decoration; it exhibited only a rope or band like design carved on the border surrounding the central figure.



**Figure 2** Rock-cut sculpture of *kīrtimukha* adorning the apex of the stele, Kasosila Pahar, c.9<sup>th</sup>–10<sup>th</sup> century CE.

At present, the image is severely weathered. In the succeeding centuries, the *kirtimukha* figure on the stele is flanked by two flying *vidyadhara*s. The *vidyadhara*s as portrayed in literary narratives such as the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahabharata* are supernatural and mythical beings (Shin 2018: 24). They are the bearers of knowledge, demonstrating many different kinds of supernatural ability called *vidyā*. Such knowledge or *vidyā* are synonymous with mental and spiritual knowledge, knowledge of spells as well as knowledge of medicinal herbs (Grafe 1999: 233). The ornamentation of the stele of divinities with decorative motifs such as *kirtimukha*, *vidyadhara* and accessory figures speaks of the influence of the East Indian Art style in the artistic activities of early medieval Assam. In fact, the *kirtimukha* decoration became the special feature of the steles modelled under East Indian School of Medieval Art style (Dutta 1990: 74). The rich decoration and ornamentation of the stele depicting flying *gandharas* (heavenly musicians) on cloud motif flanking the *kirtimukha* as well as other sculptural details is especially true of the sculptures of the Pala period of mid 10<sup>th</sup> century C.E (Kramrisch 1929: 119). This can be noticed in a number of sculptures from the Kapili valley region. A Surya image from Doboka, carved on a block of black basalt depicts the *kirtimukha*. The deity stands in *samapada* *sthānaka* attitude on a lotus over a high pedestal showing the seven horses of his chariot. He is flanked by two male attendants, Dandi and Pinagala and two female attendants, Rajni and Niksubha on two sides. Below these figures, the images of Usa and Pratyusha are depicted as shooting away the darkness with bow and arrow. Another female figurine (Prithvi or Mahasveta) is depicted below the feet of the sun god and just behind the image of Aruna, the charioteer. The stele has the *kirtimukha* figure carved on the pointed *silapatta* and it is flanked by two *vidyadhara*s (**Figure 3**). Some leaf/floral designs may be seen hanging out of its



**Figure 3** Kirtimukha flanked by flying vidyadharas on a Surya sculpture, Doboka, c.10<sup>th</sup>–11<sup>th</sup> century CE.



fangs. Again, a four armed rock-cut image of Ganesa from Kasosila Pahar, Marigaon depicts the *kīrtimukha* and the flying *vidyadharas* in the usual way (**Figure 4**). Other such images from the Kapili valley region depicting the *kīrtimukha* motif with the *vidyadharas* are a rock cut Uma-Maheswara from Buda Mayang (**Figure 5**), a *Trivikrama* form of Vishnu from Akasiganga, Vishnu images from Kawaimari, Buda Budi etc. An image from Mikirati in Hojai district depicts the *kīrtimukha* motif flanked by two flying *vidyadharas* carved at the apex of the stele of an Uma-Maheswara icon (R.D. Choudhury 1985: 63). Three string of pearls or *rudrakshamālā* is seen issuing from the mouth of the *kīrtimukha*. At present the piece of sculpture is missing from the site. From Jogijan in the Kapili valley, an image of Tripura Bhairavi, a tantric deity, depicts the *kīrtimukha* motif carved on the pointed *silapatta* bordered with a decorative band (**Figure 6**). The *kīrtimukha* has a slight grinning face with three strings of *rudrakshamālā* hanging out of its mouth. A scaly pine-cone like object hanging at the bottom of its mouth is also seen which is quite peculiar in this case (R.D. Choudhury 1985: 245). The object may be a depiction of a green lotus bud. A stylistic reading of the *kīrtimukha* motif that appeared at the apex of the stele of the above mentioned icons from the Kapili-Jamuna valley indicates that it closely resembles the *Śilpasāstra* descriptions, characterised by bulging eyes, frowning eye brows, fangs and a protruding tongue.



**Figure 4** Kirtimukha on a rock-cut Ganesa sculpture, Kasosila Pahar, c.10<sup>th</sup>–11<sup>th</sup> century CE.





**Figure 5** Kirtimukha on the stele of a rock-cut Uma-Maheswara sculpture, Buda-Mayang, c. 10<sup>th</sup>–11<sup>th</sup> century CE.



**Figure 6** Kirtimukha from Jogijan, c. 11<sup>th</sup> century CE, Assam State Museum.



The Kapili-Jamuna valley houses innumerable temple remains, many of which are decorated with the *kīrtimukha* motif carved in low relief. Rajbari in Hojai district houses remains of at least nine pre-Ahom temples enclosed within a massive brick boundary wall. Remains of a temple plinth with *garbhagriha*, *mandapa*, *mukhamandapa*, *sikhara*s carrying *angasikhara*s and *amalaka*s evidently speak of the influence of *Nagara* style of temple architecture. The site museum houses many structural components of the temple such as, door jambs, lintels, pillar bases, columns, ceiling slabs, sculptural friezes, *Siva linga*, *yonipitha* and various architectural stones. Arcs of circular stone blocks forming part of the *gandi* of the temple lies scattered around the complex. These are ornamented by *kīrtimukha* motifs carved in low relief (*Figure 7*). Three strings of *rudrakshamālā* emerge from its mouth. The *Manasara* states that the *kīrtimukha* should be placed on the front portion of the door way (*mukha-bhadra*) and even on the *sikhara* (*Manasara*, 18,151) (Krishna Kumari 2015: 16). According to Kramrisch, the *kīrtimukha* or the 'face of glory' figures prominently on the largest *Gavaksa* of *Nagara* temples, called *Sukanasa*, the antefix of the open arch of the *Sikhara* (Kramrisch 1946: 322). Quite similarly, in the various sites of the Kapili valley region the *kīrtimukha* motif can be seen carved on stone blocks that formed part of the temple *sikhara*. At the site museum of Devasthan in the Kapili valley, an image of a *kīrtimukha* is seen carved on the *kalasa* (now kept upside down) of a *Nagara* temple that must have once stood at the site (*Figure 8*). Interestingly, when compared with other regions, images of *kīrtimukha* are not commonly depicted on *kalasa* of *Nagara* temples. Such is the popularity of *kīrtimukha* in the art of the Kapili-Jamuna valley, both as an auspicious and ornamental motif that the artists might have given importance to carving it on the mouth of temple *kalasa* as well. Almost all the *kīrtimukha* depicts three strings of *rudrakshamālā* emerging from its mouth. The *kīrtimukha* motif is seen on four sides of the circular stones and the *rudrakshamālā* continue down to the stone below it, i.e. to the lower tier.

**Figure 7** Kirtimukha on stone slabs, Rajbari, c.11<sup>th</sup> century CE.



In Orissan temples, the *kīrtimukha* motif, also known as *vajra-mastaka* according to *Śilpa Prakāśa*, appears prominently on the *gandi* or spire of the temple (Donaldson 1976: 421). The motif consists of a lion-mask with pearls dripping from its mouth to form two superimposed *caitya*-medallions (Donaldson 1976: 421). The pearls issued from the mouth of *kīrtimukha* are symbolic representation of the builder's or donor's fame which is figuratively taken to be as white as pearls (Panigrahi 1961: 121). Excavations in the Kapili valley region have unearthed massive stone *kīrtimukha* that probably adorned the temple superstructure. The *kīrtimukha* figures depict three strings of chains or *rudrakshamālā* that drops down from the mouth. They exhibit canonical expressions with grinning face and teeth, projecting horns, bulging eyes, broad nose, moustache, fangs and sometimes with frowning brows (*Figure 9*). The *kīrtimukha* is depicted without its lower jaws, quite similar to the majority of the *kīrtimukha* figures on Indian temples (Kramrisch 1946: 327).





**Figure 8** Kirtimukha on kalasa of a Nagara temple, Devasthan, c.10th–11<sup>th</sup> century CE.

The Raj Mohan Nath Archaeological Park at Hojai houses stone blocks collected from different archaeological sites of the Kapili valley region such as Na-nath, Doboka, Akasiganga, Rajbari, Shivpuri, Rajabari etc. The stone blocks formed part of the structural components of the pre-Ahom temples that once stood at the sites. Many of such stone blocks have the carving of *kirtimukha* motif similar to the ones discussed above. A single arc with a *kirtimukha* motif has been placed over a raised platform of concrete blocks. On a circular concrete platform the *mastaka* and *gandi* of a temple can be seen over which has been placed the *amalaka* and *mastaka*. This has the depiction of a *kirtimukha* motif, stylistically similar to the ones that are found in the other archaeological sites of the Kapili valley (**Figure 10**). At Mahadeosal, which houses the ruins of some pre-Ahom temples, a stone piece bearing a *kirtimukha* frieze may be noticed, having the similar canonical expression. The stone blocks decorated with the *kirtimukha* that lie scattered in the various archaeological sites of the valley are similar to those of Deoparvat in Golaghat district which have similar *kirtimukha* carvings. That the *kirtimukha* motif was also used for the base is indicated by the discovery of stone blocks with dowel holes on its upper portion where the motif is sculpted. Such blocks of stone are noticed at Rajbari, Devasthan and Mahadeosal (**Figure 11**). The *kirtimukha* carved in horizontal bands around the socle or at the base are also noticed in Orissan as well as early medieval temples of central and western India; it is known as *Rahurmukher-mala* in Orissa and *Grasa-pattika* in Gujarat (Kramrisch 1946: 146, 32). Stone blocks with dowel holes that are part of the temple





**Figure 9** Kirtimukha, Sankyadevi, c.10<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup> century CE.



**Figure 10** Kirtimukha on circular block of stone, Rajbari, c.11<sup>th</sup> century CE.

*adhithana*, indicate the use of iron in the construction of the pre-Ahom temples of Assam. That iron was used in temple construction during the early medieval period of Assam is also indicated by the discovery of iron extraction and smelting site at Rahdhala pukhuri near Dhekial in the Doyang Dhansiri valley of Assam (Dutta 1997: 42).

A study of the architectural components having *kirtimukha* carvings indicates that these formed part of some early medieval temples of Assam belonging to 9<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup> century C.E. Quite interestingly, in the 9<sup>th</sup> century C.E. the Kapili-Jamuna valley was under the jurisdiction of the Salastambha rulers who had their capital at a Harrupesvara in the present Tezpur region situated on the north bank of the river Brahmaputra. However, the *kirtimukha* motif is not popular in the art and architecture of the Tezpur region with the exception of one or two such images (one at Cole Park and the other at a door sill at Sirajuli). In the artistic activities of Assam, the motif of *kirtimukha* is confined only to the architectural remains of early medieval





**Figure 11** Kirtimukha on stone blocks with dowel holes, Mahadeosal, c.11<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup> century CE.

temples found at sites such as Kapili-Jamuna valley, Deoparvat in Golaghat district, Madan Kamdev Parvat in Kamrup district and Sri Surya Pahar, Paglatek, Mornoi, Dekdhowa, Barbhita, Gobindapur of Goalpara district. The *kīrtimukha* sculptures might have existed, but Assam with its tropical climate with dense vegetation and being located in a highly seismic zone, very few remains of temple bases have been found. The *kīrtimukha* motif appeared in the art of Assam from 9<sup>th</sup> century onwards and continued till 12<sup>th</sup>–13<sup>th</sup> century CE. In the succeeding centuries, ravaged by invasions and constant conflict, the region witnessed a cessation in temple building activities due to economic instability and lack of political patronage. Again, in the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century under the Ahom rulers the region of Assam witnessed full scale development in building activities, both secular and religious architecture. However, these structures are in brick and witnessed the introduction of new motifs in the architectural design.

In other parts of India, especially in Dravidian temple architecture the *kīrtimukha* is generally noticed on the door-lintel of the main shrine or on the successive tiers of the *vimana* or *gopuram*. On south Indian temples, the *kīrtimukha* is carved on either side of the steps of the temple base (Kramrisch 1946: 323). On architectural components, the motif is generally seen on the apex of the temple arch or in its centre; it also appears on the front of the threshold of the *garbhagriha* as well as along the socle or base of the temples (Kramrisch 1946: 322–323). In the temples of Orissa the *kīrtimukha* or the *vajra-mastaka* which is a major decorative motif on the *gandi* of the temple, is sometimes accompanied by another element, the *makara* (crocodile like aquatic animal). A stone slab in a wall surrounding the Lakṣmanesvara, Bharatesvara and Satrugnesvara temples exhibit this feature. The frontally depicted *kīrtimukha* or the lion face is housed within a *caitya-medallion* flanked by a *makara*, represented in profile, on each side of the medallion (Donaldson 1976: 420–421). Strings of pearls issue from the mouth of the *makara* while a tongue protrudes out from the mouth of the lion-face. However, in the specimens observed from Kapili-Jamuna valley in Assam, the *makara* motif is not usually depicted along with the *kīrtimukha* figure. The figure sculptures such as *maithuna* couples, *yakṣa*, and *śalabhañjika* that accompany the *kīrtimukha* motif forming part of an elaborate decorative design, seen mostly on Orissan temples, are absent in the art of the Kapili-Jamuna valley. In the art of the Kapili-Jamuna valley, *kīrtimukhas* that adorn the apex of the stele of divinities are flanked by flying *vidyādhara*s. Also, the *kīrtimukha* or the ‘face of glory’ may be seen commonly on the apex of the stele of divinities as well as on the body of the temple superstructure and sometimes around the temple base, and not in the centre of the lintel of the main doorway.

## TRACING THE PAN ASIAN LINKAGES OF *KĪRTIMUKHA*: CULTURAL INTERACTIONS

The *kīrtimukha* has been found in the artistic activities of the Indian subcontinent; in architectural specimens from Nepal, Afghanistan and Sri Lanka variants of the grotesque lion

motif is depicted, though all of them technically cannot be termed as the *kīrtimukha* motif. The *kīrtimukha*, quite popular in art and architecture of South-East Asia, has often been described as the *kāla-makara* motif. The *kāla-makara* consists of two separate motifs, *kāla* and *makara*, though sometimes they are found united forming a single combined motive. The *kāla* head is shaped like the head of a monster, resembling the terrible god *Kāla* or *Yama*, the god of death in Hindu mythology who is also known as *kāla* or time that destroys all. But scholars, such as R.C. Mazumdar emphasise that it in reality the *kāla* head is derived from the Indian motive of lion's head (Mazumdar 1944: 89). Coomaraswamy describes it as a grotesque *kīrtimukha*, with features such as protruding eyes, broad nose and two big projecting teeth on two sides of the mouth, similar to the ones appearing in the early medieval temples of India. (Mazumdar 1944: 89). The lion face also appears in Chinese art in sacrificial vessels and bowls, some of which are as old as sixth century B.C.E. and has been popularly known in China as *T'ao-t'ieh* or monster face. Similarly, a monster face depicted on gothic architecture, with beard of leaves and sometimes with leaves springing out of its cheeks, forehead and lips, known popularly as 'Green Man' bears resemblance with the *kāla* head (Raglan 1939: 47). The *kīrtimukha* or the glory face is also called as *Banaspati* or 'King of woods' by the Dutch archaeologist (Gangoly 1920: 17). Regardless of its various names, it is one of the most frequently employed motifs of architectural carvings in South-East Asia.

In Javanese art and architecture, the *kīrtimukha* is used basically as a decorative element. In the Javanese temples, the motif appears as surface decoration of the entablature on the upper tiers of the temples. While in India, the size and location of the *kīrtimukha* motif in the temple architecture is quite insignificant, in most cases a mere surface decoration, in Javanese architecture it took a prominent place in the scheme of construction. In Javanese temples it has not only assumed a gigantic size, but it has taken a place in the construction of the temple, sometimes as a keystone emphasizing the scheme of the structure, and in later times assuming the role of archways, the actual architectural links which bind together the most important parts of the structure itself (Gangoly 1920: 16). Besides being used as an ornamental motif in the architectural scheme of Javanese temples, the depiction of *kīrtimukha* also represents the sacred symbolism associated with Siva temples. Portraying the Puranic legends where the *kīrtimukha* finds its abode in the matted locks of the great god Siva, a specimen from Tjandi Singasari in Java depicts the *kāla* head with its locks carved on the lingam (Gangoly 1920: 17). In Cambodia too, the *kīrtimukha* motif is commonly used as a decorative element as well as sacred symbol in the architectural carvings of temples. They are generally found in the centre of lintels over doorways of the temples (for instance, temples of Prea-Khane in Cambodia) and accompanied by other figures. One interesting specimen comes from the doorway of a Cambodian temple where the *kīrtimukha* is depicted not only as a face but is also shown with two hands, engrossed in the act of devouring itself (Gangoly 1920: 16). No illustrations from India depict the *kīrtimukha* with its hands; quite significantly, the specimen from Cambodia is successful in representing the Puranic myth of the *kīrtimukha* consuming itself. In the Lolei temple near the Rolous archaeological site, the *kīrtimukha* or the *Kāla*- head occupies the central position. Wavy garlands and tiny horses (*jala-turaga*) issue from the mouth of the monster (Marcus 1968: 321–330). While scholars such as Vogel trace the origin of such motifs to the indigenous traditions of Cambodia, other scholars like Ram Ranjan Das and D.P. Ghosh, emphasising the Indian origin of the motif categorically states that "it is, however, quite clear that of the so called *kāla makara* motif, not only the elements, but the whole design itself, is purely Indian" (Das 1974: 75). In all probability, it must be emphasised that it was only after expanding its geographical distribution outside India, that the *kīrtimukha* motif became aesthetically more refined and its proportions gigantic.

The influence of Indian art and culture in present day South-East Asia has already been discussed by a host of scholars and does not merit repetition here. That India had trading as well as cultural intercourse with these lands since the ancient times is already well known; less known is the connection between Assam with Cambodia (Kambuja) and Indonesia. In Indonesia, Brahmannical culture had established its roots prior to 6<sup>th</sup> century CE. The chronicles of the Leang dynasty of China states that in P'o-li (Bali), "the king's family name is Kaundinya and he never before had any intercourse with China. When asked about his ancestors or about their age, he could not state this, but said that the wife of Śuddhodana was a daughter of his country." (Mazumdar 1944: 22–23). In Borneo too, inscriptions in Sanskrit language, dating to 5<sup>th</sup> century CE refer to a king called Mula-varman, son of Asva-varman and grandson of king



Kundunga. Kundunga might be a corrupted form of Kaundinya, thus linking Mula-varman's ancestry with Kaundinya. The Chinese chronicle *Kang Tai* of 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE states that the founder of Kambuja or Cambodia (Fu-nan) was Kaundinya (Sarma 2008: 122). According to the Cambodian legend, one Preah Thong, the son of the king Adityavamsa of Indraprastha, who came to Kok-Thlok i.e. Funan, seized the throne of the reigning Nāga king, married the Nāga princess and then became the ruling monarch of Fu-nan (Sarma 2008: 122). The Myson Stelae Inscription of Champā king Prakasadharmā dated 579 Saka Era (657 CE) corroborates the Cambodian annals and Chinese chronicles by stating that the Brahmin Kaundinya who married a Nāga queen established the kingdom of Kamboja (Sarma 2008: 190). Now, the origin of Kaundinya is shrouded in mystery. R.C. Mazumdar relates Kaundinya to the Pallavas of South India. However, there is dearth of enough evidences to justify such association. On the other hand, emphasising the closer connection between Assam and South-East Asia, scholars such as K.L. Barua opine that the founder of the Cambodian kingdom of Fu-nan who was a Kaundinya, i.e., a Brahmana belonging to the Kaundinya *gotra*, hailed from Assam and that he was called Kaundinya as he originally belonged to Kundin (Barua 1939: 60–61). Barua locates Kundin in Sadiya in the eastern most corner of Assam (presently Lohit and Tirap districts of Arunachal Pradesh), a place which local legends associate with the kingdom of Vidarbha where the powerful king Bhismak ruled with his capital at Kundin or Kundilnagar. Legends have it that Rukmini, the beautiful daughter of Bhismak elopes with Krishna, the epic hero, who comes to Vidarbha from Dwarka. Kundin/Kundilnagar came to be known as Bhismaknagar where ruins of ancient forts and temples have been unearthed. That there was an ancient kingdom in the Sadiya region, known as Kundilnagar may be attested by the remains. Hence, K.L. Barua opines that it is not improbable that there should be a settlement of Kaundinya Brahmins in Sadiya, near the river Kundin. P. N. Bhattacharyya refers to a local tradition which speaks of a colony of Brahmins settled by Parasuram in the region of Kundilnagara (Bhattacharya 1931: 27). Moreover, *Nagara-Puspanjali* assigns the Kaundinya as one of the thirty three *gotras* of Nāga Brahmins (Barua 1939: 61). N.N Vasu also states that Kaundinya and Kaundinya- Kausika are among the *gotras* of Vaidik Brahmins of Bengal, Sylhet and Kamarupa (Assam) (Vasu 2018: 142–144). Many of the Brahmins, who are the chief beneficiaries of the land grants in Assam, prior to the 13<sup>th</sup> century C.E., must have belonged to the Kaundinya *gotra*. Accordingly, there is a great possibility that the founder of the Cambodian kingdom of Fu-nan was Kaundinya, i.e. a Brahman belonging to the Kaundinya *gotra* who hailed from Assam.

The close cultural interactions between Assam and South-East Asia since the early days may be well ascertained by literary as well as archaeological evidences. The close resemblance of the artistic motifs also speaks of such associations. Analysing the spread of Brahmanical culture from India to south-east Asia, K.L. Barua states that there were two routes of migration; one proceeded from the north overland through Bengal and Assam, along the valleys of the Chindwin, the Irrawaddy, the Salween and Mekong, while the other reached Indochina by sea across the Bay of Bengal (Barua 1939: 59). In this light, it may be asserted that the *kirtimukha* motif, so widely used in India art as well as in South-East Asia, might have travelled to South-East Asia from Assam via the land route, i.e. through Sadiya in Assam to the valleys of the Chindwin, Irrawaddy, the Salween and the Mekong, and perhaps, not necessarily through the sea route, i.e. from Bengal and South India. Also, the *kirtimukha*, with eyes having horn like sockets, carved on architectural components of a temple from Deo Parvat in Golaghat district, bears striking resemblance to the *kala-makaras* of Java. Such strong resemblance is also noticed in the *kirtimukha* motifs carved on the early medieval temples of the Kapili-Jamuna valley. Nevertheless, this transmission of artistic ideas and symbols must not be seen as a civilising force in terms of cultural developments in South-East Asia.

## CONCLUSION

The *kirtimukha* motif is quite common in the sculptures of Assam as well as in the architectural components of early medieval temples belonging to the period c.9<sup>th</sup> century C.E. to c.13<sup>th</sup> century C.E. The motif is closely associated with Siva. Due to the popularity of Saivism in early Assam, as evidenced by the extant remains which are predominantly Saivite in character, the discovery of the *kirtimukha* motif in the art of Assam is not surprising. The Kapili-Jamuna valley in Central Assam which have remains of a number of pre-Ahom temples, mostly Saivite, have depictions of the *kirtimukha*, carved in low relief, on sculptures and structural components

of the temples. Initially, being used as an essential sacred symbol carved only on the lintel over the doorway of Saivite temples, the *kṛtimukha* in course of time seems to have lost its original Saivite character and was used indiscriminately as an auspicious decoration on prominent parts of many Hindu temple dedicated to other deities also. Gradually, the motif gained popularity and was used extensively by the architects to adorn the temple complexes. The monster head was also carved on the shrines to terrify the evil doers and destroyers. Also, the *kṛtimukha* is seen as a crowning element at the top of the stele of the Hindu deities. In the Kapili-Jamuna valley the *kṛtimukha* may be seen as a finial decoration at the top of the stele of the sculptures. Also amongst the structural components, the *kṛtimukha* is carved on the stone blocks forming part of the temple superstructure as well as upon the temple base. Unlike in other parts of India where the motif was popularly used as an architectural element since 4<sup>th</sup>–5<sup>th</sup> century CE, in Assam, its use became popular in art and architecture only from 9<sup>th</sup> century onwards and continued till 12<sup>th</sup>–13<sup>th</sup> century C.E. The *kṛtimukha* sculptures of the valley have an almost canonical expression with grinning face, protruding eyes, projecting tongue and a broad nose. Majority of the *kṛtimukha* motif of the valley are depicted issuing strings of pearls or *rudrakshamala* from its mouth. This perhaps manifested a dual complementary symbolism combining both propitious and apotropaic aspects; the *kṛtimukha* mask is both a symbol of the fiend-destroying wrath of Siva and a source of wealth or growth as is evident by the pearls issuing from its mouth (Donaldson 1976: 426).

Tracing the pan-Asian linkages of the *kṛtimukha*, it may be asserted that the motif expanded geographically and in due course became a sacred symbol as well as decorative element, especially in the art and architecture of South-East Asia, the region known as *Suvarnadvīpa* in early times. That India had cultural interactions with the region of South-East Asia may be attested by literary as well as archaeological evidences. The use of various ornamental motifs such as rosettes, palmettes, lotuses, acanthus, vines, *kalpavriksha* and most commonly the *kṛtimukha*, in the art and architecture of South-East Asia speak of such associations. The *kāla-makara* motif, used popular in Javanese temples, bears striking similarity with the *kṛtimukhas* of Assam, particularly those from Dhansiri and Kapili valleys. The massive *kṛtimukhas* carved on stone blocks which are parts of several early medieval temples that once stood at places like Shivpur, Rajbari, Na-nath, Doboka, Akasiganga, Mahadeosal, Amtola etc of the Kapili-Jamuna valley are reminiscent of the massive human heads that adorn the four corners of the temple of Bayon. That the Kapili valley also maintained commercial as well as cultural ties with China, at least from the beginning of the Christian era is known from the accounts of the Chinese chronicle *Shung Shu* which records the sending of two emissaries from the Kapili kingdom to China between 420–479 CE (Sarma 1981: 38). Such evidences considerably speak of cultural relations that ancient Assam had with China and South-East Asia.

## COMPETING INTEREST

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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