**ABSTRACT**

The figure of the *kārtimukha* 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 *kārtimukha* 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 *kārtimukha* figures, usually carved in low relief. It is proposed to discuss the iconographic features of the *kārtimukha* motif in the art of the Kapili-Jamuna valley of Assam and also examine whether the iconographic depictions of the *kārtimukha* as prescribed in canonical texts, such as the *Śilpaśāstras* are reflected in the art of the valley. Pan Asian linkages of the *kārtimukha* motif will also be examined.
INTRODUCTION

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 kirtimukha. The figure of the kirtimukha, 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 kirtimukha 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, Shivpur, Akasiganga, Amtala etc depicts the kirtimukha, usually carved in low relief. It is proposed to discuss the iconographic features of the kirtimukha 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 kirtimukha 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.11th century CE.
THE LEGEND OF KIRTIMUKHA: DEPICTION IN EARLY INDIAN NARRATIVES

The kirtimukha 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 Padmapurana and Skandapurana), 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 ajña-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 kirtimukha 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 kirtimukha, 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 kirtimukha 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 kirtimukha 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 kirtimukha is also known as kala head as it symbolises time or nemesis which inevitably consumes everything, hence the devourer. The auspicious kirtimukha motif began to be used indiscriminately on various parts of the temple as decorative element. In art, the kirtimukha is characterised by projecting horns, fangs, frowning eye-brows, protruding eyes and fan-shaped ears. Such iconographic features are consistent with silpastra texts such as the Manasara, Kasyapa-silpa and the Aparajitapanccha. Often, the kirtimukha 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 kirtimukha (Donaldson 1976: 420).

According to a different version of the story mentioned in Padma Purana (Uttara Khandha, ch.11), Siva rewarded the kirtimukha by placing the monster face inside his matted locks; as such in art, the kirtimukha also sometimes appears in Siva’s jatamukuta or crown of matted hair. In this positioning 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 kirtimukha 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 kirtimukha 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 Silpa Prakāśa, which states that the kirtimukha functions as an apotropaic device to repel evil spirits and protect the temple structure from lightning (Bonner and Sarma 1966: 22). The kirtimukha 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 kirtimukha 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. 6th century CE to c. 12th century CE), majority of which are temples dedicated to Siva. The temples of the Kapili-Jamuna valley are stylistically similar to the Nagara style of temple architecture with tri-ratha or paīca-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 4th century CE. The inscription refers to the kingdom of Deva along with the kingdom of Kāmarupa, Nepal, Samatā and Kātripura existing on the eastern frontier of the Gupta Empire, and whose rulers paid allegiance to the reigning Gupta monarch. The Deva 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. 4th to c. 12th 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 9th to 12th century CE. The kīrtimukha is found adorning the apex of the stele of deities such as Siva, Vishnu, Surya, Ganesa, Tripura-Bhairavi etc. In the early sculptures belonging to 9th–10th 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-Maheswara from Kasosila Pahar in Marigaon exhibits this feature (Figure 2). This sculpture depicts Siva 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.9th–10th century CE.
At present, the image is severely weathered. In the succeeding centuries, the kirtimukha figure on the stele is flanked by two flying vidyadharas. The vidyadharas as portrayed in literary narratives such as the Ramayana 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 vidya. Such knowledge or vidya 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, vidyadharas 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 10th 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 samapadasthana 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 vidyadharas (Figure 3). Some leaf/floral designs may be seen hanging out of its
fangs. Again, a four armed rock-cut image of Ganesa from Kasosila Pahar, Marigaon depicts the kirtimukha and the flying vidyadharas in the usual way (Figure 4). Other such images from the Kapili valley region depicting the kirtimukha 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 Kawai, Buda Budi etc. An image from Mikirati in Hojai district depicts the kirtimukha 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 rudrakshamala is seen issuing from the mouth of the kirtimukha. 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 kirtimukha motif carved on the pointed silapatta bordered with a decorative band (Figure 6). The kirtimukha has a slight grinning face with three strings of rudrakshamala 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 kirtimukha 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 Silpasastra 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.10th–11th century CE.
Figure 5 Kirtimukha on the stele of a rock-cut Uma-Maheswara sculpture, Buda-Mayang, c. 10th-11th century CE.

Figure 6 Kirtimukha from Jogijan, c. 11th century CE, Assam State Museum.
The Kapili-Jamuna valley houses innumerable temple remains, many of which are decorated with the *kārtimukha* 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*, *sikharas* carrying *angasikharas* and *amalakas* 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 śīṅg*a, *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 *kārtimukha* motifs carved in low relief (Figure 7). Three strings of *rudrakshamala* emerge from its mouth. The *Manasara* states that the *kārtimukha* should be placed on the front portion of the door way (*mukha-bhadra*) and even on the *sikharas* (*Manasara*, 18,151) (Krishna Kumari 2015: 16). According to Kramrisch, the *kārtimukha* or the ‘face of glory’ figures prominently on the largest *Gavakṣa* 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 *kārtimukha* motif can be seen carved on stone blocks that formed part of the temple *sikharas*. At the site museum of Devasthan in the Kapili valley, an image of a *kārtimukha* 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 *kārtimukha* are not commonly depicted on *kalasa* of *Nagara* temples. Such is the popularity of *kārtimukha* 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 *kārtimukha* depicts three strings of *rudrakshamala* emerging from its mouth. The *kārtimukha* motif is seen on four sides of the circular stones and the *rudrakshamala* continue down to the stone below it, i.e. to the lower tier.

In Orissan temples, the *kārtimukha* motif, also known as vajra-mastaka according to *Śīlpa 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 *kārtimukha* 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 *kārtimukha* that probably adorned the temple superstructure. The *kārtimukha* figures depict three strings of chains or *rudrakshamala* 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 *kārtimukha* is depicted without is lower jaws, quite similar to the majority of the *kārtimukha* figures on Indian temples (Kramrisch 1946: 327).
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
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 Rahdhalu pukhuri near Dhekial in the Doyang Dhansiri valley of Assam (Dutta 1997: 42).

A study of the architectural components having karitukha carvings indicates that these formed part of some early medieval temples of Assam belonging to 9th–12th century C.E. Quite interestingly, in the 9th 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 karitukha 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 karitukha is confined only to the architectural remains of early medieval
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 9th century onwards and continued till 12th–13th 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 17th 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 Laksmanesvara, Bharatesvara and Satrughnesvara temples exhibit this feature. The frontally depicted 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 *krtimukha* motif. The *krtimukha*, quite popular in art and architecture of South-East Asia, has often been described as the *kala-makara* motif. The *kala-makara* consists of two separate motifs, *kala* and *makara*, though sometimes they are found united forming a single combined motive. The *kala* head is shaped like the head of a monster, resembling the terrible god *Kala* or *Yama*, the god of death in Hindu mythology who is also known as *kala* or time that destroys all. But scholars, such as R.C. Mazumdar emphasise that it in reality the *kala* head is derived from the Indian motive of lion’s head (Mazumdar 1944: 89). Coomaraswamy describes it as a grotesque *krtimukha*, 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. (Mazumdar1944: 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 *kala* head (Raglan 1939: 47). The *krtimukha* 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 *krtimukha* 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 *krtimukha* 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 *krtimukha* also represents the sacred symbolism associated with Siva temples. Portraying the Puranic legends where the *krtimukha* finds its abode in the matted locks of the great god Siva, a specimen from Tjandi Singasari in Java depicts the *kala* head with its locks carved on the lingam (Gangoly 1920: 17).

In Cambodia too, the *krtimukha* 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 *krtimukha* 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 *krtimukha* with its hands; quite significantly, the specimen from Cambodia is successful in representing the Puranic myth of the *krtimukha* consuming itself. In the Lolei temple near the Rolous archaeological site, the *krtimukha* or the *Kala* 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 the so called *kala 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 *krtimukha* 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, Brahmanical culture had established its roots prior to 6th century CE. The chronicles of the Leang dynasty of China states that in Pò-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, 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 5th 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 3rd 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 Naga king, married the Naga princess and then became the ruling monarch of Fu-nan (Sarma 2008: 122). The Myson Stelae Inscription of Champa king Prakasadharmha dated 579 Saka Era (657 CE) corroborates the Cambodian annals and Chinese chronicles by stating that the Brahmin Kaundinya who married a Naga 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 2013: 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 Vidarba 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 Vidarba 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 Brahmans in Sadiya, near the river Kundin. P. N. Bhattacharyya refers to a local tradition which speaks of a colony of Brahmans settled by Parasuram in the region of Kundilnagara (Bhattacharyya 1931: 27). Moreover, Nagara-Puspanjali assigns the Kaundinya as one of the thirty three gotras of Nagara Brahmans (Barua 1939: 61). N.N Vasu also states that Kaundinya and Kaundinya-Kausika are among the gotras of Vaidik Brahmans of Bengal, Sylhet and Kamarupa (Assam) (Vasu 2018: 142–144). Many of the Brahmans, who are the chief beneficiaries of the land grants in Assam, prior to the 13th 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.9th century C.E. to c.13th century C.E. The motif is closely associated with Siva. Due to the popularity of Vaishnavism 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 kārtimukha 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 kārtimukha is seen as a crowning element at the top of the stele of the Hindu deities. In the Kapili-Jamuna valley the kārtimukha may be seen as a finial decoration at the top of the stele of the sculptures. Also amongst the structural components, the kārtimukha 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 4th–5th century CE, in Assam, its use became popular in art and architecture only from 9th century onwards and continued till 12th–13th century C.E. The kārtimukha sculptures of the valley have an almost canonical expression with grinning face, protruding eyes, projecting tongue and a broad nose. Majority of the kārtimukha motif of the valley are depicted issuing strings of pearls or rudrākshamāla from its mouth. This perhaps manifested a dual complementary symbolism combining both propitious and apotropaic aspects; the kārtimukha 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 kārtimukha, 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 Suvarnadvipa 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 kārtimukha, in the art and architecture of South-East Asia speak of such associations. The kālakamaka motif, used popular in Javanese temples, bears striking similarity with the kārtimukhas of Assam, particularly those from Dhansiri and Kapili valleys. The massive kārtimukhas 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.

AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

Mrigakhee Saikia  orcid.org/0000-0002-4081-4119
Gauhati University, IN

Paromita Das  orcid.org/0000-0002-1643-6138
Gauhati University, IN

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