

Significance of Kirtimukha Symbol in South Asia, South-East Asia

Dr. Alka Jain

*Asso. Prof., Deptt. of Art,
Govt. College, Chandigarh
alkajain63@rediffmail.com*

Reference to this paper
should be made as follows:

Alka Jain,

*Significance of
Kirtimukha Symbol in
South Asia,
South-East Asia,*

Artistic Narration 2018,
Vol. IX, No.2, pp.28-34

[http://anubooks.com/
?page_id=485](http://anubooks.com/?page_id=485)

Abstract:

Kirtimukha literally means "face of glory". It is the predominant motif in both South and Southeast Asian art and architecture in all religions. Kirtimukha serves mainly as significant guardian of the threshold. Presently this face symbol is used extensively in various Hindu, Buddhist and Jain temples. The earliest visual depiction of this symbol is found in Jain art from around the third century A.D. Sometimes in Sanskrit the kirti is compared with conveying universal fame. The religious monuments or works of art donated by the devotees are also called kirti. Hence, this is reason, that the kirtimukha represented part of the earthly depiction of the heavenly entrance of temples. Thus this entrance is called a mukha. In Tibetan art kirtimukha appears as a demon with horned face which does not have a lower jaw and the hands hold the crest-bar in his mouth. In South and South Asian art, the sky or atmosphere is often represented by the head or face of a creature. Kirtimukha originated in India, there is plenty of evidence of the motif both in North and South India and then spread to Sri-Lanka and South-east Asia.

Keywords : *Kirtimukha, doorways, threshold, lintel, foliage, monster*

Kirtimukha, “face of glory” is the main motif in both South and Southeast Asian art and architecture in all religions. The historians and scholars have dealt with the subject elaborately, focusing mainly on one of Shiva’s myths. According to the myth, there was a great titan king called Jalandhara, the follower of Shiva. By virtue of his amazing austerity he gathered irresistible powers. After acquiring these he went against all gods and created and established his new order. Then he sent a messenger demon to humble High God Shiva, the creator, destroyer and sustainer of the world. Now the messenger of Jalandhara was Rahu, a monster whose function is eclipsing of the moon. This Rahu was sent by Jalandhara to humiliate Shiva. At that time Shiva was to marry his immortal Shakti after a period of separation with her and she was born as Parvati, the beautiful moon like daughter to the mountain king Himalaya. The message brought by Rahu was, that Shiva should give his bride i.e. the fairest maidens of all worlds, Parvati to him, his master of existence, Jalandhara. Thus hearing this Shiva countered the huge challenge and from the spot between his two eyebrows called “Lotus of Command” where the centre of enlightenment is located, a spiritual eye of advanced seer is opened. Shiva let fly a terrific burst of power which with explosion spontaneously took the physical shape of a lion headed demon. He had immense body of a monster and unquenchable hunger yet his strength was resilient but irresistible. His throat roared like thunder and eyes burst like fire and his mane spread far and wide in space. Hence seeing this Rahu was aghast. When this incarnate burst of wrath rushed to Rahu, he who had the technique of supernatural power politics immediately rushed to Shiva for protection and this created a very difficult situation for Shiva. Thus Shiva had to protect Rahu, the petitioner before him and no proper food to feed on and hence this half lion was left with painful hunger. So the monster asked Shiva to assign some victim on which the torment might be appeased. Shiva then suggested him to feed on his own flesh, so he devoured his own limbs and torso, but could not consume his face. So embodied in the monster is the wrath Shiva’s destructive power in the form of Shiva Rudra which periodically annihilates the created universe and reduces everything to ash and then itself is quenched by drenching rain. Hence this was a dear sight to Shiva. So Shiva who had reduced the monster body to nothing and only face is left hence declared that he would be known as kirtimukha, “Face of Glory” and ordered that he would abide forever at his door. Further added that whosoever neglects to worship him will never win his grace. So kirtimukha became the special emblem of Shiva himself and was a characteristic element on the lintels of the Shiva temple. Hence kirtimukha serves primarily as awe-inspiring guardian of the threshold. Presently this motif is being used generally in various Hindu, Buddhist and Jain temples. But this legend does not explain the significance of kirtimukha in Jain art. This symbol appears again and again as a conspicuous symbol. The earliest visual representation of this symbol is found in Jain art from around the third century

A.D., definitely it is earlier than the Shiva's story which is found in Puranic literature of the post-Gupta period.



Fig. 1 *Kirtimukha* from a Bodhgaya railing, c. 3rd century CE. Fig. 2 *Kirtimukha*, Java, c. 13th century CE.

The Puranic stories associate kirtimukha with the popular story of the demon Rahu, who grasps the moon, and hence causing a lunar eclipse. Hence Rahu sometimes has a magnificent head, which is a feature of kirtimukha. But kirtimukha in early representations is never shown clutching or devouring the lunar disc so this legend does not justify the Rahu's head or face with the symbol of kirtimukha. Neither these Puranic studies relate with the meaning of kirtimukha, nor with the conventional foliage motif which is often depicted as a significant element of the motif. This article also explains the significance of the kirtimukha motif in South Asia and Southeast Asia.

According to a story in the Chandag yopanisad, a king was famous among the people for his kindness that geese flying at night above his kingdom felt the atmosphere as bright and safe as the day. According to this tale a relationship between fame, light and the sound of kirti, was developed as a substitute expression for fame. It floats in space and travels very quickly, like the wind in all directions. Sometimes according to Sanskrit poetry the kirti is associated with expressing wide spread fame. The religious monuments or works of art donated by the devotees are also called kirti. It is believed that due to the patronage or religious deeds a devotee's kirti or fame will reach heaven long before his journey begins after death. Thus it is believed that the doors of heaven usually remain shut, and the gods open them for the newcomer, if they are familiar with his kirti which is achieved through his religious participation and inputs on earth. That is why the kirtimukha became part of the earthly representation of the heavenly entrance of temples. This entrance is called a mukha.



Fig. 3 Upper section of a *chaitya* at Naghal, Kathmandu, Fig. 4 Book cover for a Buddhist manuscript, Tibet, c. 7th century CE. c. 10th century CE.

Source: Vajracharya, V, Gautama, *Kirtimukha, the Serpentine Motif and Garuda: The Story of the Lion That Turned into a Big Bird*, Artibus Asiae, Museum Rietberg Zurich, Vol. LXXIV No. 2

In South Asia and Southeast Asian art, the sky or atmosphere is often represented by the head or face of a creature. This is particularly evident in Indian and Nepali sculptural representations. Kushana Mathura sculptures from the 2nd century and Nepali works from the 5th century depict the sky by a huge face or head. Because of the extraordinary curls around the face and neck of the creature in the Mathura, the head partially resembles that of a lion.



Fig. 5 Detail of a book cover for a Jaina manuscript, c. 1125 CE. Lalbhai Dalpatbhai Institute of Indology, Ahmedabad.

Source: Pratapaditya Pal, *The Peaceful Liberators: Jain Art from India* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1994), fig. 79.

The Kathmandu Valley (Fig. 3) does not precisely represent *kirti mukha*, it was an ancient custom of South Asia to symbolize the sky as a mask-like face. Thus, these visual images illustrate the literary explanation of *kirti mukha*. A *kirti mukha* image is extremely popular in the Newar craftsmen of Nepal, it is called *Chepu* by them. It's a serpent devouring form and often crowns doorways and shrine arches. According to legend, *Chepu* was the elder brother of Garuda who was destined to be the bravest and virtuous of all the celestial beings. But the mother was too eager to give birth to her son so he was prematurely given birth as a result his head and hands were only fully developed. There is yet another legend about *Chepu*, his naga devouring face appeared at the top of the shrine's entrance. Hence



Fig. 5 Detail of a book cover for a Jaina manuscript, c. 1125 CE. Lalbhai Dalpatbhai Institute of Indology, Ahmedabad.

Source: Pratapaditya Pal, *The Peaceful Liberators: Jain Art from India* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1994), fig. 79.



Fig.6 Kirtimukha above a Hindu Temple entrance in Kathmandu, Nepal

Source: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kirtimukha.Nepal1.JPG>

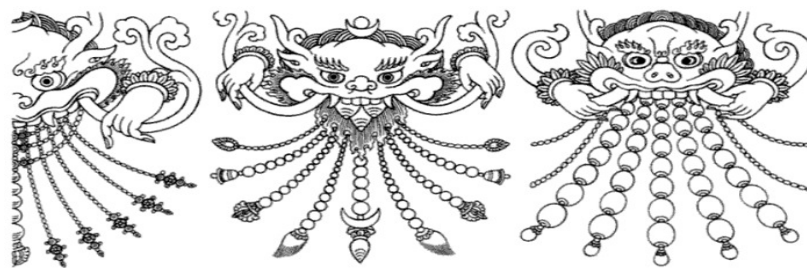


Fig. 8 Representation of Kirtimukha in Tibet

Sources: Robert, Beer, *The Handbook of Tibetan Buddhist Symbols*, Serindia Publications, 1999, pg. 77-79.

it became the important protective deities of Kathmandu valley with the position equal to Garuda in ability to terrify all demonic nagas and enemies.

The foliage motif associated with kirtimukha is the most important element that helps to understand kirtimukha's identity with the atmosphere. The kirtimukha carved on Bodhgaya railing of the 3rd A.D. is one of the early examples. It depicts the circular grinning face on the upper part of the railing. The eyebrow and the moustache of the huge face resembles the foliage motif often. This motif has remained an essential part of kirtimukha. If we compare the Bodhgaya representations (Fig. 1) with Indonesia and Nepal representations of kirtimukha, we can find out that the motif continued even in later periods. After the 7th century A.D., the spin of foliage in Nepali works gradually turned into a crescent that appears horizontally on the head of the lion. Earlier it was misunderstood by the scholars that both makara and kirtimukha derive from the stylized representation of a plant. But the foliage

motif is known in Sanskrit art manuals as *patra*, “foliage, means cloud foliage.” The association of cloud foliage with *kirtimukha* thus clearly supports the deduction that the motif symbolizes the atmosphere. For example in Jain miniatures of 11th century this *kirtimukha* symbol is represented with lotus vines coming out of the mouth with other creatures. Similar scenes are depicted in the Indian temple both Hindu and Jains both vertically and horizontally like in Quwwatul- Islam mosque in Delhi.

There are many Indian and Nepali examples which show *kirtimukha* at the summit of the entrance to temples and shrines, and edged by two *makaras*. The Sanskrit term *makara* is referred to a sea dragon or water monster which is identified as a crocodile. This association of *kirtimukha* with the *makara* arch or toran became extensively popular in the post-Gupta period 600–800 A.D. Although one can make out the initial development of the *kirtimukha* motif during the Gupta period, it was not an integral part of Gupta and pre-Gupta *makara* torana architecture. Usually the Gupta torana, depicted in the sculptural representations of shrines, the rainbow-like arch connecting the twin *makaras*, does not have *kirtimukha*. The Gupta torana evolved from the much earlier Lomash Rishi cave, *makara* torana, a contribution of the Maurya emperor Ashoka c. 272–31 BC.

In China it is known as monster of greed which was believed to have actually existed and is known as *T'aot'ieh*. The Chinese cooking utensils usually were decorated with this beast of greed. As a doorway guardian this symbol is found across whole of China, the Indian subcontinent and South East Asia.

The Tibetan art (Fig.4) *kirtimukha* appears as a heraldic device on the helmets, shields, armour and weapons. It is represented as a demon with horned face which does not have a lower jaw and the hands hold the crest-bar in his mouth. The gems or a frieze of jewelled strings usually descends from its upper jaw. A connected *kirtimukha* faces is often painted on the upper beams of the temple walls. The tasselled hangings decorate the pillars are often crowned with dome shaped image of the *kirtimukha* face. It is also seen on archways, lintels and pillar cornices. A frieze of eight faced *kirtimukhas* with net of jewels in their mouths circulate on the ritual hand bell or *ghanta*. Although *kirtimukhas* are well known from Java temples yet there are many reasons to believe their direct south Indian influence. In Bali this same motif from the leonine like image is transferred into witch like giant face of monster that guards the entrance of the 11th century hermitage of Goa Gajah at Bedulu. It is recognised as feminine from the jewellery and oversized ears. It has bugged out eyes, wide open nostrils, unruly hair along with fanged maw that is extended to form an entry itself. It is curious interchangeability from leonine face to a traditional motif from Shakti cult and transformed to a witch like face of *Rangda* which can reside in the temples of Bali villages. The Balinese deploy a creative and playful strategy of dealing with demonic forces



and animalistic figures like barong are created and venerated and danced with. The most popular is the Barong Ket which is like Kirtimukha icon. In Southeast Asia i.e. Cambodia, Indonesia and Thailand the kirtimukha icon is called Kala.

Conclusion

Kirtimukha serves as remarkable guardian of the threshold. In all the regions of South Asia and Southeast Asia this symbol is represented on the lintel of the doorway. May be the tales behind the evolution vary but the basic form and the concept is the same.

References

- 1 Robert, Beer, *The Handbook of Tibetan Buddhist Symbols*, Serindia Publications, 1999, pg. **77-79**.
- 2 Zimmer, Heinrich, *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization*, Bollingen series\ Princeton, New Jersey, 1974, pg. **175-84**.
- 3 Vajracharya, V, Gautama, *Kirtimukha, the Serpentine Motif and Garuda: The Story of the Lion That Turned into a Big Bird*, *Artibus Asiae*, Museum Rietberg Zurich, Vol. LXXIV No.2, pg. **311-33**.
- 4 O.C. Ganguly, *A Note on Kirtimukha; being the life history of an Indian architectural ornament*, Rupam, 1922, Vol. pg. **11-18**.
- 5 Srinivasan, K., R., *Cave Temples of the Pallavas*, New Delhi, 1964, pg. **38, 74 & 180**.



Fig. 3 Upper section of a *chaitya* at Naghal, Kathmandu, Fig. 4 Book cover for a Buddhist manuscript, Tibet, c. 7th century CE. c. 10th century CE.

Source: Vajracharya, V, Gautama, *Kirtimukha, the Serpentine Motif and Garuda: The Story of the Lion That Turned into a Big Bird*, Artibus Asiae, Museum Rietberg Zurich, Vol. LXXIV No. 2

In South Asia and Southeast Asian art, the sky or atmosphere is often represented by the head or face of a creature. This is particularly evident in Indian and Nepali sculptural representations. Kushana Mathura sculptures from the 2nd century and Nepali works from the 5th century depict the sky by a huge face or head. Because of the extraordinary curls around the face and neck of the creature in the Mathura, the head partially resembles that of a lion.



Fig. 5 Detail of a book cover for a Jaina manuscript, c. 1125 CE. Lalbhai Dalpatbhai Institute of Indology, Ahmedabad.

Source: Pratapaditya Pal, *The Peaceful Liberators: Jain Art from India* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1994), fig. 79.

The Kathmandu Valley (Fig. 3) does not precisely represent *kirti mukha*, it was an ancient custom of South Asia to symbolize the sky as a mask-like face. Thus, these visual images illustrate the literary explanation of *kirti mukha*. A *kirti mukha* image is extremely popular in the Newar craftsmen of Nepal, it is called *Chepu* by them. It's a serpent devouring form and often crowns doorways and shrine arches. According to legend, *Chepu* was the elder brother of Garuda who was destined to be the bravest and virtuous of all the celestial beings. But the mother was too eager to give birth to her son so he was prematurely given birth as a result his head and hands were only fully developed. There is yet another legend about *Chepu*, his naga devouring face appeared at the top of the shrine's entrance. Hence



Fig. 5 Detail of a book cover for a Jain manuscript, c. 1125 CE. Lalbhai Dalpatbhai Institute of Indology, Ahmedabad.

Source: Pratapaditya Pal, *The Peaceful Liberators: Jain Art from India* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1994), fig. 79.



Fig.6 Kirtimukha above a Hindu Temple entrance in Kathmandu, Nepal

Source: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kirtimukha.Nepal1.JPG>

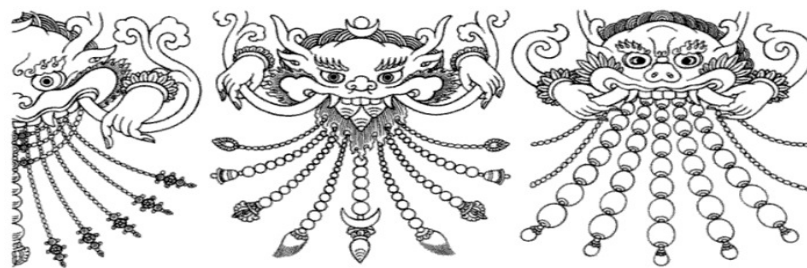


Fig. 8 Representation of Kirtimukha in Tibet

Sources: Robert, Beer, *The Handbook of Tibetan Buddhist Symbols*, Serindia Publications, 1999, pg. 77-79.

it became the important protective deities of Kathmandu valley with the position equal to Garuda in ability to terrify all demonic nagas and enemies.

The foliagemotif associated with kirtimukhais the most important elementthat helps to understand kirtimukha's identity with the atmosphere. The kirtimukha carved on Bodhgaya railing of thec.3rd A.D. is one of the early examples. It depicts the circular grinningface on the upper part of the railing. The eyebrow and the moustacheof the hugeface resembles the foliage motif often. This motif has remained an essential part of kirtimukha. If we compare the Bodhgaya representations (Fig. 1)withIndonesia and Nepal representations of kirtimukha, we can find out that the motif continuedeven in later periods. After the 7th century A.D., the spin of foliage in Nepaliworks gradually turned into a crescent that appears horizontally on the head of the lion.Earlier it was misunderstood by the scholars that both makaraand kirtimukhaderive from the stylized representation of a plant. Butthe foliage

motif is known in Sanskrit art manuals as *patra*, “foliage, means cloud foliage.” The association of cloud foliage with *kirtimukha* thus clearly supports the deduction that the motif symbolizes the atmosphere. For example in Jain miniatures of 11th century this *kirtimukha* symbol is represented with lotus vines coming out of the mouth with other creatures. Similar scenes are depicted in the Indian temple both Hindu and Jains both vertically and horizontally like in Quwwatul- Islam mosque in Delhi.

There are many Indian and Nepali examples which show *kirtimukha* at the summit of the entrance to temples and shrines, and edged by two *makaras*. The Sanskrit term *makara* is referred to a sea dragon or water monster which is identified as a crocodile. This association of *kirtimukha* with the *makara* arch or torana became extensively popular in the post-Gupta period 600–800 A.D. Although one can make out the initial development of the *kirtimukha* motif during the Gupta period, it was not an integral part of Gupta and pre-Gupta *makara* torana architecture. Usually the Gupta torana, depicted in the sculptural representations of shrines, the rainbow-like arch connecting the twin *makaras*, does not have *kirtimukha*. The Gupta torana evolved from the much earlier Lomash Rishi cave, *makara* torana, a contribution of the Maurya emperor Ashoka c. 272–31 BC.

In China it is known as monster of greed which was believed to have actually existed and is known as *T'aot'ieh*. The Chinese cooking utensils usually were decorated with this beast of greed. As a doorway guardian this symbol is found across whole of China, the Indian subcontinent and South East Asia.

The Tibetan art (Fig.4) *kirtimukha* appears as a heraldic device on the helmets, shields, armour and weapons. It is represented as a demon with horned face which does not have a lower jaw and the hands hold the crest-bar in his mouth. The gems or a frieze of jewelled strings usually descends from its upper jaw. A connected *kirtimukha* faces is often painted on the upper beams of the temple walls. The tasselled hangings decorate the pillars are often crowned with dome shaped image of the *kirtimukha* face. It is also seen on archways, lintels and pillar cornices. A frieze of eight faced *kirtimukhas* with net of jewels in their mouths, circulate on the ritual hand bell or *ghanta*. Although *kirtimukhas* are well known from Java temples yet there are many reasons to believe their direct south Indian influence. In Bali this same motif from the leonine like image is transferred into witch like giant face of monster that guards the entrance of the 11th century hermitage of Goa Gajah at Bedulu. It is recognised as feminine from the jewellery and oversized ears. It has bugged out eyes, wide open nostrils, unruly hair along with fanged maw that is extended to form an entry itself. It is curious interchangeability from leonine face to a traditional motif from Shakti cult and transformed to a witch like face of *Rangda* which can reside in the temples of Bali villages. The Balinese deploy a creative and playful strategy of dealing with demonic forces

and animalistic figures like barong are created and venerated and danced with. The most popular is the Barong Ket which is like Kirtimukha icon. In Southeast Asia i.e. Cambodia, Indonesia and Thailand the kirtimukha icon is called Kala.

Conclusion

Kirtimukha serves as remarkable guardian of the threshold. In all the regions of South Asia and Southeast Asia this symbol is represented on the lintel of the doorway. May be the tales behind the evolution vary but the basic form and the concept is the same.

References

- 1 Robert, Beer, *The Handbook of Tibetan Buddhist Symbols*, Serindia Publications, 1999, pg. **77-79**.
- 2 Zimmer, Heinrich, *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization*, Bollingen series\ Princeton, New Jersey, 1974, pg. **175-84**.
- 3 Vajracharya, V, Gautama, *Kirtimukha, the Serpentine Motif and Garuda: The Story of the Lion That Turned into a Big Bird*, *Artibus Asiae*, Museum Rietberg Zurich, Vol. LXXIV No.2, pg. **311-33**.
- 4 O.C. Ganguly, *A Note on Kirtimukha; being the life history of an Indian architectural ornament*, Rupam, 1922, Vol. pg. **11-18**.
- 5 Srinivasan, K., R., *Cave Temples of the Pallavas*, New Delhi, 1964, pg. **38, 74 & 180**.