

Kīrtimukha – With Special Reference to Gujarat

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The *Kīrtimukha* is the most favourite motif in our Indian art. It had appeared as a sacred symbol and then turned into an artistic device as a common ornamental motif in the temples. It has a lion-face. *Kīrtimukha* is also found in the Jaina and Buddhist-art. It is a symbolic motif and represented in a stylized form.¹ In Gujarat it is known as a *Grāsapaṭṭī*, *Grāsa* or *Grāsamukha*; and in south it is known as *Siṃhalatā* or *Siṃhamukha*.² The *Kīrtimukha* motif is also found to be popular in countries like Java, Bali, Myanmar and Sri Lanka.³ The *Kīrtimukha* is the crown or crest jewel in the architectural features like arches, *Gavākṣas*, lintels, etc.

The origin of the *Kīrtimukha* is narrated in a legend which forms the 17th chapter of the *Kārttikeya Mahātmya* of the *Skanda-purāṇa* (*Viṣṇukhaṇḍa*).⁴ According to this legend, Jalandhara, the powerful king sent Rāhū as a messenger to Lord Śiva who was about to marry Pārvatī, saying that the beggar Śiva was not worthy for the beautiful Pārvatī and demanded her hand for the demon king. This insult infuriated Śiva and out leapt from between his eyebrows, a terrible being with a lion's face, protruding tongue and flaming eyes with a lean – hungry looking body. This demon was ordered to devour Rāhū, but Rāhū sought Śiva's mercy and was saved from being eaten; the hungry creature asked for food that would satisfy his great hunger. Śiva then commanded it to eat its own limbs and body, which was done voraciously by it, until nothing was left except its head. Śiva was pleased with it and so blessed it that thereafter it would be known as *Kīrtimukha* and assigned it a place on the doorway of all Śiva temples.

In course of time, it lost its original Śaivite character and was used indiscriminately as a mere auspicious decoration on some prominent part,

generally on the top of the entrance of any temple, whether Śaiva or Vaiṣṇava. In Gujarat it frequently appears on the temples and is known as *Grāsapaṭṭī*. The *Kīrtimukha* is conventionalized in the Indian Art, offering a great contrast to the earlier types. One of the earliest known *Kīrtimukha* is found as an ornament on the crown of a *Nāga* at Amarāvati Rāmagrāma Stūpa of 2nd century CE.⁵ It appears at Sārnāth where the treatment is hardly artistic.⁶

At Ajanta it appeared in circle and is affixed on one of the arches on the wall between doors to the cell in cave No. 1 and ascribed to 5th cent. CE.⁷ In some examples, we find a human but demonic type face (Fig.1).

The *Kāyāvarohaṇa* specimen is unique and suggests departure from the conventional treatment. It is a transitional stage.

Here, two *Kīrtimukhas* are found lying in the village. But the new thing is a leaf – motif crest found on the fore-head. These two specimens show a demonic grotesque face with horn and big half-open eyes. The first specimen shows two protruding tusks. Both the specimens may be assigned to c. eighth-ninth centuries CE (Fig.2).

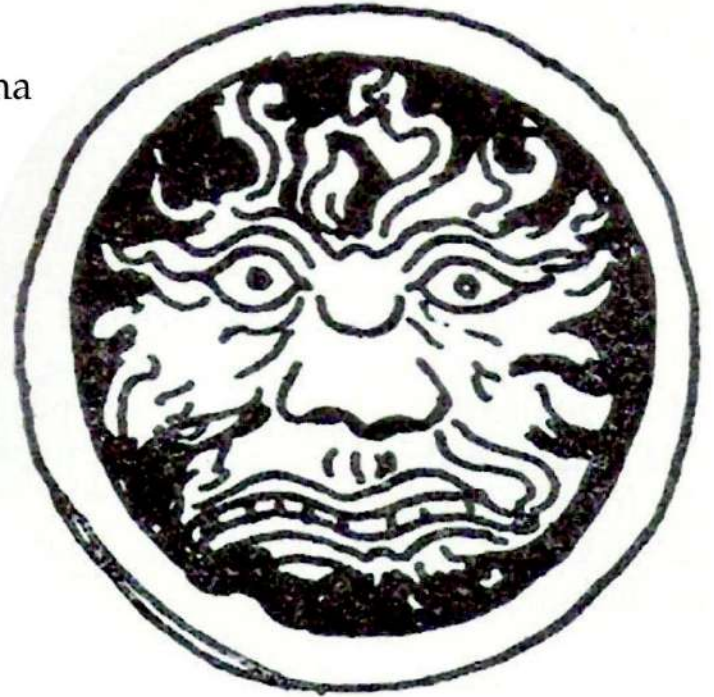


Fig.1. Ajanta, 5th century CE, After Iyer



Fig.2. Kīrtimukha Figures, *Kāyāvarohaṇa*

One more example from Kāyāvarohaṇa may be cited here. It appears in the arch or door-frame near *Suthār-no-ovāro*. This *Kīrtimukha* is flanked here by two lions well fitted in a rectangular shape. The whole motif serves here as a decorative device. One peculiar feature about this *Kīrtimukha* is the pearl garland emerging from it and ending in the mouth of the two lions. Similar powerful forms of *Grāsa* vomiting *muktāmālā* flanked by *muktāvarāla* are noted by Dhaky from Bhubanesvar.⁸ Such decorative device of *grāsa* and *varāla* are popular in Indian Art.

Above garland motif *Muktāgrāsa* is also noted on the pillar of *Paśupati* or *Lakulīśa* Temple, Pāvāgaḍha (10th century CE). It differs from Kāyāvarohaṇa specimen as the side lions – *Varāla* are absent here. The stylized *Kīrtimukha-Grāsa* on the Tunḍāv temple, District Vaḍodarā also show garland of pearls *muktāmālā* suspended from the mouth as in the Kāyāvarohaṇa and Pāvāgaḍha specimens. During the course of exploration, the present writer has noted a unique *Kīrtimukha* from Vaḍnagar, District Mahesāṇā. The specimen has demonic face, chubby cheeks and highly stylized horns. A typical open mouth with bare teeth, and two protruding big teeth and terrific circular protruding eyes are all noteworthy. There is leaf pattern on forehead. The head is like elsewhere, i.e. frontally represented. Vaḍnagar specimen can be assigned to c. 9th century CE.⁹

According to Sankalia, the pre-Cālukyan monuments including temple at Thān and Sūtrāpāḍā are devoid of *Kīrtimukha* ornament.¹⁰ In Cālukyan temples, the *Kīrtimukha* figures are almost invariably found.¹¹ The places it decorates are the basement, shafts of short and long pillars of the monuments.

The *Kīrtimukha* motif is very commonly found on the medieval temples of Gujarat. It became almost stylized and stereotyped in the Solaṅkī period and does not exactly resemble the lion face.

Iyer opines that at first, it framed a human face, as in the Gupta friezes and later the human face was replaced by that of a lion and word became synonymous with lion face motif.¹² Sankalia traced its evolution back to Gupta temples and Ajanta caves,¹³ where the form, in spite of being decorative, is realistic. It should be noted that *Kīrtimukha* is absent in rock-cut architecture. It is undoubtedly the lion's face that contributed to the evolution of the *Kīrtimukha* motif. According to Dhaky, the fundamental lion face with sinister brows by

grafting boar's ears, cat's eyes and buffalo horns mulattos into *grāsa* that is *Kīrtimukha*.¹⁴ The description is equally applicable to some of the *Vyāla* figures also.

Lastly, it is the mask of *Parmātman*, the Supreme Spirit in a lion's guise.¹⁵ *Skanda Purāṇa* describes it as second *Narasimha*.¹⁶ It can be concluded that the name *Kīrtimukha* (face of glory) explains its origin in *Skanda Purāṇa*. It is already discussed in the foregoing pages, hence needs no repetition here. The *Kīrtimukha* has lion-face and is also found in Jaina and Buddhist art. In western India, it is popularly known as *grāsamukha* and believed to be a sea-monster.¹⁷ It first appeared as a sacred symbol and then turned into an artistic device. It is a common ornamental motif on the temples.

It is not found on the Gop temple assignable to Gupta Age. At the *Pre-Solaṅkī Roḍā Temple* no. 4, *mukhacatuṣkī pillar* has demonic face omitting pearl *mālā*. *Varāla* is absent here. At Temple no. 2 from the same site *garbhagrha* lintel has lion heads with circular eyes and wide half closed mouth. It has short ear of cat. Horns are absent. *Kīrtimukha* is also present on the shaft of the pillar on the Temple no. 1 – *mukhacatuṣkī pillar*. The 10th century specimen at the *Prabhās Pātaṇa* museum has a small closed mouth and moustaches, also creeper decoration between the horns (Fig.3).



Fig.3. *Kīrtimukha*, 10th century CE, *Prabhās Pātaṇa* Museum

Lastly, as quoted *śloka* by P.O. Sompura described in the *Śilpaśāstra* – The five animals: *Kīrtimukha*, *Nāga*, *Haṁsa* and *Virālī* (*Vyālā*) are accordingly ornamented motifs of the sculpture.¹⁸

Postscript

Study of *Kārtimukha* (Face of Glory) from early time to the later medieval period in Gujarat is interesting and varied. The story is not much different from its contemporary specimens of Western Indian Art. We have already seen in the main script, Iyer's and Dhaky's interpretation of *Kīrtimukha* motif in Indian Art. The first writer traces its evolution to Lion face. The interpretation of the second author is already mentioned above in the general text. R.N. Mehta pointed out that *Kīrtimukha* in its early form resemble with mouth of tiger or *Vikṛtānanda* demon face. Mehta further suggested that as a decorative device it first framed a human or demonic face. But then other figural demonic features ceased and what remained is a terrible face with big protruding round eyes and horns on head. This form in our sculpture continued till today.

Iyer, Dhaky and Mehta's views cannot be fully accepted as both forms of *Kīrtimukha* or *Grāsamukha* appears parallel in Indian Art. Earlier grotesque figure or demonic form appears in the Kṣatrapa Art of Late 4th century CE in Gujarat. Its origin can be found in the Dev ni Morī specimen as pointed out by R.N. Mehta (Fig.4).



Fig.4. Grotesque Figure, Dev ni Morī

The same form lasted up to the end of the 11th century or beginning of the 12th century CE. The present author has pointed earlier that the Śāmaḷājī Gaṇeśa of the Late 4th century wears a *Nūpura* ornament possessing a *Kīrtimukha* motif on it¹⁹ (Fig.5). An identical motif can also be found on the jewellery and ornaments of that period.

This means that both the forms – the Demonic face and the Lion face form can be found from the same period – Kṣatrapa period, and that too, in an evolved form. But the first type has extinguished from the architectural scenario whereas the second one can be observed till today in its stylized form. The first type is comparatively more realistic. The first one – Demonic face is perceived by scholars as a mythical figure and the second one – Lion face is referred to as a composite figure.



Fig.5. Śāmaḷājī-Gaṇeśa wearing *Nūpura* in the feet with *Kīrtimukha* motifs

References

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11. *Ibid.*
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16. *Ibid.*, p.70.
17. *Ibid.*, p.69.
18. P.O. Sompura, *Bhāratīya Śilpa Saṁhitā* (Hindi), p.55.
19. Ravi Hajarnis, *Gujarat nī Śilpasamṛddhī* (Gujarātī), Ahmedabad, 1999, p.12.