

Lion Motif used in Buddhist Architecture of Ancient Bangladesh

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Received: May 30, 2018

Accepted: August 10, 2018

Online Published: August 13, 2018

Abstract

Lion is the king of the animal world. They live in the plains and grassy hills. The male lion's job is to protect the clan from enemies. However, lions do not have any natural enemy. Due to these characteristics, the lion has been considered through all ages in the world as a symbol of royalty and protection as well as of wisdom and pride. In Buddhism, lions are symbolic of the *Bodhisattvas*. In Buddhist architecture, lion motifs or figure were used as protectors of *Dharma* and therefore support the throne of the Buddha's and *Bodhisattvas*. The lion motifs (symbol) were also used at the entrance of the monasteries and shrines possibly for the same reason. In ancient Bangladesh, there are various types of Lion motif used in terracotta plaques of Ananda Vihara, Rupbhan Mura and Shalban Vihara at Mainamati in Comilla district, Vashu Vihara, Mankalir Kundo at Mahasthangarh in Bogra district and Somapura Mahavihara at Paharpur in Naogaon district. This paper aims to address the cultural significance of the lion motif in Buddhist architecture of ancient Bangladesh and relates it to various types of representation to understand its origin and evaluation.

Keywords: Lion, Motif, Terracotta, Buddhist Architecture, Ancient Bangladesh.

1. Introduction

Lion is the king of the animal world. They live in the plains and grassy hills. The male lion's job is to protect the clan from enemies. The Lion is the most ferocious beast among wild creatures. From primitive era, the lion is considered as the symbol of strength and power and through all ages in the world as a symbol of Royalty and protection as well as of wisdom and pride. In Buddhism, Lions are symbolic of the *Bodhisattvas*.¹ Lion motifs were used as protectors of *Dharma* and therefore support the throne of the Buddha's and *Bodhisattvas*.² The lion motifs were also used at the entrance of the monasteries and shrines possibly for the same reason. In ancient Bangladesh (Present Bangladesh and West Bengal), there are various types of lion motif used in terracotta plaques of Ananda Vihara, Rupbhan Mura and Shalban Vihara at Mainamati in Comilla district; Vashu Vihara, Mankalir Kundo at Mahasthangarh in Bogra district; Somapura Mahavihara at Paharpur in Naogaon district; Chandraketurgarh, Vikhramshila Vihara in West Bengal and Shamsundar Tila at Pilak in Tripura. Here we address the cultural significance of the lion motif in Buddhist architecture of Ancient Bangladesh (especially present Bangladesh portion) from 8th century to 12th century and various types of representation to understand its origin and evaluation as well as to analyses a pattern of interrelated meanings generated by the formation of the Lion terracotta art. This research identifies 83 (Eighty Three) plaques with Lion images. Depending on three Buddhist sites of Bangladesh which are Paharpur Monastery, Mainamati Lalmai hills and Mahasthangarh sites especially from 8th to 12th century. Where we can classified into five (5) categories as follows:

Firstly, Realistic (Lion) figurine: Ananda Vihar;

Secondly, Mythical (lion mixed with human head like *Naravyal*, *Nrishimha*, *Kirtimukha*): Mahasthangarh, Rupban mura, Ranir banglow;

Thirdly, Textual (Lion with women, lion with well, lion with rabbit and Lion in talking cave, cross legs, Aged Lion through story): Somapura vihar, Shalban Vihar;

Fourthly, Ferocious (Lion attacked to elephant, man): Shalban Vihar and

Fifth is that, Architectural (Two body one head lion): Shalban Vihar, Somapura Vihar, Vashu Vihar.

Lions, particularly male lions have been an important symbol for thousands of years and appear as a theme in cultures across Europe, Asia, and Africa. The most consistent depiction is in keeping with their image of "king of the Jungle" or "king of the Beasts".³ They are also found at the entrance of the monasteries and shrines in the northern area of Nepal, influenced by Tibetan Buddhism and art. The iconographic (anionic or sculpture) representation of the lion originated in Persia.⁴ A lion faced *Dakini*, a tantric deity described as a female embodiment of enlightened energy appears in Tibetan Buddhism. The Tibetan Buddhist form is known as *Simhamukha* in Sanskrit and *Senge Dongma* in Tibetan.⁵

2. Importance of Lion in Buddhist Literature

According to Buddhist Literature and Text we found many name of Buddha used in Jataka among them Lion of ten Jataka has been represented to Buddha as *Shimhacrostuc jataka*, *Shimhacharma jataka*, *Monaja Jataka*.⁶ In according to *Dighanikaya*, The Lion disappears definitely connecting *Simhaladvipa* i. e. present Sri Lanka with the lion of the *Sakyas*, i. e. the Buddha by the "Moonstone of Anuradhapura".⁷ "The lion plays a prominent part in the enumeration of the *Buddhissattva*'s primary physical characteristics (*Mahapurusa laksana*)⁸ as listed in the *Mahapadanasantanta* of the *Dighanikaya*. His upper body and his jaw are like a lion's: "*Siha pubhaddha kayo, Sihahanu.*" [*Dighanikaya*, XIV (*Mahapadanasantanta*)].

A.J. Gail says, "Probably the oldest figural representation of the Buddha is a token from Tillie Tepe, North Afghanistan (50 BC - 50 AD) inscribed in Kharosthi. The obverse side shows a herculean man pushing a wheel, called "*Dharmachakkravarataka*" (he who sets in motion the wheel law). The reverse side shows a striding lion, titled "*Siho vigatabhaya*" (the lion who chased away fear; see Fussman, 1987, 71f., fig. 2)."⁹ The letter inscription possibly quotes the "*Lalitavistara*", a flamboyant biography of the Buddha; "*Atha tasmin samaye bodhisattvah simha iva vigata bhaya bhairavo asamtrastah*,"¹⁰ "English Translated by R. L. Mitra as "doubtless and fearless as a Lion". In similar words the idea of *Shakyamuni* as a fearless lion is expressed in chapter. XV of the *Lalitavistara*: "*Simhobaya prahinah*".¹¹ On the capital of the Asokan pillar of Saranath in India a set of four animals is depicted (**Plate 1**): a lion, an elephant, a bull, a horse. This quartet is taken up not in India but in the Buddhist art of Bengal, Sri Lanka, Nepal etc. Individually, these animals provide various symbolical references to the career of the Buddha himself. Moreover, "*Shihe*" word was in the *Charhiyapada* at 33 no. pada and 9 no. line, "where said that *shila* (fox) war against *shihe* (lion) everyday".¹² In according to *Buddha Caritha*, "I(Buddha) am the last lion and my move like lion gait...."¹³

2.1 Lion Figurine Art in India

We can see this lion iconography used architecture of various parts of south Asia and south East Asian region like Asoka pillar of Sarnath, Sanchi Stupa, Harrappa, Amaravati, Mathura, Bharhut, Vikramshila, Chandraketugarh, Jagajjibanpur, Angkor, Borobudur of Indonesia, Anuradhapur of Sri Lanka, Pagan of Myanmar, Nepal, Tille Tepe of North Afghanistan, Shama Sundar Tila of Pilak in South Tripura, Tibet, China, Thailand, Cambodia and so on. The historical Buddha lived around the sixth century BCE, but no Buddhist artifacts are known from before the third century BCE.¹⁴ In the scriptures, it is mentioned that the Buddha did occasionally use images like the 'Wheel of Life' to illustrate the teachings. The Emperor Asoka (273 - 232 BCE), who converted to Buddhism and made it a popular religion in India and beyond.¹⁵ The first actual Buddha images appeared around the first century BCE, so until then the artwork was largely symbolic in nature. To symbolize the Buddha in the very early art, one used mainly the Eight Spoke Wheel, the Bodhi Tree, Buddha's Footprints, an Empty Throne, a Begging Bowl and a Lion are used to represent him. Gautam Sengupta¹⁶ first drew attention to somewhat similar foliated tail end of the lion on terracotta plaques. Found from the Buddhist monastic establishment of Jagajjivanpur in Maldah district of West Bengal. Says "...there is an element of comicality in the rendering of lions, their tails swinging upwards and ending in a flower-shaped knot."¹⁷

In The State Archaeological Gallery of West Bengal represents a naturalistically modeled lion (**Plate 20**, Sunga Period, c.1st century A.D.) in a roaring attitude with upraised tail at Chandraketugarh in West Bengal.¹⁸ Another one is damaged plaque shows a winged lion (**Plate 21**: c. 1st century AD. in Ashutosh Museum, India) sitting on a pillar base. The winged lion is distinct and is a forefront, though its head is lost. It is on its haunches while wings emerge from the joint its front legs. The tail rest on its back.¹⁹ In recently excavation many terracotta's as *Narashimha*, Corner bonding two body with one head plaque and single natural lion (**Plate 25**) figure have been found Buddhist remains in Shaym Sundar Tila at Pilak in South Tripura similarly, which is very neighboring place of Mainamati, Comilla in Bangladesh erstwhile known as Tippera district is very adjacent to the locality. Stylistically features of the images shows c. 9th century A.D. of Pala School of art.²⁰

2.2 Lion Motif Uses in Sri Lanka

The lion is symbolic for the Sinhalese, Sri Lanka's ethnic majority,²¹ the term derived from the Indo-Aryan *Sinhala*, meaning the "lion people" or "people with lion blood", while a sword-wielding lion is the central figure on the modern national flag of Sri Lanka. The entrance to Sigiriya, the Lion-Rock of Sri Lanka, was through the

Lion Gate, the mouth of a Stone Lion. The paws of the lion can still be seen today. It is one of the World Heritage Sites in Sri Lanka.²²

2.3 Lion Motif in Buddhist Architecture of Ancient Bangladesh

This research paper depends on the bellow Table of Number of Lion figurine used in Buddhist architecture of ancient Bangladesh:

Sl. No.	Name of the Site	Plaques no.
1.	Somapur Vihar, Paharpur	57
2.	Shalban Vihar, Mainamati	13
3.	Ananda Vihar, do	3
4.	Rupban Mura, do	4
5.	Ranir Banglo, do	1
6.	ar, Mahasthangarh	4
7.	Mankalir kundo, do	1
Total =		83

2.4 Paharpur alies Somapura Mahavihara, Naogaon

In Central Shrine of Paharpur, identifies Fifty Seven (57) plaques of lion images. The lion is standing on its back legs almost in similar style (**Plates 2, 3**). In two plaques the front legs are crosswise and in one (1) plaque the lion is lying. Four (4) images of the lioness are similar to the standing images of the lion.²³ The plaque depicts the four part of an aged lion (**Plates 4, 6**), which is conceived in an arched niche. The two four legs of the lion are placed one above the other and the eyes and the face of the animal have been treated in abstraction and with schematic arrangements. Another terracotta plaque of lion (**Plate 7**), the niche has the look of a stylized *chaitya* window. This panel reminds a story in *panchatantra*. The title of the story is lion a talking cave.²⁴ Besides an angry lion (**Plate 5**) plaque shows in the attitude of seeing something inside a well (water tank/*kuya*). The projection of the *Kuya* (well) over the ground is comparatively small than the figure of lion. The lion has long mane and beards and has a long tail. this figure of lion is concerned it is not naturalistically rendered but the sheer anger of a lion and his forceful approach inside the well and its face and eyes have successfully captured the dramatic elements that is narrated in the story of *panchatantra*.²⁵ Moreover, There have been found also women lioness is watching her own face in well. A story type terracotta plaque shows a lion is sleeping and a monkey is trying to wake it up by pricking into its ear. Although K. N. Dikshit said that so called monkey image is actually an image of a fox. It seems to us that of the head, tail, and expression of the animal indicate to a monkey.²⁶

2.5 Mainamati, Comilla

There have been found many lion animal figurine based corner bonding terracotta plaque (**Plates 8, 10, 14, 17, & 26**) in Shalban Vihara at Comilla. There have one single head but two body's lion plaque shown separately on both sides of the corner to suit the especial architectural requirement. The mane is shown with a series of falling curls, recalling the coiffure of Gupta sculpture.²⁷ The short curling tail and squat from of the body recall the form of lions in both bronze and stone from this and subsequent centuries. From its middle, two sides of the plaque seem to be mirror images. Similarly we have found this type terracotta plaque in Paharpur central shrine, Vashu Vihar, Vikramshila Mahavihar at Antichak (**Plate 11**) also. Recently excavation in Shalban Vihar have been found varieties type lion animal figurine decorated such lion attacked to elephant (**Plate 12**), Lion with a man (**Plate 13**), corner bonding terracotta (**Plate 10**), women worship to lion (**Plate 15**) and lion attacked a man (**Plate 16**). It is very interesting that there have been found many *Krittikumukha* terracotta plaques, *Krittikumukha* is a decorative motif showing the grinning face of a lion for example Rupban Mura (**plate 27**),²⁸ Ananda Vihar (**plate 18**) and so on. On the other hand, During the Pala period, the plaque shows a stylized *Nara Vyala*(**Plate 9**) in Mainamati.²⁹ It has the body of a stylized lion with a long tail and female head. There is description of sixteen (16) types of *Vyalas* in literature; *Nara Vyala* is being one of them.³⁰

2.6 Mahasthangarh, Bogra

The plaque of Vashu Viah (**Plate 19**) displayed in Mahasthangarh Museum has an image of a lion and a rabbit. The background of the plaque is ornamented by half circled design to indicate a cave. Most likely, this plaque is also a representation of the rabbit and lion story of *Panchatantra*. The appearance of the image gives scenes that the rabbit is feeling guilty for being late to come the lion as his meal and the lion is listening to his excuse. Recently excavation there has been found a corner bonding terracotta plaque which is a two lion body and one head type similarly Shalban Vihar. In Mahasthangarh has been found another plaque is a detached head of *Nrisimha* image, which is may be Gupta period art. There is a human touch in the treatment of its eyes and a *Krittikumukha* figure has been found which is mutilated face of *krittikumukha* has bulging eyes and open mouth.³¹

3. Discussion

Firstly, the actual reality of Lion symbol has been experienced directly in meditation by those highly realized beings like "Sakyamuni Buddha".³² The real nature of the symbol through their pure vision and understanding

even ordinary beings can recognize to some extent the real nature of symbol. In Buddhist iconography, we found the lions in their role of dharma protectors supporting the throne of the Buddha's and Bodhisattvas. The lions as guardians of the temple are represented in pairs at the entrance of shrines. As example, the forbidden kingdom of China recently destroyed in earthquake at katmondu Nyatapola temple in Bhaktapur and temple of Patan's Durbar Square of Nepal influenced by Tibetan Buddhism and art.

“The Myth is not my own, I had
it, from my mother.” --Euripides³³

Another important thing is that, the terracotta art of Bengal, including that of Paharpur definitely betrays some different traits, local color; at the same time it was part an all Eastern India art traditions. Hence some art motifs seen elsewhere are also present in Bangladesh art comprising that of Paharpur, Mainamati and Mahasthangarh lion motif is one of these common motif. All these plaques are religious in character and are valuable materials for the study symbolic religious life of Buddhist traditional in ancient Bangladesh. Lion appear in various roles, are engaged in different activities, forming a fine gallery of anionic.³⁴ The clay artist of Ancient Bangladesh (Bengal) have successfully utilized various art figurative creating lyrical and textual scenes, lion motif is a one of such alluring figure. Lion as emblem of royalty, motif of Muryan art, reference to *sakya* clan of *sakyamuni* Buddha, Roar of lion as metaphor for Buddhist teachings.³⁵ The last habitation of Lion animal in Bengal was Palamu upto 1814 A.D. in according to The Story of Asia's Lion(2005). Though these plaques the artist made us aware that lions lived in this area at that time. Though in Indian mythology the lion is not much discussed except Vishnu's man lion form named Narashimha Avatara. Lion is part of some Jataka stories. The lion have much religious influence on the society, and famous for its beauty, strength and violent nature.

In Hinduism, Hindu believes that lions protect humans from evil spirits, normally used in sculpture, decoration in traditional Bengali architecture. Lion used as *bahan* or vehicle of Durga as Uma/Mahishmordini deities.³⁶ The pair lions as guardians of the temple are represented in pair at the entrance of compounds. We may look at the artistic tradition of lion sculptures those are widely found from different parts of west Bengal and Bangladesh. Many Buddhist symbols need to be considered within the culture of the people who follow it. Therefore, many of the early symbols relate to ancient India and can be found in Hinduism as well in Temple architecture.

The Lion is one of the Buddhism's most potent symbols. It is therefore an appropriate symbol for the Buddha who tradition has it was a royal prince. The Buddha's teachings are sometimes referred to as the 'Lion's Roar'/*shimhogosh*, again indicative of their strength and power like *Shimghanada Avalokitesvara*³⁷ sculpture of Sultanganj of Bihar (**Plate 23**) *Manjubara* (**Plate 22**) of Mainamati etc. There have many sculpture of Buddha where lion depicted under pedestal of Buddha sculpture like *Akhosvva Buddha*.³⁸

It is mentionable that Mainamati Museum displays a plaque found at Shalban vihara which is the artist has presented a decorated lion (**Plate 24**) which is in contrast with reality. In the plaque the mane of the lion is like petals around it's face and it's eyes and eye-brows are slightly engraved. Though we would like to say that, there would have not to sure find out any lion motif decorated in any terracotta or any figure beside bull in the Indus valley civilization, where we have found a certainly a lion stuck with inscription of Buddha in Afghanistan during 1st century B.C. Obviously, early ancient lion symbol used in Mycenae at Persia. Now is the question is that how is it symbolized in ancient Buddhist architecture through literal and textual context with general and rituals under Buddhism.

On the above mentioned discussion after, we can classify of those lion figurine typologically in five types as follow in the table:

Sl. No.	Type/Style	Characteristics	Sites/places
1.	Realistic	Natural Lion	Ananda Vihar, comilla
2.	Mythical/ Tantric	Naravyal, Nrishimha, Kirtimukha	Mahasthangarh, Rupban mura, Ranir banglow,
3.	Textual/Literal (Jataka)	Lion with women, lion with well, lion with rabbit, Lion in talking cave, cross legs, Aged Lion/ older	Somapura vihar, Naogaon
4.	Ferocious	Lion attacked to elephant, Lion attacked to man	Shalban vihar, Comilla
5.	Architectural component	Two body one head lion	Shalban vihar, Somapura Vihar, Vashu Vihar

In conclusion, we could say possibly that Lion Motif or figure used in Buddhist Art and Architecture under religious aspect like formation of Buddha or Vehicle of *Manjubara* or mythical as well as gradually developed in influence by Hindu deity *Durga's Vahan* (Chariot) Lion. All these plaques are religious in character are valuable materials for the study symbolic religious life of Buddhist traditional in Ancient Bangladesh.

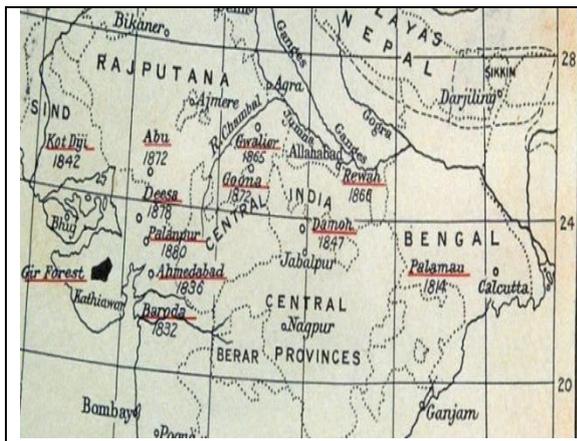
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Acknowledgement

I wish to express my sincere gratitude to Kelaniya University of Colombo at SriLanka for allowing me to present this paper in “6th SSEASR Conference”2015 at Colombo in 4-7 June 2015. I am special thankful to Dr. Anura Manatunga, Head of the Center for Asian Studies, UoK, as well as Dr. Shahnaj Husne Jahan and Dr. Nalini Rao for their valued Comments and suggestions. I would like to give thank Dr. Perween Hasan and Dr. Enamul Haque, Chairman, ICSBA, for invaluable help. I want to give my special thank to SSEASR organizer for giving this opportunity to me.



Map : Last habitation map of lion in Bengal,1814, courtesy: Divyabhanusinh

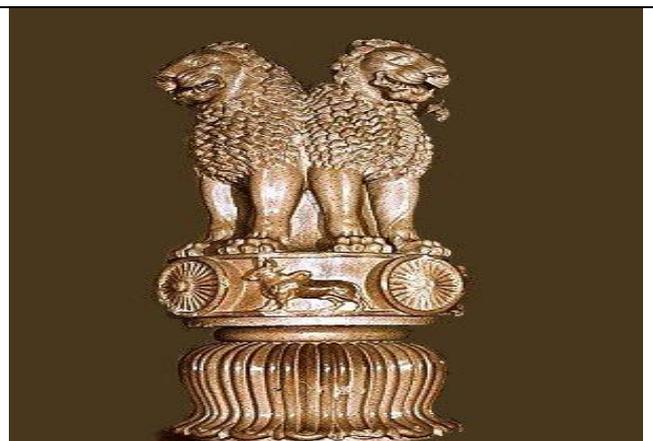


Plate 1: Capital of the Lion, Asokan Pillar, Sarnath, India, (from Internet)



Plate 2: Standing on two legs, Lion terracotta plaque, Paharpur, courtesy: Abdul Khalek(DoA)



Plate 3: Standing on two legs, Lion terracotta plaque, Paharpur, Naogaon, Bangladesh



Plate 4: Lion face with cross legs (symbol of aged), Paharpur.



Plate 5: Lion with well/*kuya*, Paharpur, courtesy: Department of Archaeology of Bangladesh.



Plate 6: Lion face with cross legs, Paharpur, (after K.N.Dikshit).



Plate 7: Lion in talking Cave, Paharpur, (after K.N.Dikshit).



Plate 8: Corner bond terracotta, Shalban Vihar, Mainamati, Comilla



Plate 9: *Naravyala*, Mainamati, (after Saifuddin)



Plate 10: Corner bonding terracotta , Shalban Vihar,



Plate 11: Lion, two body and one head, Vikramshila, Antichak, Bhagalpur, India, (from Internet)



Plate 12: Lion attacked to elephant, Shalban Vihar, Comilla



Plate 13: Lion & Man, Shalban, Mainamati, Comilla.



Plate 14: Corner bonding plaque, tail like petal, Shalban Vihar, Mainamati



Plate 15: Women worship to lion, Shalban Vihar, Mainamoti, Comilla, Bangladesh.



Plate 16: Lion attacked a man, Shalban Vihar



Plate 17: Corner bonding terracotta, one head two body type lion, Shalban Vihar. Courtesy: DoA, GoB.

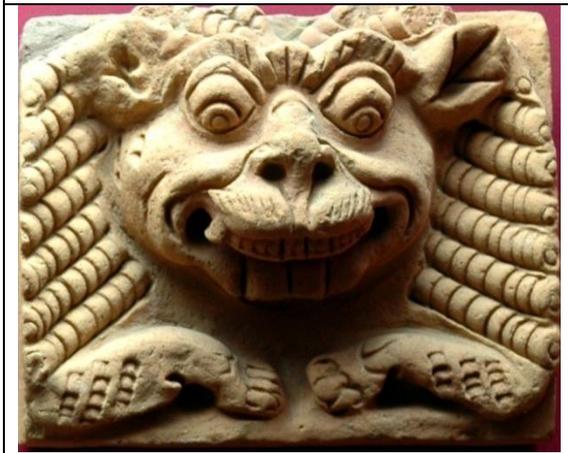


Plate 18: *kirtimukha*, Ananda Vihar, Comilla



Plate 19: Rabbit & Lion, Vashu Vihar Mahasthangarh, Bogra



Plate 20: Chandraketugarh, Natatrul Lion, West Bengal, India.



Plate 21: Chandraketugarh, winged, West Bengal, India, 1st century B. C.



Plate 22: Manjubar Sculpture sitting on Lion , Mainamati



Plate 23: Simhanada Avalokitesvara, Sultanganj, Bihar, Pala period, Birmingham Museum & Art gallery



Plate 24: Lion (mane decorated), Shalban Vihar, Mainamati



Plate 25: Lion, Shyamsundar Tila, Pilak, South Tripura, India



Plate 26: Lion, Fragmentary corner bonding Terracotta Plaque, Shalban Vihar, Mainamati, Comilla

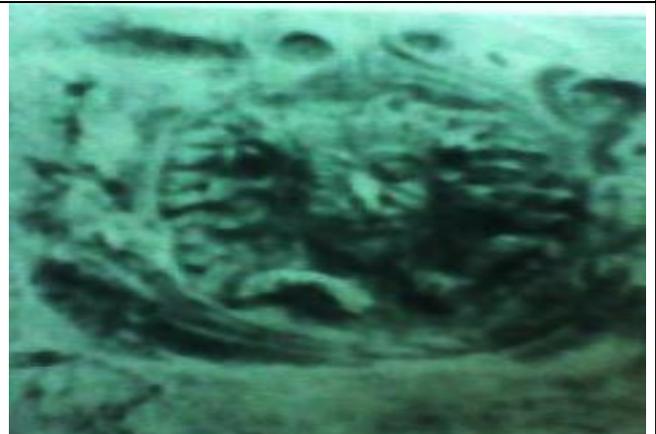


Plate 27: *kirtimukha*, Rupban Mura, Comilla

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