

## **A glance at Mythology of Sacred Bovine in the Indo-Iranian Ancient Beliefs**

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**Abstract:** The two ancient civilizations of India and Iran have commonalities in the culture, language, myth, religion and art. The Indo-Aryan culture, more commonly known as the Vedic Culture, formed the essential core of Hindu religion and society. As the main focus of this study, mythological and beliefs vicinity can illustrate the relationship between these nations during the ancient time. The myth and ideology of the Vedas is clearly compared to the Aryans economic, social, and ritual customs in symbol of their cattle. Most of these myths are similar to the ancient Iranian myths in the sacrifices of cow and bull.

**Keywords:** Myth, Cow, Bull, Sacred Bovine, India, Iran

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The sacred bovine is the beliefs of most people in the ancient world. When did the cow or bull get sacrifices? How was it done? This is the main aim of this study. In this paper, I attempt to indicate the historical background, the importance of cattle, and the mythology of bovine in the Indo-Iranian myths.

Towards the end of Ice age, the hunters settled on the open areas followed by the changes in the climate and fertility of lands. During this time, men apart from hunting the preys started domestication of animals and plants. The first animal trained by human being is cow around the Neolithic Age. At the same time, domesticated cattle formed a mainstay of agrarian society and symbolized a range of aspects of fertility, affluence, and peaceful pursuits.

The Aryans are the same clan of Indo-Iranian. They were the pastoral group. Their subsistence based on agriculture and animal husbandry. The migration of these people from the Central Asia towards Iranian Plateau and northwestern India brought many aspects of common life to these regions. In the Indo-Iranian myths, the bull and cow were appreciated as a symbol of purity. It was also considered as the first animal which existed on earth. They believed that the bull and cow were the most important aspects of ritual practices. Indo-Iranians believed in animals as the source of natural power that could protect humans against the other powers [1].

There are cultural and religious commonalities between Iran and India; they have similar faith in the

power of women and goddesses. This supported by the archaeological evidences of feminine figurine and cattle statues discovered at the ancient sites of Indo-Iranian regions. The figurine of mother goddess has been discovered in both Mohenjo-Daro and Elamite sites. Among the other commonalities between two nations were the sacrifices with the use of fire. Fire is used in home for cooking, to drive out the evil spirits, cancellation of magic and charm of the evil, and in purification.

### **Historical Background**

The earliest evidence of vicinity between man and animals belonged to the time of cave paintings in the old world sites at France, Australia, Spain, Africa, and India, by around 40,000 years ago. This relation was based on predator and prey. Animals played more important role in providing food for hunters. In spite of the food, these cave paintings showed the status of animals in the human life as the hunting magic, spiritual awareness, and some artistic relating to the animals. In the next phase, these characters led to appearance of animism, totemism and religious symbolism. Finally, the continuity of this relation resulted in animal domestication in the Neolithic Period. The zebu and taurine cattle have been domesticated in southwest Asia around 10,000 years ago and the other cattle in the regions from Greek to Afghanistan and Baluchistan around 6000 B.C. [2]. Potts [3] demonstrate that, a gold bowl with depicting bull imagery has been discovered from the Tepe Fullol of Afghanistan dated back to the Bronze Age.

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According to [4], by the end of ice age, due to climate change and also the favorable land, predators settled on the open area and started to control animals and cultivate plants. The taming of cow coincided with the start of agriculture. Domestication of animals and plants were an important stage for human life during the Neolithic period. Following this period, the economy and life style were founded on agriculture and animal husbandry. The animals were controlled and used by human being. The archaeological evidences proved this matter. These evidences showed primarily agricultural economy associated with the extensive dependency on cattle population [5].

Archaeological remains represented the female figurines as Goddess. Exposing of bull skulls buried with horns that depicted as a male God in the Pre-Pottery Neolithic (PPN) period sites of the southern Levant and also at Mureybet, an ancient site located on the west bank of the Euphrates in northern Syria [6]. Potts [3]. states that, the bull-man was also common in old Babylonian Glyptic. He also showed the paired nude hero and bull-man in Akkad. Assyrian texts recorded different animals which were hunted by king. The hunting animal scene was depicted on the walls of some rooms of Assurbanipal's North Palace from the ancient Near East. Bulls and lions were the most common animals depicted in the hunt scenes on monumental reliefs.

### **Indo-Iranian origin**

Ghirshman [7] argues that, the great migration of Indo-Europeans in Asia with Thraco-Phrygian (a branch of the Indo-European family of languages) features in Asia Minor and Iranians must have been in some way connected with the very extensive movements of attacking people in central and Western Europe around the same time. He states that the Aryans coming from Transoxiana, a region in Central Asia, then they migrated to Iran and the eastern branch of them spread to the south of the Hindu Kush, settled in the district of Arachosia as well as the Punjab [8,9].

The Aryans arrived to Indian sub-continent around 1700 B.C. to 1400 B.C. The Indo-Aryan culture displaced after the Harappan Civilization in India during 1,000 years. Indians call the Aryans as Rig-Vedic Aryans, due to bringing the first collection of hymns of Rig-Veda which it is the early form of Sanskrit or Old Indic. Indo-Aryan culture, more commonly known as the Vedic Culture, formed the essential core of Hindu religion and society. The Sanskrit is very close to Avesta, the sacred text of the present-day Zoroastrians of Iran and India. Regarding the Indo-Iranian language,

Avari Claims that:

The dominant language family of the northern part of the Indian sub-continent is the Indo-Aryan. This

family is also considered to have a sister branch in the Iranian family; and both branches are said to belong to a much larger family of families, which is known as Indo-European (P 60).

The two communities, the Avestan and the Rig-Vedic co-existed in the eastern Iran and Afghanistan between 1700 B.C. and 1400 B.C. They denote the two utmost vital supports of the Indo-Iranian custom as a whole. They had close links in language, culture, mythology and rituals and they worshipped a number of common gods together. The other shared customs between this people are the Fire and the Soma in the Rig-Veda and Haoma in the Avesta, the juice of a fertility plant [10].

Ancient civilizations of Iran and India have been historically associated with similarities of the art and culture. The archaeological study shows the most comparison of art and antiquities between advanced civilizations of Mohenjo-daro, the Mesopotamia, and the cultures of southeastern Iran. By reviewing animal mythology of these civilizations, many of their shared cultures and beliefs would be clear. The role of sacred cow, as the most popular mythological animal is most dominant [11].

### **The importance of bovine cattle**

The role of cattle as a source of food has been a fundamental in the human life since the ancient time. Cattle provided a supplement of milk and meat to the diet. Cow offers enormous quantities of milk in the Indo-European beliefs. Apart from food, use of cattle can be seen in making tools from bones and horns since the ancient periods. The domesticated cattle also helped farmers in pulling plows and wheeled carts [12,2,13].

The archaeological indications of domesticated hump-backed cattle appeared in Baluchistan and also its depictions on the seals discovered from the sites of Harappan culture around the fourth millennium B.C [13]. The Harappan and the Mesopotamian civilizations flourished during the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium B.C. and their economy was based on agriculture. The role of animal in this system of economic was very predominant. Among the animals associated with farmers, the bull was used for numerous such as pulling the plough, tanning of leather, transporting, and also for ritual purposes. These jobs of bull are supported by enormous archaeological and literary evidences. The Vedic people were originally pastoral-nomadic in nature and the cow seemed to be most important in both Indian and Iranian culture. In the Iranian culture, the cow was superior to the bull in cultic and ritual activities [9].

According to Fairservis Jr [12], the cattle were important in the Harappan ideology which showed the cow-women and perhaps a bull-man in the seal-tablets discovered at sites such as Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro.

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Among the remains of animal bones exposed during the excavations, the cattle bones were predominant. The importance of cattle was also suggested by the figurines. It appeared in the ancient Indian and Iranian sites [12].

### **The mythology**

Cow and bull played more significant role in the economic, social, and ritual aspects of people since the ancient ages. This usefulness led to myth in the most of ancient world. Cattle were sacrificed between the different nations for instance Indo-European, Greeks, Indo-Iranians, and Romans. The early Indians and Romans performed the sacrifice of a pregnant cow [13]. Best example of western mythology is related to Minos, king of Crete when he built a house for Minotaur, the half-human, half-bull child of his wife Pasiphae. Figure of a bull appeared in the Minoan relics for instance on buildings, pottery, frescoes, jewelry and also in the sacrificial and ritual customs. The faith of Minoan Crete believed that, a male fertility spirit represented sometimes as a bull and sometimes as a young man named Kouros, partner and son of the mother-goddess [14].

According to Collins [15], in the Indo-Iranian ethos, the bull was respected as a symbol of purity and also it was considered as the first animal that lived on earth. They believed that bull and cow were most important for the ritual practices. The Indo-Iranians ate meat as sacrifice offered from the Gods. In a Vedic hymn, cow is mentioned as sacred and it should not be killed. Albeit it does not mean that cow's meat was never taken. Among the Iranians, meat was the main object of their diet, but like the Vedic Aryans, they also appeared to hold the cow as sacred animal [9].

### **Iranian myths**

The place of cow in the Iranian mythology is equal to the Taurus in the sky. Due to its character in associating with farmers, it was compared as Mitra. Mitra is a symbol of treaty and friendship in the Indo-Iranian divinity. Iranian myths believed that, Srishok, the last animal in the end of life should be killed to restoration of human life. It was a symbol of cloud and rain. Goshurun, the cosmic cattle, had the same place. Tishtr, god of rain, sometimes manifested as the cow. Cow' horn was symbols of wisdom, the sun and the moon. The Verethraghna (Bahram) is the divinity of victory that kills the Daeva. In the Iranian mythology, he will appear in ten different symbols that its second symbol is a cow with yellow and golden horn.

Iranian mythology states that, during the creation of world, cow was the first creature. This cow was killed by Ahriman (Angra Mainyu), the destructive soul, and finally its sperm goes to the moon and when the embryo was quite clean, various species of animals and plants come out. Hadhayosh is a cow that transfers

the humans from one region to another. When the world ends, Saoshyant, who brings the final renovation of the world will kill the Srishok and with its fat makes the Haom. Hoam is a plant which is used in the Zoroastrian ritual activities. People find the immortals after eating the Hoam [11].

In the Avesta due to the most usefulness and sacrifice of cow, its name is used as prefix of some other animal's names like Gaw Mish (buffalo), Gaw Mahi (Amur goby), Gaw Goraz, Gaw Gavazn [4]. The bull in the Zoroastrian belief had the high position, so it was represented in the architecture of Persepolis [15]. In other words, Bull is a symbol of wealth and source of all goodness in the ancient Iranian myth [11]. The second hymn of Gathas says that, the cow begs Ahura Mazda to send Zoroaster (Zarathushtra) as a leader for changing the world. In the Elamite myth also, cow is the symbol of strength and productivity[1].

### **Indian myths**

Harris [16] Claims that, the cow worshipping in India is a relatively recent phenomena. The Hindu text did not prohibit the slaughter of cattle in the second millennium B.C. The early Hindus ate meat offered by Brahman priests in the special ritual feasts. The Vedas had differing opinions; some favored slaughter of cattle in rituals and others considered it as taboo. Beef eating was common in the first millennium B.C. Through 200 A.D., the position of Indian cattle changed to a holy phase and eating meat was strictly prohibited by the Brahman priesthood. Ahimsa was the basis of all Hindu belief in the unity of all life that eating beef was restricted according to it by 1000 A.D.

Aryans arrived northwestern India in the early second millennium B.C. and they brought the new language, social structure, religion and ritual customs. Aryans were pastoral people and their subsistence depended on cattle. Later, the Brahmans, the poet-priests of Aryan society composed the Vedas in the centuries following ca. 1300 B.C. Vedas are the sacred scriptures of Hinduism. Bovine is mentioned more in the Vedic literature [2].

In the Indo-European myth it is highlighted on the role of both human and bovine (ox or cow) as the two important features of the world. Purusa, the sacrifice, is made of two names: Pu and vrsa In the Rig-Veda [13]. Alike to Avesta, the cow has a significant mention in Vedic literature. The term used for cow is 'Gau'. This term has been combined with differences in various terms of everyday usage such as Godhuli (dusk), Gojanya (gods), the one born from a cow, duhita (daughter) one who milks the cow [9]. According to Mallory and Adams [13], the priests of ancient India sacrificed the cow with eight feet known as Astapadi and its sacrificed embryo presented to the earth. He also named the Kamadhenu (or Surabhi), the wish-fulfilling

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cow that has been compared to Auoumla that its udders provide rivers of milk.

The myth and ideology of the Vedas is clearly compared to the Aryans economic, social, and ritual customs in symbol of their cattle. Most of these myths are similar to the ancient Iranian myths in the sacrifices of cow and bull.

According to Lodrick [2]:

Dyaus, the great father of the Indo-Aryan pantheon, is described as “the bull with thousand horns” who fertilizes Prithivi, the Earth-cow, with the gods and all creatures springing from this union. In the Vedic creation myth, Indra slays Vrata, thus releasing the cosmic waters which come forth like lowing cows and give birth to the Sun, bringing moisture, warmth and light into the universe. The Divine Bull, as Indra, impregnates the cows and, as the Sun, is sacrificed to nourish the earth and renew its fecundity. Parjanya, Soma, Agni and Rudra are all Vedic deities who are represented as bull-gods, with aspects of Agni and Rudra merging in the late Vedic period and perhaps evolving into the god Shiva, the great Destroyer of modern Hinduism. The vehicle (vahana) of Shiva is the bull, and images of the bull Nandi are to be found facing the entrance to all Shiva temples in India today.

The symbols of cow in the Vedic literature depicted as the highest symbol of femininity, fertility, and maternally and its role is greater importance than even the bull. Prithivi is mentioned as the divine cow, and the mother of the gods. Lodrick [2] regarding to other symbol of cow, states that:

Aditi, the Vedic goddess of space who is also identified with the earth and with nature is referred to in one passage as the Cosmic Cow; the cosmic waters, released after Indra slays the demon Vrata, come forth lowing like cows; rain cloud are called cows. Surabhi, known also as Kamadhenu, is the wish-fulfilling Cow of Plenty, who symbolizes the abundance and proliferation of Nature, and thus represents both motherhood and regeneration.

## CONCLUSION

The relationship between India and Iran dated back to the ancient periods. Two major civilizations of Harrapan and Mesopotamia were connected through the ancient Iran. People with common ancestors, the Aryans, founded the very close relation since the ancient era. The Aryans brought the similar culture, language, myth, religion and art into the two old civilizations. Indo-Iranian ancient mythology based on sacred cow and bull discussed in this study. Both of Indo-Iranian myths speak about the cow as the first creature. They believe that, the cow's sperm goes to the moon and when the embryo was quite clean, various species of animals and plants emerged.

Indo-Aryan culture, more commonly known as the Vedic Culture, formed the essential core of Hindu religion and society. The term used for cow is ‘Gau’ in the both Indo-Iranian ancient literatures and this word combined with many of the other words. The two ancient people believed that the common sacred cow, as the divines of earth, cloud, rain, and animals as natural power can protect humans against the other powers. Fire is used for home affairs, drive out of the evil spirits, cancellation of magic and charm of the evil, and purify in both Indo-Iranian myths.

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