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Q13

Discuss the significance of the lion and bull figures in Indian mythology, art and architecture.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2022 · GS I · 15 marks · Indian Heritage and Culture

Indian culture will cover the salient aspects of Art Forms, literature and Architecture from ancient to modern times.

Core demand of the question

- Discuss the significance of the lion and bull figures in Indian mythology, art and architecture
- Treat both beasts across Indus, Vedic-Puranic myth, Buddhist and Hindu art, and imperial architecture
- Keep a 15-mark length

Revision summary

The lion is Durga's mount, **Narasimha**'s form, and the **Buddha** as Shakyasimha.

The bull is Nandi, Jaina Rishabha, and an older emblem of cattle wealth.

Indus seals and Ashokan lion and bull capitals fix both in early art.

Temples use **simhasana**, vyala, and the **Nandi mandapa** as built theology.

The Republic's emblem continues the architectural lion as a public sign.

Introduction

The lion and the bull are two of India's oldest royal and sacred animals. They mark power, dharma, and devotion from Indus seals to **Ashoka**'s capitals and to the **Nandi mandapa** of the Hindu temple.

Body

Mythology

- The lion is the vahana of Durga and the man-lion **Narasimha** of Vaishnava myth, so it stands for the goddess's force and for Vishnu's terrible protection of the devotee.
- The **Buddha** is Shakyasimha, the lion of the Shakya clan, which is why the lion roar of the dharma is a Buddhist figure of speech and of throne.
- The bull is Nandi, Siva's vahana and gate-keeper, and Rishabha in Jaina memory; it also recalls Vedic cattle wealth and the uncastrated strength of dharma.
- Together they pair forest kingship and pastoral-agrarian strength, which Indian myth needed as much as river and mountain gods.

Art

- Indus seals show powerful bulls and related bovids, which already treat the animal as a ritual and economic emblem, even where the later Hindu names are absent.

- Mauryan polish gives the **Sarnath lion capital** and the **Rampurva bull capital**, so early historic art made both beasts into imperial standards.
- Buddhist railings and later Hindu sculpture use vyala-lions, simha-vyala, and recumbent Nandi as a visual grammar of the sacred compound.
- Chola and later bronzes and stone Nandis, and Durga-slaying-the-buffalo panels that still keep the lion beside the goddess, keep the pair in living worship.

Architecture

- Ashokan pillars used the lion as a capital that the Republic later took as the State Emblem, so the architectural lion became a national sign.
- Temple gateways, thrones (**simhasana**), and pillar bases use lions as load-bearing and apotropaic figures that warn as well as decorate.
- **Separate Nandi mandapas face the linga on an axis, which is architecture as theology:** the bull hears and waits.
- Step-wells, forts, and palace brackets repeat lion and mythical yali forms, so the beasts left the temple for court building as well.

Shared political meaning

- Kings sat on lion thrones and issued coins with bulls, as on some Gupta and later types, which made the animals a language of legitimate force.
- **The pair therefore works at three levels:** story, image, and built space, all teaching who may rule and who may worship.

Flow diagram

Lion -> Durga Narasimha Buddha
 Bull -> Nandi Rishabha cattle
 Lion -> Sarnath capital simhasana
 Bull -> Nandi mandapa seals
 Sarnath capital simhasana -> Power dharma
 Nandi mandapa seals -> Power dharma

Conclusion

The lion signifies royal and goddess power and the **Buddha's** roar; the bull signifies Siva, cattle wealth, and steadfast hearing. Indian art and architecture placed both at capitals, thrones, and temple doors, which is why they still read as sacred public signs.

Facts & figures

Sarnath lion capital

Ashokan pillar capital that became independent India's State Emblem.

Rampurva bull capital

Mauryan polished bull that pairs with the lion as an imperial animal.

Nandi mandapa

Axial bull pavilion facing the Siva linga in living temple plans.

Narasimha

Man-lion avatara of Vishnu, a core Puranic use of the lion body.

Indus bull seals

Harappan animal seals that show the bull's early emblematic power.

Simhasana

Lion throne as a pan-Indian royal and cult seat.

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