



“THE CONCEPT OF *MITRA* IN INDO-IRANIAN TRADITION: FROM CONTRACT TO SOCIAL AND COSMIC ALLIANCE”

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Abstract

This study examines the semantic range and conceptual development of the Indo-Iranian term *mitra* as reflected in Avestan and Vedic sources. It focuses on the dual nature of the term, which encompasses both the narrow juridical meaning of “contract” or “promise” and the broader sense of “alliance” as a binding social and moral relationship. Through textual analysis of Avestan passages, particularly those presenting hierarchical and functional classifications of *miθra*, the research highlights the term’s role in structuring interpersonal, familial, and political relations. The study further explores the linguistic expressions associated with the establishment and violation of *miθra*, demonstrating its significance as a formalized and enforceable bond. Comparative evidence from Vedic traditions supports the interpretation of *mitra* as a concept grounded in reciprocity and obligation. The evolution of the term in later linguistic stages, where it acquires meanings such as “friend” and “love,” is also considered in light of its original semantic core. The analysis situates *mitra* within the broader Indo-Iranian worldview, emphasizing its function as a foundational principle of social cohesion and moral order.

Keywords

Mitra, Miθra, Indo-Iranian religion, Avestan texts, Vedic tradition, contract, alliance, social order, semantic development, moral obligation, philology

The Indo-Iranian deity Mitra derives his name from the common noun *mitra*, which fundamentally denotes a “contract” or binding agreement, encompassing a wide semantic field that includes covenant, treaty, alliance, and promise. This linguistic origin is crucial for understanding the theological and functional essence of the deity within early Indo-Iranian religious thought. Rather than being a secondary or metaphorical association, the connection between the name and its abstract meaning reflects a deep conceptual continuity between language, social order, and divine authority.

In early scholarship, interpretations of Mitra often emphasized naturalistic or cosmological dimensions, particularly identifying him with solar or luminous phenomena. However, such approaches tended to overlook the semantic core embedded in the term *mitra* itself. A more philologically grounded analysis demonstrates that the primary significance of the term lies not in physical or celestial representation, but in the sphere of social and moral regulation. The concept of “contract” in Indo-Iranian culture was not limited to legalistic agreements; it encompassed a sacred and inviolable bond that structured interpersonal, political, and even cosmic relationships.



Within this framework, Mitra emerges as the divine guarantor of order based on mutual obligation and trust. He embodies the sanctity of agreements and ensures their observance, acting as both witness and enforcer. His role is intrinsically ethical, as he upholds truth, loyalty, and justice, punishing deceit and breach of faith. Thus, Mitra is not merely associated with contracts in a symbolic sense, but is the very personification of the principle that sustains them. This understanding aligns closely with the broader Indo-Iranian worldview, in which abstract concepts such as truth, order, and covenant were frequently conceptualized as divine beings. The deification of *mitra* reflects a process in which essential social values were elevated to a sacred status, thereby reinforcing their authority and permanence. In this sense, Mitra functions as a bridge between the human and divine spheres, ensuring that the moral foundations of society are anchored in a transcendent order.

Moreover, the figure of Mitra illustrates how early Indo-Iranian religion integrated legal, ethical, and cosmological dimensions into a unified system. The maintenance of contracts was not simply a social necessity but a cosmic imperative, and its violation could threaten the balance of the world. Consequently, Mitra's significance extends beyond the regulation of human interactions to the preservation of universal harmony.

The etymology of the name Mitra remains a subject of scholarly debate, with no single derivation attaining definitive acceptance. One influential proposal connects the term to an Indo-European root meaning "to exchange," suggesting an original semantic field related to reciprocity and mutual obligation. However, this interpretation is only one among several competing hypotheses, and the available linguistic evidence does not allow for a conclusive determination of the original root.

An alternative etymological approach derives the name from a root meaning "to measure." Within this framework, Mitra is interpreted as a solar figure, specifically as the entity that "measures" the day through the regular progression of time. This interpretation assumes that the ethical and juridical dimensions associated with Mitra—such as his role as the guardian of agreements and moral order—developed secondarily from an initial cosmological function. Such a view reflects a broader tendency in earlier scholarship to prioritize naturalistic explanations of Indo-Iranian deities, linking them to observable celestial phenomena.

Despite the apparent plausibility of associating Mitra with the sun, textual evidence from both the Iranian and Vedic traditions indicates a more complex relationship. In the Avestan corpus, *Miθra* is closely connected with light and is frequently described in terms that evoke solar imagery. Nevertheless, he is not explicitly identified as the sun itself. Similarly, in the Vedic tradition, Mitra appears alongside solar deities and shares certain luminous characteristics, yet he retains a distinct identity and function that cannot be reduced to that of a solar god. The direct identification of Mitra with the sun emerges only in later stages of religious development in both cultural spheres.

Scholarly attempts to equate *Miθra* entirely with the sun have been critically reassessed, and such interpretations have been challenged on philological and textual grounds. The distinction between association and identity is particularly important in this context: while *Miθra* operates within a symbolic and cosmological framework that includes solar elements, his primary characteristics are not exhausted by them.

A markedly different line of interpretation proposes an astral identification of Mitra with the planet Venus. This perspective is based on specific passages in the Avestan hymns, which are interpreted as referring to celestial phenomena associated with both the morning and evening



star. According to this view, *Miθra* embodies a dual aspect, corresponding to the visible appearances of Venus at different times of the day. In the Vedic context, a parallel distinction is suggested, wherein *Mitra* is associated with the morning star, while another deity assumes the role of the evening counterpart.

These varying interpretations—linguistic, solar, and astral—demonstrate the complexity of reconstructing the original nature of *Mitra*. They reflect different methodological approaches, ranging from comparative linguistics to textual exegesis and the study of ancient cosmologies, each highlighting distinct aspects of the deity's multifaceted character.

The semantic range of the Indo-Iranian term *mitra* is most clearly illuminated through its usage in Avestan textual traditions, where it encompasses a spectrum of meanings extending from concrete agreements to broader notions of social and moral cohesion. Two particularly illustrative contexts reveal both the narrower and more expansive dimensions of the term, demonstrating its adaptability within juridical, social, and religious frameworks.

In one instance, a graded classification of *miθra* is presented alongside corresponding punishments for its violation. The initial forms of *miθra*, established through verbal agreement or symbolic gesture, suggest relatively simple and immediate interpersonal commitments. However, these are followed by more complex categories measured metaphorically in terms of material or social value, such as livestock, human dependents, or land. This progression indicates that *miθra* is not merely a singular type of agreement but a scalable concept reflecting varying degrees of obligation and consequence. The severity of punishment for breach underscores the binding nature of such commitments, extending beyond the individual to affect familial and social networks. The notion that the violation of a *miθra* could result in harm to relatives highlights its embeddedness within a collective moral order, where personal actions bear communal repercussions.

In another context, a hierarchical enumeration of *miθra* relationships is offered, structured according to the degree of sanctity attributed to different social bonds. These range from voluntary associations, such as friendships and partnerships, to inherently given relationships, including familial and educational ties, and ultimately extend to the level of inter-political relations and religious commitment. The inclusion of both voluntary and involuntary relationships within the same framework suggests that *miθra* cannot be confined to the narrow sense of a contractual agreement. Rather, it signifies a binding alliance or relational obligation that encompasses all forms of structured human interaction. The gradation of sanctity reflects an increasing intensity of moral and spiritual commitment, culminating in the highest level associated with religious adherence, where violation is equated with a fundamental breach of faith.

This broader interpretation of *miθra* as “alliance” rather than merely “contract” is further supported by its application across diverse relational contexts. While a contract implies a deliberate and often formalized agreement between parties, an alliance may also include relationships that are not chosen but are nonetheless binding and ethically charged. Such an understanding aligns with the pervasive role of *miθra* in regulating not only legal or economic exchanges but also the integrity of social structures and the maintenance of harmony within and between communities.

The evolution of the term in later linguistic stages, where it comes to denote “friend” or “love,” has prompted alternative interpretations that emphasize affective or ethical dimensions over juridical ones. Some scholars have proposed that *miθra* represents a foundational moral



principle or even a generalized sense of piety. These views highlight the deity's benevolent and supportive characteristics, suggesting a shift from formal obligation to interpersonal goodwill. However, such interpretations may obscure the underlying structural function of *miθra* as a binding force that ensures reliability, trust, and order. The semantic development toward "friendship" can be understood as a natural extension of the concept of alliance, where mutual obligation and trust give rise to positive relational qualities.

Philological evidence from both Avestan and Vedic sources further reinforces the centrality of *mitra* as a term denoting formalized agreement and mutual obligation. Specific expressions used to denote the establishment of a *miθra* involve verbs meaning "to make" or "to place," indicating a deliberate act of instituting a binding relationship. Similarly, phrases describing the mutual solicitation of a promise reflect a reciprocal process of agreement formation. These expressions reveal a consistent conceptualization of *miθra* as a structured and enforceable bond, whose integrity is essential to both social and cosmic order.

Even in later textual traditions, where the everyday usage of the term may have shifted toward more affective meanings, there are indications that its earlier juridical and ethical connotations persisted, particularly in religious contexts. This continuity suggests that the foundational idea of *miθra* as a binding and morally significant relationship remained influential, even as its semantic field expanded and adapted to changing cultural and linguistic environments.

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