

# Cultural Daily

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## The Gay Origins of the Hindi Word for 'Friend'

Pitamber Kaushik · Wednesday, January 15th, 2020

The Sanskrit and Hindi word for friend is “Mitra”. It is also the Nepali word for it. The Sinhala word is ‘mitura’. Vernacular languages and dialects in North India often have related words as “Meet” and “Mitwaa.” However, few ponder their [origin](#). The word’s [etymology](#) has surprising, stark and vivid homosexual connotations.

Had the incumbent Indian regime’s right-wing ideologues actually read the language, texts, and scriptures they so often [hail](#) and [invoke](#), they would have known better than to deem homosexuality and genderfluidity as [disorders](#), [anomalies](#) and “[western corruptions](#)”.

Unlike other Proto-Indo-European words, many of which are preserved as such in Sanskrit, Mitra or its derivatives are not words which have been borrowed to create words in European languages. Most words in European languages trace their origin to Proto-Indo-European, and Sanskrit being a second-tier descendant of it, appears to have mothered them. But there seldom exist words that sound even remotely like “Mitra”, meaning ‘Friend’ in other European languages. Note that Mitra wasn’t either the original, or always the most popular word for a friend. Even in Bengali, a language that has several nouns borrowed from Sanskrit (*tatsam*), Mitra is sparingly used, *Bandhu* being preferred. Even in Tamil, ‘Mitra’ denoting friend is a relatively new addition. There is an overarching reason behind this.

Mitra was a Proto-Indo-Iranian deity, who is likely to have preceded the Vedas and even Sanskrit. He gave rise to eponymous entities in Vedic Hinduism and primitive Zoroastrianism (Mithra).



*Mithras-Orion*, a 1980 book by Dr Michael P. Speidel, an eminent American Professor of Ancient History at the University of Hawaii, opens with the line, “Mithras is mankind’s oldest living God”. He observes pieces of evidence and relics of the Proto-Indo-Iranian divinity being found from Britannia to Roman Arabia and the Danube to the Sahara. The 3500-year old figure is still worshipped in India in two distinct faiths – Zoroastrianism and Hinduism.

His divinity was so iconic, appealing and ubiquitous, that his or his derivatives’ mentions can be found all over the Middle-East and Near-East, from Britain to Bangladesh, through Europe, Turkey, Bactria and Iran. His name was later adopted for different figures in various religions as Buddhism and Pagan cults, as well as various Gnostic faiths. Various Greek figures borrow his name too, some with sizeable character influences.

Retrospective Semantic reconstruction yields the word having meant “covenant, treaty, agreement or promise”, affirmed by the word’s latter and modern usage in Avestan (where it means “covenant”) and Sanskrit (where it means “friend”). Mithra was invoked during any sort of oath, pledge, agreement, accord, or treaty, for three reasons: He represented the omnipresent Sun which could bear witness anywhere and everywhere; He was the all-pervasive light and hence illuminated (and thus bore a pious, chaste witness to) any act, consecrating and solemnising every bond; Finally, he directly was, by virtue of his identity and very definition, the patron of covenants, bonds, and friendship. In fact, light sources as the fire of the *yajnakund* (sacred, ritualistic fire-pit) or the earthen lamp, are popular witnesses to oaths and swearing in Hinduism. Invoking Mithra thus played an important crucial and diplomatic role in bilateral interpersonal, intersocial or geopolitical relations. Often, Mithra and Varuna (the omnipresent sky, or the “binding” truth – as Varuna carries a *Paash* lasso and etymologically means to bind, as oceans and sky bind the Earth), were both invoked and summoned to attest, guarantee, uphold, or testify a pact or agreement. The *Paash* whip is common if not salient to all jurisdictional deities who punish those deviating from righteousness. Varuna is thus a severe judge – the guardian of Ethics.

The Vedic Mitra itself dates back to at least 1400 BCE, the date of his first written mention. His role and nuance of character widely vary, but he generally assumes the role of a Sun God or a general harbinger of light in Greece and Rome. In India, he was a Sun God, later being one the two chiefs of the early set of *Adityas* (today the word *Aditya* is a Synecdoche specific for the Sun God but it was varyingly used to collectively refer to all his Siblings – the sons of Matriarch Aditi, the mother of the lesser Gods and initially the Mother Goddess Earth), but abruptly disappears from the role. Often multiple Sun Gods exist, without an auxiliary or principal status being relegated to either, and no overarching explanation for their simultaneous, parallel occurrence, or one’s disappearance, being furnished. Even, today “*Om Mitray Namah*” is often a part of the set of synonymous salutations recited in devotion to the rising Sun. It finds a place in multiple Sunrise prayers, both Puranic, as well as folk, most importantly the *Upasthaana* prayer. Mitra is co-worshipped alongside Surya, the Sun deity in the *Mitrotsavam* Hindu festival, as the facilitator and guarantor of the latter’s orderly traversal of the sky. Locally known as ‘Itu Thakur’, Mithra is worshipped for a whole month in Bengal in the month of *Agrahayana*. The origins of the Bengali surname “Mitra”, are dubious at best, although one speculation attributes it to the deity. In many renditions, he is shown to be close friends, companion, or kin with the Solar deity or figure, most famously in [the popular bull sacrifice relief](#).

According to the Encyclopaedia Britannica [entry](#) for Mitra, he is “the god of light, whose cult spread from India in the east to as far west as Spain, Great Britain, and Germany”. It is further elucidated “His worship spread to Persia and, after the defeat of the Persians by Alexander the Great, throughout the Hellenic world. In the 3rd and 4th centuries AD, the cult of Mithra, carried and supported by the soldiers of the Roman Empire, was the chief rival to the newly developing religion of Christianity. The Roman emperors Commodus and Julian were initiates of Mithraism, and in 307 Diocletian consecrated a temple on the Danube River to Mithra, “Protector of the Empire.”



Relief of Roman Mithras, in a tauroctony scene.

As an interesting sidenote, marginalised hypotheses have been proposed which attribute the conception of Jesus’ life to the story of Mithra, particularly given his status as the Sun God, and the circumstances of his birth, and bull-slaying (Earth’s position shift in the Taurus constellation

around the time). Other hypotheses link him to Orion, and even link the three together, based on zodiac and other stellar constellational patterns.

Mitra, via his derivatives Mithra and Mithras is perhaps one of the most pervasive and cross-cultural deities in the world. The universality of its meaning or at least connotation as ‘covenant’ in differentiated languages as Akkadian and Sanskrit precursors allude to his unanimity and influence as a binding concept stringing together civilisations. Mithraism was a popular mystery-cult in Ancient Rome which displays some kink and discontinuity with the ongoing Oriental Mithraic traditions, but depicts remarkable and undeniable similarities as well. The aforementioned Bull-sacrifice relief were frequent adornments of Mithraic temples.

In Ancient Persia, Mithra was the protector of *arta* (truth or righteousness) and plays the role of a *Ratu* (judge), forbidding those who broke promises, vows and pacts from entering the paradise. As a witness, consecrator, testifier and preserver of covenants, he was also the guardian of all interpersonal ties – love, marital bonds, and ‘friendship’ – a patron of promise-keepers, and prosecutor of violators. Mithra is described as “of vast pastures” (allusion to omnipresence of a truth-guardian) and described as “truth-speaking, ... with a thousand ears, ... with ten thousand eyes, high, with full knowledge, strong, sleepless, and ever awake”, all characters of the illuminating, ubiquitous Sunlight. He is also the guardian of the Waters.

In Indic scriptures, Mitra, starting off as a Solar deity, starts to get increasingly associated, rather coupled, with another very dynamic, versatile, and pliable figure – Varuna, in certain narrations his brother. In these telling, together, they lead the early *Adityas*. They go on adventures, traversals and patrols together, before the former becomes increasingly sidelined, or reduced to a mere mirroring or supporting role. The much-adapted Varuna, by varying accounts, and depending on context is the deity of one or more of ‘Sky, Oceans & Seas, Water.’ Given that his prime and primal role was that of a Sky-God, it is intuitive that he shares an intimate relation with Mitra, the Sun God his co-inhabitant. Moreover, in the abstract, Varuna came to be the patron and upholder of truth (*Rta*) and justice, an essential prerequisite as well as a consequence of a covenant-formation or alliance-forging. Varuna seems to have taken up the exact roles of the Zoroastrian Mithra – upholder of truth, enforcer of rightfulness, the Justice, and the Guardian of the waters. However, Varuna is much more than being a half-derivative of the undifferentiated proto-Mithra.



Mitra-Varuna by [Develv](#)

Today, Varuna is found from Japan (in the form of Suiten) to Malaysia to Pakistan (In Sindh, as the sea-God *Jhulelal*, worshipped by the Muslim majority and Hindu minority alike). As the rise of *Indra*, the King of Devas (important in the early Rigveda, but reduced to lesser Gods in later texts) undermined the multitude of roles of Varuna, and reduced him from the status of a chief deity to one of the elementals in the pantheon, relinquishing the sky and rain from his domain the Indra, the God of Storms, Clouds, Rain, and War, on similar lines, Mitra was (figuratively-speaking) evicted from the sky (displaced from the Solar role) by Surya, the newly-emerging specific deity.

Mitra and Varuna represent the two lunar phases – waning and waxing, respectively. The two phases fitting together and complementing each other to form the whole might be an explicit reference to homosexual conjugal relationship. The mutual injection of light and darkness on the nights of culmination and inflexion (new moon and full moon), might be an allusion to alternating sides in male-male consummation. It is noteworthy that in many ancient and pagan faiths, new and

full moon nights were held as fateful and potent times (for the better, or worse) for performance of exceptional or so-called irregular sexual congress and/or marital rites. Varuna is also seen to represent the setting Sun (as he's the overlord of the seas), while Mitra is the rising Sun, thus forming another yin-yang-esque couple. According to A.A. MacDonell's *Vedic Reader*, "In the *Atharvaveda*, Mitra is again associated with sunrise, and is contrasted with Varuna's association with the evening. In the *Brahmanas*, the exegetical commentaries on the Vedas, the associations with morning and evening lead Mitra to be connected with the day, and Varuna with night." Note that rising Sun and setting Moon, along with twin Gods, one with a torch pointing up, the other with his inverted, occur without variation in over 500 bull-sacrifice depictions of the Roman Mithra as well.

In his book "Tritiya Prakriti: People of the Third Sex", the founder of the Gay and Lesbian Vaishnava Association (GALVA), the world's first LGBTQI Hindu religious organisation, Amara Das Wilhelm [notes](#):

*Sri Mitra-Varuna are portrayed as icons of brotherly affection and intimate friendship between males (the Sanskrit word Mitra means "friend" or "companion"). For this reason, they are worshiped by men of the third sex, albeit not as commonly as other Hindu deities. They are depicted riding a shark or crocodile together while bearing tridents, ropes, conch shells and water pots. Sometimes they are portrayed seated side-by-side on a golden chariot drawn by seven swans. Ancient Brahmana texts furthermore associate Sri Mitra-Varuna with the two lunar phases and same-sex relations: "Mitra and Varuna, on the other hand, are the two half-moons: the waxing one is Varuna and the waning one is Mitra. During the new-moon night, these two meet and when they are thus together they are pleased with a cake offering. Verily, all are pleased and all is obtained by any person knowing this. On that same night, Mitra implants his seed in Varuna and when the moon later wanes, that waning is produced from his seed." (Shatapatha Brahmana 2.4.4.19) Varuna is similarly said to implant his seed in Mitra on the full-moon night for the purpose of securing its future waxing. In Hinduism, the new- and full-moon nights are discouraged times for procreation and consequently often associated with 'citrarata' or unusual types of intercourse.*

Further to this, it is also cited that "*The Bhagavata Purana* (6.18.3-6) lists Varuna and Mitra as having children through 'ayoni' or non-vaginal sex. For example, Varuna fathered the sage Valmiki when his semen fell upon a termite mound, and Agastya (hence his titular name Kumbhsambhava) and Vasistha were born from water pots after Mitra and Varuna discharged their semen in the presence of Urvasi. This account is similar to Gay couples having children through surrogate mothers in modern days."

More specifically though, it is sporadically proposed that Varuna can be seen as the recipient or the penetrated, in the homosexual union, while Mitra is the insertive counterpart, as referenced by the Sun setting in the sea, the realm of Varuna, as well as Varuna's 'binding' nature. However, others contend otherwise.

Such is the elegant inherence of the underlying unity of the duo, that the root word of Mitra "Mei", and that of Varuna, "Var" (from which the eponymous words for 'boon or wish grant' – a binding

blessing, ‘adoption/acceptance’ as well as for ‘prospective spouse’ are derived from) both mean “to bind”. “Tra” means “to cause”, hence, mitra stands for a covenant, agreement or accord which is binding. Although both etymologies are classically dominant, they are not definitive.

The interdependence of truth and justice with alliance, amity and union is allegorically represented in the mutual intimacy between the leading duo of the Vedic Pantheon. Prominent hypotheses contend that the twosome represented the Priest and the King. The earliest civilisations, particularly in Mesopotamia had Priests and subsequently Priest-Kings in the supreme roles – they assumed the charge of the society’s conduct as moral chieftains, jurists and ethical enforcers. Most important acts were within their jurisdiction. Sometimes, they gradually became Priest-Kings, broadening their scope, or worked in tandem with the newly-emerged kingly system, often asserting and consolidating divine rights to rule, by lending them supernatural credence vide their own designation. Gradually, the influence of the priests substantially waned, as they assumed a more subverted role, only serving to strengthen and mentor the sovereign. Just as a pact upholds, and in due course, consolidates truth and righteousness, the High-Priest consolidated and cemented the position of the king, imparting him unearthly legitimacy. In *Shatapatha Brahman*, Mitra is explicitly deemed to be the Priesthood, while Varuna is the Royalty.

This puja of Itu Thakur in Bengal is celebrated like a Vrata especially by the ladies. On first day women are bring a clay pot with full of soil and implant many kind of seeds and plant roots. In every Sunday of the month they worshipped and sprinkle water on it. And on final day they immerse the abducted Itu Thakur in water before sunset, sealing the Solar-Water consummation allusion of Varuna (the guardian-deity of the cardinal direction West) swallowing Mitra (perhaps a phallic-oral intercourse symbology).

Mitra and Varuna are at times virtually indistinguishable, and they are often referred to as *Mitravaruna*, a single word. Their bond was so great that it was used to sanction and testify any important relation. Mitra and Varuna came to be metonyms for any synergistic dichotomy and assumed an idiomatic status similar to, if not more intense than “David and Jonathan”. This is the sheer amount of connotational baggage, or dare I say heritage, that the commonly used Hindi word for friend carries.

For someone still skeptical of the etymological claim, or for one who incurred a cultural shock and would shake their head in dogged defiance or disbelief after reading this, or just for the sake of a curious explorer, additional bibliographical references have been furnished [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#).

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