

NPTEL
Nation and Narration

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Transcript from the Video

Hello everyone,

Continuing our exploration of the effects of colonialism on Indian society, we observe how various elements that were considered commonplace underwent significant transformations during this era. We have previously examined alterations in household interiors and the shift towards more romantic and companionate relationships between spouses. In this lecture, we will investigate the evolution of the concept of friendship during the colonial period. In this lecture, we will be exploring the section on friendship in Sudipta Kaviraj's renowned book *Inventing the Private*, where he examines the autobiography of Sibnath Sastry. The notion of friendship underwent a radical redefinition in colonial due to a variety of socio-political transformations caused by colonial modernity. The advent of Western education, emergence of new political structures, the rise of print culture, and changing ideas of individuality and community, etc. contributed to radically reshaping the meaning and function of friendship in literature, politics, and everyday life. In pre-colonial India, relationships were primarily formed around notions like caste, kinship, and religious affiliations. Colonial modernity introduced a more individualistic notion of friendship, influenced by Western liberal principles. Friendships, especially among the educated elite, started transcending traditional structures of caste and religious barriers, thereby developing a new sense of solidarity and intellectual companionship. Before we come to our discussion of the new mode of friendship, let us take a look at the nature of the older forms of friendship that used to exist here.

Friendship was different in the past than it is now. People lived in close-knit communities and joint families. They lived in a small, constrained world. The majority of their friendships were made within their family, class, or caste. People frequently made friends with neighbors, family members, or members of their own neighborhood. Social life was significantly shaped by caste. Typically, members of one caste did not interact with others very often. Caste even determined occupations. For instance, children of farmers typically became farmers, and children of carpenters typically became carpenters. This implied that people from the same background lived and worked together. Within that group, of course, friendships were formed as well. Likewise, the majority of friendships were between individuals of the same sex. Additionally, there was little interaction between boys and girls. There were very few opportunities for young people to interact with people outside of their social circle. Because of all of this, friendships were scarce in the past. The freedom to select friends was limited. People only grew close to people who were close to them and who looked like them. This means that the boundaries of friendship were always determined by caste, gender and class. What this clearly shows is that the social circumstances were not really congenial for people to select friends from diverse backgrounds. They mostly made friends with people who shared their gender, caste, or class. There were few personal options and rigid social norms.

The way people formed friendships started to shift during the colonial era. In the past, friendships were typically restricted to one's own gender, caste, or class. But with time, new spaces began to open up. Education brought about one of the most significant changes. The

British established universities, colleges, and schools that were accessible to all communities. These locations evolved into secular gathering spots for members of various castes and social classes. Before this period, education was primarily associated with caste. Usually, a person's birth determined their occupation. For instance, it was assumed that a child born into a family of carpenters would grow up to be one as well. They remained in their own group and learned the trade from family members. However, this gradually started to change during the colonial era.

As modern education spread, students from various backgrounds began to interact in classrooms. It was now possible for a boy from a carpenter's family to sit next to a trader or a farmer. They spent time together in libraries and hostels, played the same games, and studied the same books. They were able to build relationships that went beyond caste and class thanks to these common experiences. This change was significant. Meeting someone outside of one's social circle was extremely rare in the past. However, they now started to comprehend one another better in schools and universities. Friendships were no longer solely founded on occupation, family, or place of birth. Even though not everyone had access to these secular spaces, these areas represented a radical shift in the notion of friendship. Gradually, the concept of friendship started to transcend boundaries. It marked the start of a new social life in which friends could be chosen not only by caste or class but also by common interests.

Institutions such as Presidency College in Calcutta, Elphinstone College in Bombay, and later institutions in Madras and Lahore brought together young men (and later women) from diverse backgrounds with a common curriculum that emphasized logical inquiry and critical thinking.

Students developed strong bonds in these settings, which were frequently expressed using highly emotional language. These friendships, which were fostered in dorms, libraries, and debate groups, gave rise to new subjectivities—young people who started defining themselves not only by caste or family but also by their common goals, values, and interests. Simultaneously, print culture was essential in reflecting and forming these new friendship ideals. Novels, autobiographies, journals, and periodicals all evolved into platforms for examining the political potential and emotional tone of friendship. For example, the Bengali novel emerged as a significant platform for rethinking relationships outside of conventional parameters. In order to subtly challenge social norms, writers like Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay and later Rabindranath Tagore frequently depicted friendships involving characters from various castes or religious backgrounds. Similarly, an emerging emotional vocabulary of respect, trust, affection, and loyalty that marked friendships as essential to moral and political change can be traced in autobiographical writings and letters, such as those of Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Mahadev Govind Ranade, or Pandita Ramabai. As a result, friendship in colonial India was a dynamic cultural and political form rather than just a personal emotional connection. It enabled people to express disapproval, envision different kinds of community, and challenge established norms. In this way, friendship—while still bearing the emotional burden of intense personal connection—was essential to the development of a contemporary Indian public sphere.

At the same time, print culture played a big role in shaping these new ideas of friendship. At the same time, these new notions of friendship were greatly influenced by print culture. People were able to investigate the concept of friendship in politics and society through books, journals, autobiographies, and periodicals. For instance, the Bengali novel emerged as a significant framework for considering relationships beyond conventional bounds. Authors such as Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay and Rabindranath Tagore used their stories to illustrate how people from different castes or religions can be friends. This questioned

long-standing social conventions.

Additionally, the autobiographies and letters of leaders such as Mahadev Govind Ranade, Pandita Ramabai, and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar began to use an emotional language of loyalty, respect, and trust. They believed that friendship was crucial to bringing about political and moral change. In colonial India, friendship thus evolved beyond a simple personal connection. It was a potent means of voicing disapproval of long-standing social mores, establishing new kinds of communities, and considering how society ought to evolve. Although friendship still held great personal significance, it was also crucial to the development of the contemporary Indian public sphere.

During the colonial era, the nationalist movement also played a significant role in uniting people from various backgrounds. Social and political life were significantly shaped by the emergence of nationalist and reformist groups, in addition to the expansion of education. As they gained prominence, organizations like the Indian National Congress, the Brahmo Samaj, the Arya Samaj, and other student movements frequently depended on the ability of friendships and other emotional bonds to bring people from diverse backgrounds together. Friendships played a crucial role in these organizations by connecting people who might not have otherwise crossed paths. Caste, class, and even religion were all social barriers that were bridged by the concept of friendship. Nationalist leaders realized that in order to combat colonial rule, various groups needed to stand together. This unity was reinforced by friendships founded on common political objectives. These connections were founded on a shared vision for an independent and free India rather than on familial or caste-based ties. The inflexible caste and communal identities that were frequently emphasized in the colonial public sphere were contrasted with friendship. The nationalist movement aimed to envision a new collective identity, whereas the British colonial system used caste and religious division to keep people under control. This identity was based on shared political and ethical beliefs among individuals from various backgrounds, rather than blood or birth. In this sense, friendship served as a potent instrument for social and political change in addition to being a personal connection. Through these friendships, people united to oppose the colonial system and strive toward a future based on justice and equality. The nationalist movement demonstrated how friendship, regardless of its personal connotations, could be crucial in forming India's new collective identity.

One can clearly identify a whole lot such famous examples in this regard, some of the most famous ones being the friendship between Tagore and C.F. Andrews. It was a friendship based on intellectual and philosophical affinity, crossing national and racial boundaries. Similarly, the friendship between Gandhi and Nehru which was not defined by caste or regional identity, but by a shared vision for India's future, even though they often had ideological differences. This powerful shift from identity-based to affinity-based friendships redefined personal and political relationships in colonial India, laying the foundation for modern ideas of solidarity and intellectual companionship.

This does not mean that traditional friendships were completely abandoned during the colonial era. Friendships based on caste, kinship, and community continued to exist, especially in rural and semi-urban areas of India where colonial modernity did not equally permeate. In reality, social hierarchies often remained deeply ingrained, even among the elite with Western education, and friendships did often reflect prevailing structures of privilege and exclusion. For example, although many upper caste reformers promoted equality and fraternity, their social networks were often restricted to caste or class members. Additionally, the rhetoric of universal friendship—which was shaped by liberal or Romantic ideals—was sometimes aspirational rather than completely attainable.

Strong social opposition was often encountered when friendships attempted to cross caste or religious boundaries.

Such friendships have been known to cause public censure or even disapproval from family members, particularly when they overtly questioned hierarchies. This implies that while new friendships were significant, they were neither absolute nor unchallenged. Literary works that romanticize egalitarian friendship while subtly reiterating gender or caste norms also exhibit a conflict between the old and the new. As a result, the colonial era should not be seen as a period of total disruption but rather as a period of complex negotiation where traditional and modern friendships overlapped, coexisted, and occasionally clashed. The idea of friendship expanded, but it did so in a culture that was still greatly impacted by historical injustices.

But that said, we should admit that a newer form of friendship also came into being with the arrival of modernity, surpassing traditional family bonds. Under the western influence, the young people felt that that family ties alone were insufficient, as they ventured out into newer professions outside the traditional occupations. Sibnath Sastry's autobiography provides us with a vivid illustration of this transition. Intimate family ties appear noticeably lacking in the autobiography, with friendships taking center stage. These friendships, which are based on shared values and interests, frequently started during college or while living together. It's remarkable that these friendships, which were sparked by youthful enthusiasm, persisted even after these people achieved success in their careers. The idea that even those who succeeded financially in this changing modernity continued to help their less fortunate friends is further supported by this cultural shift.

It's amazing that these friendships, which were forged by youthful zeal, lasted after these individuals succeeded professionally. This cultural change further supports the notion that even those who were financially successful in this evolving modernity continued to assist their less fortunate friends.

Modern changes brought two big shifts in how people made friends and what friendship meant in society. First, there were more options for people to choose from, when it came to friendships. In the past, they were primarily limited to friendships with members of their own caste or family. Even though there were still some restrictions, the pool of potential friends during the colonial period significantly grew. Second, as social and familial ties began to shift, friendship itself gained significance in people's lives.

Bengal's traditional order was severely upended by the arrival of contemporary social changes. The urban upper class, who lived in a new professional environment, was the main group affected by this shift. People like Bhudev Mukhopadhyay, who worked as doctors or school inspectors, could be assigned to distant parts of the empire, and Bengalis in particular held many administrative positions. Their frequent moving significantly affected people's social connections. They felt the need to look for new social circles in strange places as they grew less connected to their immediate families and kin.

People in similar positions and with similar views on social norms became close friends of modern professionals. Not only because of their overt beliefs, but also because they provided a framework for social interaction, organizations such as the Brahmos were instrumental in supplying this much-needed social support. Because they disapproved of traditional Hindu practices, the Brahmos in particular aimed to create new domestic standards. In this sense, the standardization of appropriate behavior in the home was greatly aided by individuals such as Sastri and his work on *Grhadharma* (domestic conduct). These new friendships were extremely helpful in Sastri's own life, particularly when his family failed to support him and he began to rely more and more on his friends.

Early on, Sastri's friends were mostly his college pals and Calcutta students who shared rented homes with servants and common areas. There are touching instances of Sastri helping people in need, such as when he urged a friend to wed a widow. Their youthful zeal subsided as they grew older, but their strong friendships persisted. The majority of these friends, who were formed in college or through a mutual passion for Brahmo reform, went on to achieve success in their careers. This was because it was difficult to fail once a person was enrolled in the contemporary educational system during the colonial era.

This led to a certain amount of financial and ideological homogeneity within their social group. As demonstrated by the life of poet Michael Madhusudan Dutt, who encountered numerous challenges, it is evident that friends who were wealthier frequently provided support to those who were less fortunate. Sastri had a special relationship with his friends because, despite the fact that his wealthy friends occasionally provided for his necessities, he was a religious preacher and therefore morally superior.

What stands out in his autobiography is the complete absence of close relationships with his family and the overwhelming presence of his friendships. This highlights the social potential for a new kind of life for reformed Hindus, one characterized by intense social connections outside of the traditional family circle. There's a theoretical underpinning to this shift, influenced by contemporary Western ideas. These new individuals essentially argue that relying solely on traditional family and kinship for social connections is morally unjustifiable once they embrace individual differentiation. Even close relatives, like siblings, may not share the same temperament, intellectual interests, or adapt to the changing occupational landscape brought about by economic modernity. In contrast, friendships are formed based on shared temperaments and intellectual inclinations, making them more intense and reliable. It becomes evident that, in the lives of socially upper-class Bengalis, friendships become more significant over time than the bonds of kinship. On the other hand, friendships are more dependable and intense since they are built on common intellectual interests and temperaments. It becomes clear that friendships eventually take precedence over familial ties in the lives of socially mobile upper-class Bengalis.

The nature of friendship—its diverse manifestations and complex dynamics—is a recurring theme in literary works, particularly in the novels of writers like Saratchandra Chattopadhyay and Tagore. In these stories, close friendships are crucial, and in some amazing cases, intellectual ties persist in the face of intense disagreement. The relationship between characters Binoy and Gora in Tagore's novel "Gora," both in terms of their personalities and intellectual arguments, is one example of a story that even suggests complementarity. Friendships became more important to people than traditional family ties. After they started to see themselves as individuals, Western thinking led many people to believe that traditional family-based relationships were not always the best. Many autobiographies show this shift, with authors writing more about their friends than their families. College or shared housing were common places for friendships to start. In the beginning, these friendships were frequently very strong and were based on common interests. Many of these friendships persisted even after they found employment and advanced in life.

Many of these friends became successful professionals because modern education gave them new chances. Some even helped their less well-off friends by sending them money or offering support. Sastry's autobiography shows that for many educated and upwardly mobile Bengalis, friendships slowly became more important than family ties. Over time, friendship took a central place in their social lives.

Men's and women's friendships also started to shift during this period. It began to cast doubt on long-held beliefs and introduced fresh perspectives on intellectual and emotional connection. However, this shift was not simple. Society was still full of uncertainties and fears. The majority of people's perceptions of male-female relationships were based on marriage or family. As a result, friendships between men and women were frequently regarded with suspicion. Women did not have the same freedom to make friends outside of their caste or social group as men did. Women were still not given the same freedom to make friends, despite new concepts and contemporary advancements. A lot of people thought that men and women couldn't be "just friends." Others frequently believed that a close relationship between a man and a woman would result in marriage or that it was improper. Although it was possible for men and women to work or study together, it was difficult to accept close friendship on an equal footing. People were concerned about morality and rightness. Strong gender norms shaped these friendships. However, the concept of friendship between men and women was not entirely novel. It frequently occurred in familial roles, such as those between a teacher and student or a brother and sister. Such friendships were more socially acceptable because of these roles.

However, we must also keep in mind that some educated, modern, upper-class young men made an effort to integrate their wives into their intellectual and social circles. Tagore's book *Home and the World* serves as a good illustration of this. In the narrative, a strong nationalist leader named Sandip is introduced to his wife Bimala by Nikhilesh, a modern and tolerant landlord. Nikhilesh supports political consciousness, education, and women's rights. He wants Bimala to participate in public and political discourse and leave the confines of the house. This demonstrates how some reform-minded men of the colonial era desired that women be regarded as more than just wives and mothers, but as unique people with their own opinions.

But this attempt to establish trust and friendship results in unforeseen issues. Charming but self-centered, Sandip takes advantage of his friendship with Bimala to achieve his goals. Bimala finds herself torn between Sandip's passion and her husband's ideals. She eventually realizes that Sandip has taken advantage of her for his own ends. The narrative demonstrates that although integrating women into intellectual life was a positive step, there were risks involved. It implies that male-female friendships, particularly those that take place in the home, may become complex and even detrimental to family life.

When it comes to the idea of friendship, Jnanadanandini Devi was an important figure in Bengal's social and cultural life during the late 1800s and early 1900s. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Jnanadanandini Devi (1850–1941) played a significant role in Bengali social and cultural life. She was Rabindranath Tagore's sister-in-law and the wife of Satyendranath Tagore, the first Indian to enter the Indian Civil Service. The way upper-caste Bengali women, known as *bhadramahilas*, lived and participated in society was altered in part by Jnanadanandini Devi. She took a very daring and novel step at a time when the majority of women remained behind the *purdah*, a system that kept them out of the public eye. She began holding parties at her house where men and women could meet and discuss literature, philosophy, and society.

She was influenced by what she had observed in Bombay and England, where people gathered in drawing rooms to converse and exchange ideas. Many of the writers, intellectuals, and social reformers who visited her home were members of the Bengal Renaissance and the Brahmo Samaj. New ideas about gender, friendship, and public life were made possible by

Jnanadanandini Devi, who helped challenge established norms by establishing a forum for men and women to speak freely as equals.