

## **Culture of Friendship- A Philosophical Study in Indian Tradition**

Dr. Kamala Srinivas

Associate Professor, Department of Philosophy

SIES College of Arts, Science & Commerce (Empowered Autonomous), Mumbai

[kamalas@sies.edu.in](mailto:kamalas@sies.edu.in)

### **ABSTRACT**

The main focus is that we need a culture of friendship based on love. Indeed, culture and friendship merge solidly to exemplify a sense of life to every human person and to every society. And ‘Indians are among the world’s fastest in making friends, and on an average have six best friends,’ is stated in The Friendship Report 2019 based on a global survey of how culture, age, and technology shape preferences. On the one hand, this proposition is a fact, because the more people develop a culture centered on friendship, the happier they are. On the other hand, it is also a duty: we all have to fully engage ourselves to build a culture of friendship, based on friendship to love. One can trace the vocabulary and its use in the *Rig Veda*, where the seers referred to friendship as *maitri*, *sauharda* and *sakhya*, and those involved are called *mitra*, *suhrd* and *sakha*; sometimes used interchangeably in form and other times used to describe different levels of it. It has both an intrinsic and an instrumental value to sustain the family, the clan, and the wider society. It also cultivates and nurtures important virtues such as loyalty, mutual concern, and altruism to experience joy and happiness in life. The aim is to examine the classical Indian discussion on friendship as it is suggested as moral and emotional conflict with the highest ideal of non-attachment (*aparigraha*) and selfsufficiency (*anasakti*). Many cultures value friendship as highly as the Indian, apart from being valuable such an exercise suggests and indicate too much of contemporary India’s social and political life to claim *samdarshi* (equanimity).

**Keywords:** *culture, friendship, maitri, sauharda, sakhya, mitra, suhrd, sakha, aparigraha, anasakti and samdarshi.*

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### **Introduction**

India is a rich, multifaceted, and age-old tradition that is historically situated, constituted by the values, beliefs, symbols and many other humanly created relics that has been continuously transmitted across generations through the Vedas, the Puranas, the Shastras, the epics, the folklores and myriads of languages. In this sense, Indian spiritual tradition reflects the value seeking process of human life and implicates a particular worldview of interpersonal relationships. As a result, both philosophy and human life are intimately related because the ontology of personhood is asserted in Indian culture. In the words of Dr. S. Radhakrishnan,

“God lives, feels and suffers in every one of us, and in course of time, His attributes, knowledge, beauty and love will be revealed in each of us.”

## Culture

Culture is derived from the Latin term ‘*cult* or *cultus*’ meaning tilling or cultivating or refining. In addition, it means cultivating and refining a thing to such an extent that its end product evokes our admiration and respect. In India, this is practically the same as suggested by the term ‘*Sanskriti*.’ Culture is a way of life based on certain *samskara*. The term *samskara* is composed of two Sanskrit root words, the one precedes as *sam*, means "well planned" or "well thought out." Followed by *kara*, meaning "the action undertaken." Therefore, *samskaras* refer to the subtle mental impressions caused by every thought, intention, and action an individual experiences. For instance, the food we eat, the clothes we wear, the language we speak in, the personal-professional relationship we build and the faith that one follows all are aspects of both *samskara* and *sanskriti*. Culture refers to the patterns of thought and behaviour of people. It expresses itself through social habits, customs, economic organizations, interpersonal relationships, and political institutions. Every generation engages within a culture by formal as well as informal processes. According to Buddhist teachings, “mind precedes all mental states... if with an impure mind a person speaks or acts’, suffering follows...” For instance, if someone is feeling resentful towards another person, one’s action towards that person may be influenced by those negative emotions, resulting in unkind behaviour or words. In short, we can say that culture is the embodiment of the way in which we think and do things. It is also the things that we have inherited as members of society. Indian culture is a treasured possession of our society. According to Indologists, Indian culture stands not only for a traditional social code but also for a spiritual foundation of life. Culture is the soul of a nation. Based on culture, we experience the prosperity of its past and present. It is a collection of values of human life.

The main characteristic of Indian Tradition on reality and human functioning is rooted in both the spiritual as well as the natural worlds. The former Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru has very appropriately stated that “Culture is the widening of the mind and of the spirit” (Narasimhachar, 1967:190). The conceptual analyses pertaining to personal-existential concern emphasize contextualized relationships depending upon time, place, and person. Such an understanding puts forth a socially embedded and relational concept of a person. This plays a crucial role in defining and expressing the identities of different human relationships, as in,

with family, other adult family members, with siblings and relationships beyond family, such as in friendship.

## Friendship

A composite meaning of 'friendship' in philosophy is given as, "a distinctively personal relationship that is grounded in a concern on the part of each friend for the welfare of the other, for the other's sake, and that involves some degree of intimacy" (Helmm, 2017). Each and every one of us has our reasons for friendships. Friendships are based on an individual's free will to choose whom they want to initiate a friendship with. As per an old saying that is commonly known, "You can't choose your family, but you can choose your friends." Friendships have five essential characteristics that make them unique from other forms of interpersonal relationships, they are voluntary, personal, equality, involvement, and emotional connect. From the above understanding it is suggested that all friendships are essentially voluntary. Voluntariness works both ways - sometimes we meet some people and never end up in friendship with them. Sometimes it's because we are not interested, or the other person is not interested. We also choose to end some friendships when they are unhealthy or no longer serve a specific purpose within our lives. Hence, culture or *sanskriti* is both a result of human action as well as a determinant of human action. In short, a composite of meanings, plurality of forms and multiplicity of perspectives encompasses India's intellectual history, religious teachings and spiritual wisdom as a comprehensive knowledge, enough to refer and to attain our current ideas of friendship.

First, how are friendships formed? It is important to know what brings two individuals to come together. In the Hitopadesha, Verse 1.72 states that,

|| *na kaścit kasyacin mitram na kaścit kasyacid ripuḥ | kāraṇād eva jāyante mitrāṇi ripavastathā vyavahāreṇa jāyante mitrāṇi ripavastathā* ||

No one is a natural friend or a natural enemy, it is through some cause or need alone that one becomes a friend and another an enemy. It is through behaviour alone that enmity and friendship are formed. So, the situation brings two individuals together to identify themselves as friends or not. The bond of friendship is often formed through shared experiences, mutual respect, trust, and genuine care for one another. Common interests, values, and a sense of understanding also play a significant role in creating and sustaining friendships. Additionally,

empathy, support, and the ability to communicate openly and honestly contribute to the strength of a friendship.

Second, further in the Hitopadesha Verse 1.198 a reference to the definition of the term for friend “*mitra*” is found —

|| śoka trāṇaṃ bhaya trāṇaṃ prīti viśvāsa bhājanam | kena ratnam idam mitram jātyakṣara dvayam ||

The two-syllable *mi-tram* signifies solace in sorrow, freedom from fear, and it is the vessel of love and confidence, by whom this precious jewel of friendship was created.

Third, is the characteristics of friendship –

The threefold character of friendship is (1) to curtail one from what is unbeneficial, (2) to inspire one in what is valuable and (3) to stand by one in adversity.

As a result, a friend is one who walks in when the rest of the world walks out. Friendship is one of the most sacred things present in human relationships.

In the Rig Veda, every *deva* (deity) is praised and worshiped as a friend. Deities are mutual friends of one another. In turn, the worshipper is also referred to as a friend of the deity. Every person following the *vaidika* dharma is a friend. In other words, if you have positive vibes all around you, you can very well claim to have a divine friendship. Both Vedas and Upanishads state about importance of good friends’ circle and also it states about importance of having friends.

It speaks of if a person -

keep the company of scholars, then one is enlightened.

keep the company of criminals, then one learns their habit.

keep the company of fools, then one becomes fool.

One can trace the vocabulary in the hymns composed by the great seers, which refers to friendship as *maitri*, *sauharda* and *sakhya*, and those involved are called *mitra*, *suhrd* and *sakha*; sometimes used interchangeably in form and other times used to describe different levels of it.

To consider some of the verses as mentioned in the Rig Veda are:

1. Indra praised as a friend (*sakha*) of the worshiper, ease of access and giver of Prosperity. यो रायोऽवनिर्महान्सुपाः सुन्वतः सखा । तस्मा इन्द्राय गायत ॥ (RV 1.4.10)

2. Vishnu is called the inseparable friend (*mitra*) of Indra.

नवष्ोः कर्ामनि पश्यत यतो व्रतानि पस्पशे । इन्द्रस्य युज्यः सखा ॥ (RV 1.22.19)

3. Agni is praised as the best father, best relative, best friend who never holds back from doing what is in our best interest. आ नह ष्मा सूिवे नपतानपयमजत्यापये । सखा सख्ये वरेण्यः ॥ (RV 1.26.3)

4. Soma is praised as a friend (*suhrd*) under whose protection the worshiper never comes to harm.

त्वं िः सोर् नवश्वतो रक्षा राजन्नघायतः । ि ररष्येत् त्वावतः सखा ॥ (RV 1.91.8)

So, friends have both an intrinsic and an instrumental value to sustain the family, the clan, and the wider society.

The Mahabharata Udyoga Parva chapter 45 verse 12 gives the six indication of friendship –

॥ *sauhr̥de vai ṣaḍ guṇā veditavyāḥ priye hr̥ṣyantya priye ca vyathante | syād ātmanaḥ suciraṃ yācate yo dadātyayācyamapi deyaṃ khalu syāt | iṣṭān putrān vibhavān svāṃśca dārānabhyarthitaścārhati śuddha-bhāvaḥ || tyakta dravyaḥ samvasenneha kāmād bhun̄kte karma svāśiṣaṃ bād̄hate ||*

They are:

1. friends delight in the prosperity of friends, and
2. friends are distressed at their adversity.
3. If anyone asks for anything which is dear to his heart, but which should not be asked for, a true friend surely gives away even that.
4. A true friend who is of a righteous disposition, when asked, can give away his very prosperity, his beloved children, and even his own spouse. (Figuratively not literally !!!)
5. A friend should not dwell in the house of a friend, on whom he may have bestowed everything, but should enjoy what he earns himself.
6. A friend does not hesitate to sacrifice his own good for his friend.

Chanakya, the ancient Indian philosopher, economist, and strategist, in his timeless treatise known as Chanakya Niti, delves on some of the profound insights about friendship and why it

is essential to observe the quality of one's friendships. In Verse 1.12, Chanakya recognized the immense value of friendship and dedicated a significant portion of his teachings to it. It states that,

|| *ātūre vyasane prāpte, dur-bhikṣe śatru-saṅkate rājā-dvāre śmaśāne ca yas tiṣṭhati sa bāndhavaḥ* ||

A true friend is one who stands by, in sickness, in misfortune, in famine and when threatened. For him, friendship is a cornerstone of human existence. It shapes our experiences, influences our decisions, and provides solace in times of need. Chanakya's teachings on friendship are a reminder of the profound impact our friends have on our lives. Cultivating true friendship is a lifelong journey worth embarking upon. Hence, Chanakya Niti imparts invaluable lessons on the significance of genuine friendships and reminds us that associating with virtuous friends can lead not only to personal growth but also to nation's socio-political accomplishments. As per our scriptures friendship has been something beyond connecting with other people, it has always been stories of sacrifice, love, and unselfishness.

In addition to this, our understanding of friendship is derived from many regional languages in India, each with its own word used to refer to friends as *dost*, *bondhu*, *nanbargal*, *snehitulu*, *suhrttukkal*, *mitra*, *mitro* are just a few to mention. We describe India as a land of diversity, spirituality, and cultural wealth. It's also known for its ancient history with a deep sense of community living accommodating learners, seekers, traders, invaders across the globe who benefited from all the richness in knowledge this land had to offer, in return they all valuably added to her glory a wide spectrum of pieces of work in the fields of art, literature, philosophy and science throughout the ages.

Thus, India's *sanskriti* or culture underlies in the fact that with its customs, norms, values, and attitude that govern relationship between friends within a community; it also includes cultural attitude based on loyalty, trust, honesty, and reciprocity in relationships. Our *sanskriti* gives priority to collective living, hospitality, and camaraderie. Various cultural practices, festivals, and traditions foster social connections and strengthen friendships. India's unique approach to friendship, rooted in its cultural and ancient historical background, contributes to its vibrant social fabric, and enriches interpersonal connections within and across its boundaries. Its emphasis on friendship plays a significant role in enhancing the quality of life for its people.

The research article is a study of all these composite meanings as found in the Indian philosophical traditions to put forth the understanding of ‘culture of friendship.’

### **Culture of Friendship**

As per an Indian proverb, “in prosperity, our friends know us; in adversity, we know our friends.” A culture of friendship reflects the social dynamics of warmth, generosity, and friends considered as an extended family. It also cultivates and nurtures important virtues such as trustworthiness, mutual concern, and altruism to experience joy and happiness in life. Interestingly, Bhikhu Parekh in his book titled “Friendship in Classical Indian Thought” (2008) writes, “Friendship is a unique and complex form of human relationship” (Parekh, 2008:153). Its diverse nature evolves over time and is influenced by various factors such as personality, interests, and life circumstances.

*“Sakhaa naam kaha kautuhalam”*

This Sanskrit phrase is translated as “where is the curiosity about friends’ names?” It emphasizes the idea that true friendship goes beyond mere curiosity about names or superficial details. Friendship can take various forms depending on the dynamics and depth of the relationship. Some common forms of friendship include:

1. Casual Friendship: Cool and informal relationships where people enjoy each other’s company occasionally without much emotional burden.
2. Close Friendship: Intimate relationships characterized by trust, loyalty, and shared experiences. Close friends confide in each other and offer support through both good and bad times.
3. Long-Distance Friendship: Friendships where individuals maintain a close bond despite physical distance. They often communicate through technology or occasional visits.
4. Professional Friendship: Relationships formed in the workplace or professional settings based on mutual respect, collaboration, and shared goals.
5. Childhood Friendship: Bonds formed during childhood or adolescence, often based on shared interests, proximity, or mutual experiences.
6. Acquaintanceship: Casual relationships with people one knows but doesn’t necessarily consider close friends. Interactions are usually limited to specific contexts or social gatherings

7. Supportive Friendship: Relationships where friends provide emotional, practical, or financial support to each other during challenging times.
8. Historical Friendship: Lifelong connections with friends who have been part of one's life for many years, often spanning different life stages and experiences.
9. One-Sided Friendship: Imbalanced relationships where one person invests more time, effort, or emotional energy than the other, leading to feelings of frustration or disappointment.
10. Online Friendship: Connections formed through social media, online communities, or gaming platforms, where individuals interact and develop friendships virtually.

Beginning in early childhood, most of us establish casual friendships with peers who share common interests, as we may have studied in the same class in school, lived in the same neighbourhood, or met during the playtime in a park or play areas in gateway societies. Such friendships are maintained by enriching positive experiences, sometimes developing into much stronger social ties. The Panchatantra and Jataka tales mention several stories about friendship and wisdom. Quality should always take precedence over quantity when it comes to friends. Our friends significantly influence our thoughts, actions and guide us in building enriching and enduring relationships. The Panchatantra story on "The Four Friends and The Hunter," is about the friendship between a tortoise a deer, a crow and a mouse carries an important lesson on why we should stand by our friends and depicts why good friends are important. "The Wind and The Moon," another from the Jataka Tale deals with friendship between a lion and a tiger, they met when they were too young and lived together in the shade of a rock. For some unknown reason, one day the two friends got into a silly argument. The tiger said, "Everyone knows the cold comes when the moon wanes from full to new!" The lion said, "Where did you hear such nonsense? Everyone knows the cold comes when the moon waxes from new to full!" Neither could convince the other. They could not reach any conclusion to resolve the growing dispute. They even started calling each other names! Fearing for their friendship, they decided to go ask the learned forest monk, who would surely know about such things. The monk thought for a while and replied. "It can be cold in any phase of the moon, from new to full and back to new again. It is the wind that brings the cold, whether from west or north or east. Therefore, in a way, you both are right! And neither of you is defeated by the other. The most important thing is to live without conflict, to remain united. Unity is best by all means." This shows that friendship is more important than minor arguments.



While there are many characters mentioned in the scriptures - Ramayana and Mahabharata exemplifying friendship and setting the highest standards and examples, conveying to us what does it mean to be a good friend? The most compelling story from our scriptures on friendship we always think about is the relationship between Ram and Sugriva, Ram and Guha, Krishna and Sudhama, Krishna and Arjuna, Krishna and Draupadi, Karna & Duryodhana.

### **Rama and Sugriva – “The essence of friendship is Help”**

In the eighth Parva of Kishkinda Kanda, the common bond of friendship between the two who were facing similar challenges in their lives at that time was securing each other. While Sugriva gave the example of his own never-say-die spirit to uplift bereaved Rama's spirits, finding comfort in his words, Rama regained his composure. He was thankful for the friendship, and he clearly saw that it was impossible to find such a dependable and capable friend in such tough times. On his part, Rama assured Sugriva that he will do what it takes to help Sugriva win back his wife as well as kingdom which were sieged by his enemy brother Vali. The two friends thus reassured each other of their unflinching support in accomplishing the tasks of each other and rejoiced in that moment.

### **Krishna and Sudhama – “The depth of Divine companionship”**

Krishna and Sudhama studied under the guru. Sandeepani, Ujjain. After their education is completed, both parted their ways. Krishna became the king of Mathura whereas Sudhama was a poor man struggling to feed his family. Once Sudhama decided to meet Krishna and went to Dwaraka. Initially, he was hesitating to meet Krishna thinking whether Krishna would recognize him or not. When Krishna saw Sudhama, he welcomed him grandly. Sudhama was hesitating to offer the small quantity of poha that he brought with him. Krishna observed this and accepted the poha and blessed Sudhama with extreme wealth.

### **Krishna and Arjuna – “Friends as Soulmates for a lifetime”**

No other friendship from our ancient past was as celebrated as the friendship as theirs. The portrait of them in a single chariot has been etched firmly in people's memory since generations. They are winners in any situation. They exhibited how to live life with happiness, not brooding over difficulties. They challenged the challenges thrown at them by destiny and triumphed most of the time. Vedavyasa offered many instances that depict the unparalleled

bonding between the awesome twosomes. We have in abundance, in every Parva, the fascinating bonding or association these two had while moving ahead with their lives exemplifying their deep friendship. In short, the two, whenever they come together, breathe fresh air given any grave situation. They weave magic indeed into the otherwise traumatic parts of the epic. Krishna-Arjuna's friendship is that of ultimate bliss.

### **Krishna and Draupadi – “The importance of Reciprocity in friendship”**

Krishna and Draupadi were best friends. Krishna called her '*sakhi*' and she called him '*sakha*.' They were always there for each other. Their mutual love and respect for each other became an extraordinary example of selfless friendship and unconditional giving, making it memorable for decades and centuries. They shared their hopes, fears, and dreams together. They shared a beautiful platonic bond by caring about each other and supporting each other unconditionally.

### **Karna and Duryodhana – “Trust, the core of friendship”**

The story of Duryodhana and Karna friendship in the Mahabharata demonstrate how shared experiences can empower and uplift not only the individual but also those who are on a similar journey. While we sometimes feel alone in our struggles, dreams, or joys, those who have walked a similar path often want to offer their support and friendship. By sharing our experiences, we can break down the walls of isolation and create bridges of connection. It only takes one shared experience to open the doors to friendship and understanding.

Nevertheless, the narrative conveniently overlooks Karna's evil acts under influence, the influence of friendship with Duryodhana. That Karna could do anything for a friend, go to any extent for his friend's pleasure, is an oft-referred story. Karna-Duryodhana's celebrated friendship is viewed with benevolent sympathy and even admiration. But does their friendship merit any acceptance at all? Does true friendship entail throw discretion to winds? And doing anything for the other? Is that not an evil collusion, rather than friendship? What exactly then is real and true friendship?

Dr. Kristin Bledsoe a leadership educator at Trevecca Nazarene University in Nashville, Tennessee, U.S.A., states with regard to culture and community both together can develop emotionally intelligent teamwork in the next generation-

if we can strengthen relationships through shared experiences, we can build a better community. It's possible to foster communities where individuals share their experiences, struggles, and triumphs. Whether through support groups, online forums, or local meetups, providing a space for people to connect and share their stories can be immensely helpful. We can also collaborate with others with shared experiences to advocate for change and raise awareness about important social issues.

Thus, shared experiences become a powerful tool for inspiring empathy, mobilizing communities, and effecting positive societal transformations.

## Conclusion

The Indian cultural perspective on friendship emphasizes the transient nature of relationships, the value of detachment and virtue, and the significance of ethical conduct. Through the descriptions presented in this paper, we gain insights into how to navigate these intricate aspects of human interactions. Friendship is one such social tie, rooted in our cultural teachings that establishes a “we” and “us” rather than “I” feeling. And also standing by each other through no matter whatever happens with the below mentioned highest ideals that lies within our ‘culture of friendship,’ to promulgate ‘friendship of love. ‘recognizing impermanence (*Parinamavada*), it means in true friendship, one who gives and receives back in huge manifolds. A true friend encourages us to be generous and supportive in our interactions with others. The Sanskrit word ‘*Parinamavada*’ is the teaching that ‘everything is in a constant state of flux’. Indeed, change is the only constant thing we can expect in life. Just as the trees drop their leaves in Autumn so that they may grow new buds in Spring, the day turns to night, the seasons come and go, we too go through changes every moment of every day; so too do our minds experience change continuously. Happiness, joy, and peace are important emotions to feel, yes, but so too is sadness, anger, and loss. To experience only the good stuff is to experience only half of what life has to offer. The culture of friendship transcends towards friendship to love in order to allow us to experience and learn from every aspect of our being, the light and the dark, and to truly live we must not push away the things we don’t want to feel, but allow them to happen, and know that this too shall pass. When we let the moment be what it is without either trying to cling to it, or to push it away, we can really say we’re living in that moment, allowing things to come and go, without the need to possess any of it.

- i. Practicing detachment (*aparigraha*), refers to trustworthy friends, as they are the ones who will provide unconditional support and stand-by one through the highs and lows,

thick and thin times as a pillar of support. *Aparigraha* offers us so much freedom – the freedom to work and do what we love without worrying about the outcome, the freedom to rely less on external and material possessions to bring us happiness, and the freedom to experience everything life has to offer, whatever that may be. Culture of friendship develops this *yama* to one’s life, and strengthens to observe, what happens when one just let go? Each time we enter into a new relationship, in one way experience to nourish a sensation of joy and happiness, whereas on the other hand, there’s often a flash of concern to avoid toxic friendship.

- ii. being self-sufficient (*anasakti*), discusses virtuous friends, will ensure to remind us that associating with such righteous person can lead to personal growth and making conscious choices aligned with values, we can approach friendships and enmities with a profound understanding of their impact on our personal growth and the collective well-being of society.

Ultimately, the Indian traditional and scriptural wisdom encourages us to cultivate compassion, forgiveness, and wisdom, transcending the limitations of ego and fostering harmonious relationships. Many cultures value friendship as highly as the Indian. In a world grappling with unprecedented challenges, our country’s exclusive initiatives such as “Neighbourhood First” policy, “bilateral trade” with United States, “Vaccine Maitri” across the sphere, “Operation Dost” for earthquake relief in Turkey, “Operation Karuna” for cyclone Sitrang in Myanmar, these actions demonstrate India’s commitment to global solidarity, compassion, and crisis response. In recent years India has emerged as a beacon of hope through its steadfast commitment to Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR). The diverse approach of contemporary India’s social and political strategic planning is grounded in the philosophy of *samdarshi* (equanimity). Thus, proving that ‘a friend in need is friend indeed!’ Friendship is an incredibly important part of our lives. To the extent that we value living our life in an intentional, beautiful way that is aligned with our values and our ethics, with our sense of what the universe is and our purpose in being here, friendship can be a venue and a vehicle for spiritual elevation to evaluate, judge and arrive at decision with *samabhava* (equability). In Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, it is stated that, “Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community.” Many of the Indian visionaries such as Rabindranath Tagore, M.K. Gandhi, Sri Aurobindo, Swami Vivekananda, Dr. S. Radhakrishnan have referred to '*Sarvadharmā Samabhava*' as a touch stone for peaceful coexistence of people belonging to a multi-faceted nature, type, age, profession, status and have

firmly emphasized on fearless, cohesive, and collective identity grounded in the ancient wisdom of “*Vasudaiva Kutumbakam*” the world is one family, has exemplified that it is not just a phrase but a guiding principle that shapes its actions and defines its role in the global community.

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