



India - Language, Culture, Customs and Etiquette

Welcome to our guide to India. This is useful for anyone researching Indian culture, customs, values and wanting to understand the people better. You may be going to India on business, for a visit or even hosting Indian colleagues or clients in your own country. Remember this is only a very basic level introduction and is not meant to stereotype all Indian people you may meet!

Facts and Statistics

Location: Southern Asia, bordering Bangladesh 4,053 km, Bhutan 605 km, Burma 1,463 km, China 3,380 km, Nepal 1,690 km, Pakistan 2,912 km

Capital: New Delhi

Climate: varies from tropical monsoon in south to temperate in north

Population: 1,065,070,607 (July 2004 est.)

Ethnic Make-up: Indo-Aryan 72%, Dravidian 25%, Mongoloid and other 3% (2000)

Religions: Hindu 81.3%, Muslim 12%, Christian 2.3%, Sikh 1.9%, other groups including Buddhist, Jain, Parsi 2.5% (2000)

Government: Federal Republic

Languages in India

The different states of India have different official languages, some of them not recognized by the central government. Some states have more than one official language. Bihar in east India has three official languages - Hindi, Urdu and Bengali - which are all recognized by the central government. But Sikkim, also in east India, has four official languages of which only Nepali is recognized by the central government. Besides the languages officially recognized by central or state governments, there are other languages which don't have this recognition and their speakers are running political struggles to get this recognition. Central government decided that Hindi was to be the official language of India and therefore it also has the status of official language in the states.

Indian Society & Culture

Hierarchy

The influences of Hinduism and the tradition of the caste system have created a culture that emphasizes established hierarchical relationships.



Indians are always conscious of social order and their status relative to other people, be they family, friends, or strangers.

All relationships involve hierarchies. In schools, teachers are called gurus and are viewed as the source of all knowledge. The patriarch, usually the father, is considered the leader of the family. The boss is seen as the source of ultimate responsibility in business. Every relationship has a clear-cut hierarchy that must be observed for the social order to be maintained.

The Role of the Family

People typically define themselves by the groups to which they belong rather than by their status as individuals. Someone is deemed to be affiliated to a specific state, region, city, family, career path, religion, etc.

This group orientation stems from the close personal ties Indians maintain with their family, including the extended family.

The extended family creates a myriad of interrelationships, rules, and structures. Along with these mutual obligations comes a deep-rooted trust among relatives.

Just Can't Say No

Indians do not like to express 'no,' be it verbally or non-verbally. Rather than disappoint you, for example, by saying something isn't available, Indians will offer you the response that they think you want to hear.

This behaviour should not be considered dishonest. An Indian would be considered terribly rude if he did not attempt to give a person what had been asked.

Since they do not like to give negative answers, Indians may give an affirmative answer but be deliberately vague about any specific details. This will require you to look for non-verbal cues, such as a reluctance to commit to an actual time for a meeting or an enthusiastic response.

Etiquette and Customs in India



Meeting Etiquette

- Religion, education and social class all influence greetings in India.
- This is a hierarchical culture, so greet the eldest or most senior person first.
- When leaving a group, each person must bid farewell individually.
- Shaking hands is common, especially in the large cities among the more educated who are accustomed to dealing with westerners.
- Men may shake hands with other men and women may shake hands with other women; however there are seldom handshakes between men and women because of religious beliefs.
- If you are uncertain, wait for them to extend their hand.

Naming Conventions

Indian names vary based upon religion, social class, and region of the country. The following are some basic guidelines to understanding the naming conventions, although you will always find exceptions to rules:

Hindus:

- In the north, many people have both a given name and a surname.
- In the south, surnames are less common and a person generally uses the initial of their father's name in front of their own name.
- The man's formal name is their name "s/o" (son of) and the father's name. Women use "d/o" to refer to themselves as the daughter of their father.
- At marriage, women drop their father's name and use their first name with their husband's first name as a sort of surname.

Muslims:

- Many Muslims do not have surnames. Instead, men add the father's name to their own name with the connector 'bin'. So, Abdullah bin Ahmed is Abdullah the son of Ahmad.
- Women use the connector 'binti'.
- The title Hajji (m) or Hajjah (f) before the name indicates the person has made their pilgrimage to Mecca.

Sikhs:

Sikhs all use the name Singh. It is either adopted as a surname or as a connector name to the



surname.

Gift Giving Etiquette

- Indians believe that giving gifts eases the transition into the next life.
- Gifts of cash are given to friends and members of the extended family to celebrate life events such as birth, death and marriage.
- It is not the value of the gift, but the sincerity with which it is given, that is important to the recipient.
- If invited to an Indian's home for a meal, it is not necessary to bring a gift, although one will not be turned down.
- Do not give frangipani or white flowers as they are used at funerals.
- Yellow, green and red are lucky colours, so try to use them to wrap gifts.
- A gift from a man should be said to come from both he and his wife/mother/sister or some other female relative.
- Hindus should not be given gifts made of leather.
- Muslims should not be given gifts made of pigskin or alcoholic products.
- Gifts are not opened when received.

Dining Etiquette

- Indians entertain in their homes, restaurants, private clubs, or other public venues, depending upon the occasion and circumstances.
- Although Indians are not always punctual themselves, they expect foreigners to arrive close to the appointed time.
- Take off your shoes before entering the house.
- Dress modestly and conservatively.
- Politely turn down the first offer of tea, coffee, or snacks. You will be asked again and again. Saying no to the first invitation is part of the protocol.
- There are diverse dietary restrictions in India, and these may affect the foods that are served:
 - Hindus do not eat beef and many are vegetarians.
 - Muslims do not eat pork or drink alcohol.
 - Sikhs do not eat beef.
- Lamb, chicken, and fish are the most commonly served main courses for non-vegetarian meals as they avoid the meat restrictions of the religious groups.



Table manners

Are somewhat formal, but this formality is tempered by the religious beliefs of the various groups.

- Much Indian food is eaten with the fingers.
- Wait to be told where to sit.
- If utensils are used, they are generally a tablespoon and a fork.
- Guests are often served in a particular order: the guest of honour is served first, followed by the men, and the children are served last. Women typically serve the men and eat later.
- You may be asked to wash your hands before and after sitting down to a meal.
- Always use your right hand to eat, whether you are using utensils or your fingers.
- In some situations food may be put on your plate for you, while in other situations you may be allowed to serve yourself from a communal bowl.
- Leaving a small amount of food on your plate indicates that you are satisfied. Finishing all your food means that you are still hungry.
- Business Etiquette and Protocol in India

Relationships & Communication

- Indians prefer to do business with those they know.
- Relationships are built upon mutual trust and respect.
- In general, Indians prefer to have long-standing personal relationships prior to doing business.
- It may be a good idea to go through a third party introduction. This gives you immediate credibility.

Business Meeting Etiquette

- If you will be travelling to India from abroad, it is advisable to make appointments by letter, at least one month and preferably two months in advance.
- It is a good idea to confirm your appointment as they do get cancelled at short notice.
- The best time for a meeting is late morning or early afternoon. Reconfirm your meeting the week before and call again that morning, since it is common for meetings to be cancelled at the last minute.
- Keep your schedule flexible so that it can be adjusted for last minute rescheduling of meetings.



- You should arrive at meetings on time since Indians are impressed with punctuality.
- Meetings will start with a great deal of getting-to-know-you talk. In fact, it is quite possible that no business will be discussed at the first meeting.
- Always send a detailed agenda in advance. Send back-up materials and charts and other data as well. This allows everyone to review and become comfortable with the material prior to the meeting.
- Follow up a meeting with an overview of what was discussed and the next steps.

Business Negotiating

- Indians are non-confrontational. It is rare for them to overtly disagree, although this is beginning to change in the managerial ranks.
- Decisions are reached by the person with the most authority.
- Decision making is a slow process.
- If you lose your temper you lose face and prove you are unworthy of respect and trust.
- Delays are to be expected, especially when dealing with the government.
- Most Indians expect concessions in both price and terms. It is acceptable to expect concessions in return for those you grant.
- Never appear overly legalistic during negotiations. In general, Indians do not trust the legal system and someone's word is sufficient to reach an agreement.
- Do not disagree publicly with members of your negotiating team.
- Successful negotiations are often celebrated by a meal.

Dress Etiquette

- Business attire is conservative.
- Men should wear dark coloured conservative business suits.
- Women should dress conservatively in suits or dresses.
- The weather often determines clothing. In the hotter parts of the country, dress is less formal, although dressing as suggested above for the first meeting will indicate respect.

Titles

- Indians revere titles such as Professor, Doctor and Engineer.
- Status is determined by age, university degree, caste and profession.
- If someone does not have a professional title, use the honorific title "Sir" or "Madam".
- Titles are used with the person's name or the surname, depending upon the person's



name. (See Social Etiquette for more information on Indian naming conventions.)

- Wait to be invited before using someone's first name without the title.

Business Cards

- Business cards are exchanged after the initial handshake and greeting.
- If you have a university degree or any honour, put it on your business card.
- Use the right hand to give and receive business cards.
- Business cards need not be translated into Hindi.
- Always present your business card so the recipient may read the card as it is handed to