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Namaste! (Hello!) and welcome to our guide to Indian Culture, Customs,

Business Practices and Etiquette



Our guide to India shines a light on the culture, customs, language, society, manners, etiquette and values - all helping you to understand the people!

What will you Learn?

You will gain an understanding of a number of key areas including:

- Language
- Religion and beliefs
- Culture & society
- Social etiquette and customs
- Business protocol and work culture

Gain an Expert Understanding

Once you've read this guide, ensure the success of your India business venture by:

Purchasing an in-depth India Country Insight Report (</resources/country-insight-reports/india-insight/>), authored by a country specialist and outlining detailed country and culture information.

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STEREOTYPING

Remember this is only a very basic level introduction to Indian culture and the people; it can not account for the diversity within Indian society and is not meant in any way to stereotype all Indian people you may meet!

FACTS AND STATISTICS

Location: Southern Asia, bordering the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal, between Burma and Pakistan (</resources/country-guides/pakistan-guide>)

Capital: Delhi

National anthem: Jana Gana Mana (written in Bengali)

Nationality: Indian

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

Population: 1.3 million (2019 Est.)

Population growth rate: 1.13%

Climate: variable; tropical monsoon in south and temperate in north

Time Zone: UTC + 5.30

Currency: Indian Rupee

Government: Federal Republic

Internet penetration: 34.8% (2019 Est.)

Business Culture: Ranked 49th in The Business Culture Complexity Index™ (</resources/bcci>)



[Navarathri Golu Dolls - Religion and spirituality are central to life in India]

LANGUAGE IN INDIA

As India is one of the world's oldest cultures it has been subjected to a plethora of language influences.

The primary ones are; Hindi 41%, Bengali 8.1%, Telugu 7.2%, Marathi 7%, Tamil 5.9%, Urdu 5%, Gujarati 4.5%, Kannada 3.7%, Malayalam 3.2%, Oriya 3.2%, Punjabi 2.8%, Assamese 1.3%, Maithili 1.2%, other 5.9%. English is used primarily in business, and for economic and political purposes.

Language is regional and dialects play a role in the variety of languages spoken throughout India, with some sources suggesting that there are possibly 1,652 different languages or dialects. These come from four main linguistic families and are centred on different regions.

Local guides and translators may be beneficial if you are conducting meetings in a variety of locations throughout the country as difference in language is ubiquitous.

INDIAN CULTURE & SOCIETY

Religion & Beliefs

Hindu (<http://commisceo-global.com/blog/a-brief-introduction-to-hinduism>) 79.8%, Muslim (<http://commisceo-global.com/blog/a-brief-introduction-to-islam>) 14.2%, Christian (<http://commisceo-global.com/blog/a-brief-introduction-to-christianity>) 2.3%, Sikh 1.7%, other and unspecified 2% (2011 est.)

India has the second largest Muslim population in the world

Religious practises are an integral part of daily life

From the Hindu culture arose three other major religions: Buddhism (<http://commisceo-global.com/blog/a-brief-introduction-to-buddhism>), Jainism (<http://commisceo-global.com/blog/a-brief-introduction-to-jainism>) and Sikhism (<http://commisceo-global.com/blog/a-brief-introduction-to-sikhism>).

Hinduism has long established roots in India dating from 2000-1500 B.C.E

In Hinduism there is no single founder, specific theological system, or central religious structure

Vedas and Upanishads are the holy books of Hinduism

Hinduism teaches meditation, yoga and ascetic practices to cultivate self-discipline and unity

The cow is considered a sacred animal

Major Celebrations/Secular Celebrations

26th January (Republic Day)

15th August (Independence Day)

2nd October (Gandhi Jayanti; Mahatma Gandhi's Birthday)

Diwali – October/November

Holi – March, to celebrate Spring

The Family

Family values are highly respected throughout India and are fundamental in daily life

The structure of the family is patriarchal; a woman must obey her father, her husband, her son.

Arranged marriages are commonplace

The urban middle class population of India have begun to move away from arranged marriages

Families often live with three or four generations in the same household

Traditionally sons inherit and daughters receive a dowry

Child care is provided by the female family members

Social Stratification

India has one of the world's oldest caste systems

The caste structure divides people into four main groups: Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras

Brahmins, the teachers and intellectuals - Brahma's head. Kshatriyas, the warriors and rulers - Brahma's arms. Vaishyas, the traders - Brahma's thighs, and finally, Shudras, the menial workers - Brahma's feet

There can be as many as thirty castes within one village

Intermarrying between castes was forbidden but in urban areas is now more common

Your caste is set by birth

Gender Roles

Mothers, grandmothers and older siblings care for infants

Patriarchal families are the norm

Women are considered to hold secondary positions within the home and workplace

82.14% of males and 65.46% of females are literate (2011 census)

Women often receive little schooling
Divorce and inheritance laws are male dominated

Socialisation

Until the child is two, the mother or grandmother is primary caregiver
Once the child is two, older sisters are the primary caregivers
Sons are generally given better opportunities and receive a superior education
Gender specific roles are encouraged within the family unit and in wider society

Economy

The Indian economy is one of the fastest growing in the world
Indian labour force is estimated at 509.3 million
60% are employed in agriculture or related industries
India has established Special Economic Zones to encourage and support business
India's long-term growth is considered moderately positive due to a young population and corresponding low dependency ratio, healthy savings and investment rates
GDP 7.6% (2016 Est.)

Food

Food in India is often served on a 'thali' – a tray or plate that can hold several dishes
'Curry' is a European term to describe the spicy dishes found in India
In some parts of India meals are eaten with rice (chawal), in others, flat breads (roti) are preferred
Food is infused with spices such as cumin, turmeric, black pepper, cardamom, cloves and coriander
Most Hindus avoid eating beef

Arts, Humanities & Popular Culture

The Indian culture has absorbed and amalgamated many different customs and ideas throughout its long history which has led to a rich tradition and folk culture
The most popular musical instrument in India is the sitar, an instrument similar to a guitar
India is well regarded for its rugs, craft, metalwork, bronzes, stone carving, pottery, woodwork, and jewellery.
Traditional sports include camel racing and cock fighting
Folk dances are regional and often celebrated during festivals
'Bollywood' is the informal name given to the popular Mumbai-based film industry
Bollywood has the largest output in the world in terms of number of films produced and, possibly, number of tickets sold.



[Thali is the staple of Indian food - bread with various curries and chutneys]

SOCIAL CUSTOMS & PROTOCOL

Naming conventions

Due to India's diverse cultural groups there is variance between regions on naming conventions

If in doubt, ask! This is likely to cause least offence

It is generally safe to address an elder as 'sir' or 'Ma'am'

Indians generally have a 'given' name – a name they use at work or for people they are not overly familiar with

Many people in India also have a 'pet' name – a nickname for family and close friends

Often you will find that an older female is referred to as 'auntie', even if unrelated

Younger males are often called 'little brother'

Family names, or surnames often denote the caste or area that an individual originates from – these can have a suffix that denotes the type of their ancestor's trade

Indians may also use a different religious name

Many Muslims do not have surnames. Instead, men add the father's name to their own name with the connector 'bin'. For example, Abdullah bin Ahmed is Abdullah the son of Ahmad

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

Meeting & Greeting

In India it's traditional to greet people using 'Namaste' – place both hands together and bow slightly. In urban areas this is often overlooked

Men will often also shake hands when meeting or leaving

Men should not attempt to shake hands with women
Some Indian women might shake hands with a western woman
Indian culture is based on a hierarchical system so elders and superior are greeted first
Religion, caste and social standing all effect greetings

Communication style

Avoid standing too close to others
Communication may not be straightforward – you may have to read between the lines and interpret gestures/signs
Differing relationships will determine how people interact with each other – watch what others do
Indian men may often pat each other on the back as a sign of friendship
Some gestures can be easily misinterpreted – a western hand wave from side to side can mean ‘no’ or ‘go-away’ in India
If an Indian says ‘I will try’ this can usually be interpreted as ‘no’
On the whole, Indian people dislike to refuse something, or someone, outright
Use your right hand to touch, accept or give something
Do not beckon with your hand or snap your fingers – instead, with your arm extended, curl your fingers downward in a claw motion
Pointing, with either one or two fingers, is considered rude and used for inferiors only
Chins, thumbs and entire hands are used to point or direct someone’s attention
When a head is jerked back, or moved in a figure of eight, this usually means ‘yes’

Personal Space

Refrain from standing within an arm’s length of others
Do not touch others on their head
Public displays of affection are not encouraged
Feet are considered unclean (this also applies to the left hand) so avoid touching another’s foot (apologise immediately if this is accidental)

Gift Giving

Gifts are not usually given at the first meeting
Once the relationship has developed gifts may be exchanged
Personal gifts are appreciated- especially if from your own country
Give and receive gifts with both hands – never just the left as it is considered unclean
Generally, gifts are not opened in the company of the benefactor
Avoid giving black or white gifts; black denotes anger, evil and negativity, while white is reserved for funerals and mourning
Instead choose red, blue or green for a gift or wrappings
Avoid gifts that are made from leather or pig skin

Dining & Food

Many strict Muslims, and Hindu women, do not drink alcohol

You may be invited to wash your hands before eating

Food is often eaten with the right hand

Guests are generally served in a hierarchical order; guest of honour, men and then children (Women may eat later)

Meals often end with a variety of sweets (paan), betel nut served with lime and wrapped in a betel leaf

A host will always serve their guests. Accept whatever you are offered but don't feel obliged to finish everything on your plate

If food is placed in communal dishes for you to help yourself, always use a spoon

Breads can be used to scoop up food

Reciprocate your invitation to dine with one of a comparable value

In a restaurant the host will generally pay the bill

Visiting a home

Always accept an invitation to dine, unless you have a plausible reason for not attending

Give the hosts and their children 'thank you' gifts, although this is not always expected

It is acceptable to arrive up to thirty minutes later than the stated time

Flower garlands may be placed around your neck – this can be removed after a few minutes but should be retained in your hand for a time

Shoes are rarely worn inside an Indian home – watch your host and other guests if unsure, and make certain your socks are clean!

Ask permission from your host to smoke. Smoking in the presence of elders is considered rude

Apologise if your feet or shoes touch another person

Taboos

Do not touch another person with your feet or shoes

Do not show anger

Do not use public displays of affection

Winking and whistling should be avoided

Ears are considered sacred – do not box or pull on another's ears



[Commuters on the Metro system in the city of Mumbai]

BUSINESS CULTURE, PRACTICES & ETIQUETTE TIPS

India is a rapidly growing marketplace that is tipped to be one of the largest economies in the world in the near future. Ensure your business etiquette, and knowledge of their culture, is accurate to maximise your potential and avoid unnecessary awkwardness.

Business in India can be viewed as a reflection of society; hierarchical structures pervade business and culture, with the result being that strong individuals are leaders in business and their control is unquestioned by those lower on the chain of command.

To be successful when dealing with Indian business people, or conducting business in the country itself, it is worth considering this structure and ensuring that you are dealing with the decision makers so as to avoid prolonging the conclusion.

Relationships are the basis of all business dealings in India, be prepared to invest time and effort into building a solid foundation from which your commerce will grow.

What to wear

Conservative dress is most suitable for both men and women

Dark suits for men - in hotter regions it can be acceptable to dress less formally

For women, conservative dresses or business suits, but avoid showing too much leg if wearing skirts or

dresses

Casual wear is not recommended for a first meeting

Titles

Address people by their professional title (Dr, professor etc.) or, Mr or Mrs, followed by their surname

Wait until invited to address someone by their first name, or preferred name

If in doubt, use the suffix Mr or Mrs, especially when addressing elders. Sir or Madam is also appropriate

Remember, status is dependent upon education, caste, age and profession - address people accordingly if possible

Business cards

Business cards may be given after the initial handshakes and greetings

Give and receive cards with your right hand

Higher educational degrees are a symbol of status – remember to put this on your business card

Give cards face up so that they can be easily read

As business is often conducted in English it is unnecessary to translate one side of your card

Meetings

Plan and organise meetings well in advance of your trip, if travelling long distances, as they may often be postponed. Check again before travelling

Be punctual – this shows respect and integrity

Business meetings often begin with small talk

This may continue for an extended time as Indians prefer doing business when they are familiar with someone

Ask your hosts personal questions; family, marriage, education and sport are good starting points. Avoid politics, religion and the caste system

If unsure on any matter, defer to the senior person in the room as they will generally control the final decision

Follow up meetings with an overview of discussions and decisions

Negotiating

Saying 'no' is too direct and confrontational for many Indians.

Instead they will often say 'maybe' or 'I'm not sure'. If this occurs change tack or rephrase question if possible

Avoid any hard sell or appearing too demanding – Indians prefer harmony and respect

Having said that, they can also bargain and will often barter for what they want

Do not be tempted to show impatience or anger. Remain calm throughout the negotiating process

Your interactions with your own countrymen will be monitored – try not to disagree publicly

Final decisions will be made by the most senior person present and may take time – be patient

Management

The caste system is still very much in evidence in the Indian business world
Remain aware of superiors and treat them accordingly
Indian society is built upon close familial relationships which can cross over into the business world. Be aware of ties that run through the business you are dealing with
A paternalistic approach is often taken by managers in India due to hierarchical structures
Managers will make decisions but they are also responsible for those below them within the business' structure

For more information please visit [Being a Manager in India \(/resources/management-guides/india-management-guide\)](/resources/management-guides/india-management-guide)

Thank you for reading our guide to India.

We hope you found it useful.

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