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.

- Taking part in a two-hour live webinar (/training/countries/india), customised to meet your unique needs, with one of our India country experts or;
- contacting us in respect to our India consultancy services.
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)
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.
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 affect 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
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)

Thank you for reading our guide to India.
We hope you found it useful.
If you have anything to add to our country profile please contact us using the form below, as we are keen to ensure accuracy.

Quiz: Test Your Knowledge of Indian Culture!
Take the Culture Vulture's Quizzes on India and see how much you have learnt about the country, its people and culture.
If you can score above 85% then you know your stuff! You have only 3 minutes!

Quiz on Indian Culture (http://commisceo-global.com/quizzes/country-specific-quizzes?view=quiz&quiz_id=38)
Quiz on Working with Indians (http://commisceo-global.com/quizzes/business-culture-quizzes?view=quiz&quiz_id=14)

Buy an In-Depth Country Report for India
For those needing a more detailed and comprehensive overview of India we have published an expert Report on Indian Society, Culture & Business (/resources/country-insight-reports/india-insight).
The 46-page document has been authored by one of our India country specialists and provides readers with much more detail that our free guide above. Topics include:

- An introduction to the country, its history, politics, people and culture
- Insights into the country’s values, customs and etiquette
- Tips on preparing to work with new colleagues from India
- Expat-orientated information on daily life
- Guidelines and tools on adapting and dealing with cultural differences

All for only £4.99.

Order via the button below to receive your India Insight in seconds or read more (/resources/country-insight-reports/india-insight) before buying!

Great Blogs on India

Below are some of our blogs which look at India:

- Understanding the Culture is Key to Successful Business in India (http://commisceo-global.com/blog/understanding-the-culture-is-key-to-successful-business-in-india)
- Why India is Becoming a Top Expat Destination (http://commisceo-global.com/blog/why-india-is-becoming-a-top-expat-destination)
- Is Anglo-Indian culture fading into oblivion? (http://commisceo-global.com/blog/anglo-indian-culture-fading-into-oblivion)
- Inside Indian Culture: Tips on Doing Business in India (http://commisceo-global.com/blog/cultural-tips-doing-business-in-india)

Do you need to cite this page for school or university research?

Please see below examples.

Simply change the country name depending on which guide you are referencing.

📝 MLA Format:

LICENSE OUR CULTURE GUIDES

Did you know that you can upload all our Country Culture Guides onto your company intranet?

Connect your expatriate and international business staff with customised country information at the touch of a button.

Click here (/resources/license-our-content) for more information.