

Cultural Competence for Professional Travel in India



Note: The following guidelines are based on traditional customs and practices. Some of the formalities or cultural taboos outlined below may not always be applicable in large urban centers, or when dealing with Indian expatriates.

Greeting

- Men shake hands with men when meeting and leaving, but not with women. Indian women may shake hands with foreign women, but not with men. This may not be the case in an international business setting, it is best to follow the lead of your host.
- Never address an Indian by his or her first name.
- Unless you're familiar with Hindu, Muslim, or Sikh titles, use the following information to address Indians.
 - In the North, name order is first name and last name.
 - In the South, name order is father's first name and first name.
 - Across India, address Hindus by English courtesy title (Mr., Mrs., or Miss) or professional title and last name (in the north) or first name (in the south).
 - After establishing a relationship, Hindus may give you a nickname like "uncle" or "mother." Never refuse this offer of friendship.
- When finishing a conversation ask for your host's permission before leaving.
- When shaking hands with a Muslim, use only your right hand.
- Indians often converse indirectly. When someone says, "I will try," he or she generally means "no."

Acceptable conversation topics include: Sports (soccer, tennis, and especially cricket), family, local cuisine, Indian cinema and culture.

Unacceptable topics include: Relations with Pakistan, criticism of Indian customs, caste issues (including asking about a person's caste), tensions between adherents of different religious groups or excessive praise of Indian children (praise may attract the evil eye.)

Business Card Etiquette

- Business cards are exchanged after the initial handshake and greeting.
- If you have a university degree or any honor, 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 them.

Gift Giving Etiquette

- 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. Guests should also give small gifts to any children in the home.
- Do not give frangipani or white flowers as they are used at funerals.

- Business gifts could include: pens, ties, or whiskey (if the recipient drinks). Other ideas include: fruit, candy, books about home country, gifts from home country such as perfume, chocolate, crystal objects, or small pieces of china.
- Yellow, green and red are lucky colors, 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.
- Always give and receive gifts with both hands.

Non-verbal communication:

- Indian people value their personal space, try to maintain an arms length distance from your Indian counterpart.
- Use your **right** hand to touch someone, eat, pass money, or pick up merchandise, as the left hand is considered unclean.
- Do not touch anyone-especially children- on the head, as tradition holds that the soul resides there.
- Be courteous towards elders, show respect by remaining standing until the elder person(s) sit(s) down.
- When Indians smile and jerk their heads backward or move their heads in a figure eight motion, they're saying "yes."
- Indians often interpret a hand waving from side to side as "no" or "go away" not "hello."
- Never point at the feet of anyone or show the soles of your shoes. Doing so is an insult. Apologize immediately if your feet or shoes touch another person.
- Point with your chin (but not at superiors), whole hand, or thumb – never point with one or two fingers. Indians use one or two fingers only to point at inferiors.

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.
- 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.

Dining Etiquette

- Indians entertain in their homes, restaurants, private clubs, or other public venues, depending upon the occasion and circumstances.
- Take off your shoes before entering the house.

- 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.
- Hindus do not eat beef and many are vegetarians.
- Muslims do not eat pork or drink alcohol.
- Sikhs do not eat beef.
- Table manners are somewhat formal, but this formality is tempered by the religious beliefs of the various groups.
- Don't serve yourself, let your host serve you. Wait for the host to begin eating and invite you to do so before you begin.
- Much Indian food is eaten with the fingers. If utensils are used, they are generally a tablespoon and a fork. Always use your right hand to eat, whether you are using utensils or your fingers.
- Take food from communal dishes with a spoon, never your fingers. Never let the spoon touch your plate.
- Wait to be told where to sit. . Guests are often served in a particular order: the guest of honor 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.
- Leaving a small amount of food on your plate indicates that you are satisfied. Finishing all your food means that you are still hungry.

Dress:

- Foreign women should wear modest clothing with high necklines, particularly in Muslim areas. Revealing clothing can elicit unflattering remarks or unwanted stares.
- For business and formal occasions, men wear suits and ties. Women wear conservative pantsuits or dresses.
- Avoid wearing leather.
- Men and women cover their heads when entering sacred buildings. Always carry a large clean handkerchief with you for this purpose

Internet Resources:

Customs and Etiquette:

<http://www.kwintessential.co.uk/resources/global-etiquette/india-country-profile.html>

Travel guides:

<http://www.executiveplanet.com/index.php?title=India>

<http://wikitravel.org/en/India>

World Fact Book

<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/in.html>

Relevant References:

Bosrock, Mary Murray. 2007. *Asian Business: Customs and Manners*. Meadowbrook Press, New York.

Grihault, Nicki. 2006. *India-Culture Smart!: A Quick Guide to Customs and Etiquette*. Kuperard.

Morrison, Terri and Conway, Wayne. 2006. *Kiss, Bow, or Shakes Hands, Asia: How to Do Business in 12 Asian Countries*. Adams Media Corporation.

For health and safety tips, visit:

U.S. Department of State: Info on India

<http://www.state.gov/p/sca/ci/in/>

McKinley Immunization and Travel Clinic

<http://www.mckinley.illinois.edu/clinics/itc/itc.htm>

Travel Regulations (OBFS)

http://www.obfs.uillinois.edu/manual/central_p/sec15-1.html

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