

India – A Guide to Business Culture and Practices



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One of the most striking features about India, which any foreign traveler must appreciate, is the size and diversity of this country. Given its vastness and variety, there is no single way to understand India. In fact, one observer once commented that 'India as a nation exists only in the minds of its population.' Many travelers find India unpredictable and confusing because they fail to grasp this point. The following paragraphs will give a perspective to understand one's experience of India.

Geography and Climate

India is the seventh largest country in the world in terms of size, with a total landmass of 3,287,590 sq km. Located in South Asia, it has land boundary of 14,107km with its neighbors [Pakistan, China, Bangladesh, Burma, Nepal and Bhutan] and a coastline of 7,000km, which stretches across the Arabian Sea and Bay of Bengal in the Indian Ocean.

On average, the Indian climate varies from tropical to temperate. However, in reality, India has a multiplicity of climates and terrains across its regions, which ranges from snow-peaked Himalayas in the north, desert in the west, thick rain forests in the north-east, flat green pastures in the Gangetic planes, and plateaus in south and central India.

In general, October to March is a better period to visit India, which marks the winter season. During this time, the temperature can go as low as 2-3oC in the Northern mountains of India. However, in most other parts of the country, it is normally a comfortable 15-25oC. Indian summers [April to June] can be very hot, with the temperature reaching 50oC in many locations.

Demographic Profile

Contrary to its image, India is a surprisingly young country, with a median age of 24. Around 40% of its population falls in the rage of 20-44 years. Compared to the older generation, this younger generation is more confident, has more liberal and consumerist values, and is more ambitious.

This is a quite recent change in the country's demographics, and has implications for changes in cultural values.

There is a wide urban-rural divide in India. Indian society is primarily agrarian. More than 70% of India's population lives in villages, and subsists on agriculture. However, the contribution of agriculture is only 23%.

India has one of the largest populations of technically qualified manpower, comprising around 15 million doctors, engineers and scientists. On the other hand, the literacy rate in the country is just over 50%.

India has a large linguistic diversity. It has 18 constitutionally recognized major languages, in addition to around 1,600 other languages and dialects. There is no single language which is spoken by all Indians. According to the constitution, Hindi is the official national language. However, less than 40% of people in India can speak or understand Hindi. English is the co-official language, since it is spoken by most of the educated Indian class, and is the common language used in business situations.

Making appointments

Indians appreciate punctuality and keeping one's commitments. However, many visitors to India find it very disconcerting that often Indians themselves are quite casual in keeping their time commitments. One of the reasons for this is that in the Indian mind, time is generally not considered as the objective yardstick for planning and scheduling one's activities. Rather, for most Indians, the plans and schedules are contingent on other people and events, and therefore can--and do--get changed.

It is advisable to schedule your appointment at least a couple of months in advance. If you are making your appointments before coming to India, do emphasize that you will be in India for a short period of time, if this is the case. It is also useful to reconfirm your meeting a few days before the agreed upon date.

Though not essential, it often helps in getting an appointment if you have an Indian contact.

There is a distinct difference in the cultures of the government departments and business organizations. Compared to a business organization, it is normally more difficult to get an appointment with officials in a government department. Also, in the government departments, there is a greater likelihood that your appointment may be rescheduled or that you may be kept waiting for as many as several hours before you actually meet the person.

Do be prepared for last minute changes in the time and place of your meeting. It is useful to leave your contact details with the secretary of the person, so that, in case there are changes, you can be informed.

It is advisable to make the effort to be early in order to keep your appointment. In most Indian cities, the roads are quite crowded, and during high-traffic hours, it can take you a long time to reach your destination.

Indian addresses can be confusing. This is so because the pattern of numbering the buildings varies across different places, even in the same city. This is further complicated by the fact that during the last few years, in many cities, the streets have been renamed. To avoid getting lost, it is useful to check 'how to reach there' from your contact.

Normal office hours are 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. However, in some large cities [e.g., Mumbai], some places of business start working earlier to avoid congested traffic while commuting. Increasingly, among the business organizations, there is also a trend towards a longer working day, which can start as early as 7:30 a.m. and last till 8:00 p.m.

Normally, lunch is for one hour, between 12:00 p.m. and 2:00 p.m.

In recent years, there is a trend towards luncheon meetings and 'power breakfasts', which are often the times when business is discussed.

Dinner appointments for business purposes are rare. Official dinners are mostly hosted as large gatherings, and are mainly meant for socializing and getting to know each other.

The work-week differs across organizations and sectors: Government offices work Monday-Saturday, with the second Saturday of the month as an additional holiday; most business organizations follow a five-and-a-half day work week; and, most IT and software companies have a five-day work-week, with Saturday and Sunday off.

The business and official work in India are done using the western 'Christian' calendar. The convention for writing dates is dd/mm/yy, e.g., December 25th, 2004 will be written as 25/12/04.

In most Indian business organizations, banks and government departments, the Financial Year is calculated from April to March. Since the end of March is the time for closing the financial year, people are very busy. Try to avoid scheduling an appointment around this period. The MNCs, however, mostly follow a January-to-December financial year.

Most Indians take vacations during the summers [April-June] and Mid-December to Mid-January. In addition, in Northern and Eastern India, a favorite time for taking vacations is around October, which coincides with Dussehra/ Pooja holidays [see below].

India has a long list of holidays. Some of these--e.g., Independence Day [January 26th], Independence Day [August 15th], Gandhi Jayanti [October 2nd], and Christmas [December 25th]--are observed according to the western calendar. The others, which are Hindu, Sikh or Muslim festivals--e.g., Pongal/ Makar Sankranti, Holi, Idu'l Zuha, Dussehra, Deepawali, Muharram, Guru Nanak Birthday, etc.--follow the lunar calendar. The dates for the latter holidays are not the same in terms of the western calendar, and therefore, it is advisable to contact the local Indian Embassy/ Consulate to find out the holiday list for that particular year.

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Since India is a culturally diverse country, different parts of the country also celebrate festivals which are regional in nature. Thus, each state also has its own list of holidays. You can get this list from the Tourism Departments of the particular states.

Guidelines for business dress

In recent years, the dress code in Indian business settings has undergone a transformation. Moreover, it also differs widely across regions and business sectors. Therefore, it is difficult to make a generalization about the most appropriate way to dress that will be valid across India. However, the following points should assist you in making the right decision.

Normal business dress for men is a suit and tie. However, since India has a warm climate, often just a full-sleeved shirt with a tie is also acceptable. It is also important to select neutral colors, which are subdued and not very bright.

In most companies, particularly in the IT sector, however, the dress code is much more casual. It is not unusual to find people wearing T-shirts and jeans with sneakers. However, as a visitor, conservative, though not formal, dress is advisable.

For foreign women, pant-suits or long skirts, which cover the knees, are more acceptable to wear. The neckline of the blouse or the top should be high.

For women, a salwar-suit is also acceptable for business dress.

Jeans with a T-shirt or short-sleeved shirt are acceptable as casual wear in informal situations for both men and women.

You can wear casual dress if invited to a social gathering. However, if a foreigner wears an Indian costume [kurta-pajama for men, and sari or salwar-suit for women], this kind of dress is also appreciated, and often seen as a gesture of friendship.

General guidelines

Most Indians enjoy good conversation on a variety of topics. Even in business meetings, it is common and normal to start discussions with 'small talk' on other unrelated issues. In fact, this is seen as a way of building rapport and trust.

In general, Indians are open and friendly, and compared to many countries in the West, have a lesser sense of privacy. It is not unusual for a stranger to start up a conversation with you on a flight or a train journey.

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Sometimes, Indians ask questions which can be seen as too personal and intrusive. However, one must remember that discussing one's family and personal life is normal among Indians. In fact, often enquiring about the other person's family is seen as a sign of friendliness.

Conversation in India is as much an exchange of views as it is a mode of building and strengthening relationships. Consequently, complimenting and showing appreciation are quite normal among Indians.

Indians seldom express their disagreement in a direct manner; open disagreement is likely to be interpreted as being hostile and aggressive [though expression of disagreement by someone who is superior or elder is, by and large, acceptable]. Normally, disagreements are openly expressed only with those with whom one has built a trusting relationship. Otherwise, disagreements are expressed in an indirect manner. In most cases - unless, it is a crucial issue - it is advisable to avoid expressing direct disagreement.

Welcome topics of conversation

While there are many topics of conversation which Indians find engaging, there are a few which are quite popular. These are: Politics, Cricket, Films and, in recent times, Indian Economic Reforms. Taking the time to do some advance preparation on these subjects can be very helpful in building rapport and establishing one's acceptance.

Indians are enthusiastic about discussing politics and political figures. A foreigner can sometimes find the level of political awareness of an average Indian surprising. It is important, however, to recognize that politics in India is very diverse, and the political issues are often regional in nature. Thus, certain political topics may be very local, and it is advisable to get involved only if you know about them.

Cricket in India is almost a national pastime. India has produced some world-class cricketers [e.g., Sachin Tendulkar, Sunil Gavaskar, etc.] and Indians - even those who don't play it - are passionate about the game. Cricket, for Indians, is not just about the game, but also about the cricketers, who are seen as national celebrities, and are idolized.

India produces the largest number of films annually [around 800-1000] in the world. There are more than 13,000 movie theaters in the country. Even though the advent of TV has reduced the viewers in the theaters, most Indians keep abreast with the latest movies through TV channels, videos and CDs. Like the Cricketers, film stars are considered as national icons, and are subject to discussion and gossip. The popularity of film personalities also results in another peculiarly Indian phenomenon: many popular film personalities enter politics and get elected to the state assemblies or the national parliament.

India opened its economy in 1991, and since then the forces of change have affected virtually all Indians, both personally and professionally. Almost all Indians have an opinion about these changes in the economic policies, and are quite vocal in advocating or opposing these changes.

In addition to the above, it is important to appreciate that India is an ancient and rich civilization, and most Indians are proud of their heritage. They normally enjoy discussing Indian traditions and history, especially with a foreigner.

Topics to avoid in conversation

Normally, Indians are a tolerant people, and are accepting of religious differences. During the last decade, however, there has been a rise of strong religious sentiments in Indian society. It is, therefore, advisable to avoid discussing religious beliefs. On the other hand, religious practices and rituals play a major role in Indian life, and a genuine enquiry into a certain religious practice will normally be met with an enthusiastic response.

Due to historical reasons, India's relationship with its neighboring country, Pakistan, has never been a very friendly one. Some educated Indians view this as a failure on the part of politicians on both sides. However, many Indians can be very biased, emotional and one-sided when discussing Pakistan. In general, it is advisable to steer clear of discussions on this topic.

One part of the diversity of Indian society is the large rich-poor divide. In India, one may quite frequently find rich localities and sprawling slums next to each other. Indians are as sensitive and defensive about the poverty as they are proud of the economic growth the country has seen. While Indians do openly discuss the country's poverty, if a foreigner initiates a discussion about it, it is likely to be interpreted as an impolite criticism.

Addressing others with respect

When addressing a person, it is advisable to prefix the name with a 'Mr.', 'Mrs'. or 'Miss', or the professional title of the person ['Doctor' or 'Professor'] unless the person asks you to refer to him by his/her first name.

In general, people are addressed by their name [without the prefix] only by close acquaintances, family members, or by someone who is older or superior in authority.

The naming conventions in the southern states of India [Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and Kerala] are different when compared to other parts of the country [often broadly referred to as North India, though it also encompasses the eastern and western regions of the country]

In North India, most people have a family name [e.g., Sharma, Patel, Singh, etc.], and the names are written in the western style--first name followed by the surname. Sometimes, there may also be a middle name, such as 'Chandra', 'Kumar', 'Prasad', etc. For instance, Mr. Praveen Chandra Kulkarni will be addressed as Mr. Kulkarni--or as Praveen, if the relationship is informal.

In contrast, in southern states, men do not have a family name. Instead, the name of one's father and/or the ancestral village/town is used for the purpose. These are normally abbreviated and prefixed before the first name. For instance, a south Indian name 'Kamundari Ranganthan Gurumurthy' will be written as 'K. R. Gurumurthy', signifying that the person's ancestral place is 'Kamundari', father's name is 'Ranganathan', and his first name is 'Gurumurthy'. He will be addressed as Mr. Gurumurthy--or if the relationship is informal, as just Gurumurthy.

Due to assimilation in the local culture, often even non-Hindu communities follow the same naming conventions in the southern states. For instance, the present President of India, Dr A. P. J. Abdul Kalam, is a muslim from southern India, and the initials in his name are an abbreviation of his lineage [Avul Pakir Jainulabdeen].

Women normally adapt the husband's name [family name in North India, and first name in southern India] after marriage.

Changing Conventions

It must be mentioned that with time and social mobility, the naming conventions are also changing. For instance, many south Indian families have started adapting the north Indian naming conventions.

Since the family name in north India also denotes the person's caste--and therefore, place in the social hierarchy--some liberal-minded north Indians do not use the family name [or use their father's name instead].

There is an increasing trend among educated professional women of keeping their maiden name after marriage.

Selecting and presenting an appropriate business gift

Gift giving is customary in India, and is seen as a sign of friendship. However, it is generally not expected at the first meeting.

It is advisable not to give expensive gifts, unless you are very close to the person. Normally, large and expensive gifts are given only by family friends and close relatives--and for specific family occasions,

such as a wedding. Since Indians try to reciprocate a gift, if it is too expensive, it can cause embarrassment for the recipient.

Use red, yellow, green or blue colored wrapping paper. White and black colors are considered inauspicious.

Normally, gifts are not opened in the presence of the giver. However, sometimes your Indian host may insist on your opening the gift, and would expect appreciation for his/her choice.

If you are invited to an Indian's home for dinner, you must take some kind of gift, such as a box of chocolates or flowers. If your host has children, carrying a gift for the child [a toy or a book] is also appreciated.

If you are visiting an Indian during a festival, it is customary to carry a box of sweets.

If you are giving money as a gift, do remember that 11, 51, 101, 501, etc. are considered auspicious numbers. Your gift would be more appreciated if it is in these denominations.

Before the opening up of the Indian economy, many foreign products were not available in India, and would have made a good gift. However, now most foreign-made products are accessible to Indians, and have, consequently, lost their value as a gift. However, Indians do appreciate a gift which is representative of your, or a specific, culture [e.g., Dutch wooden shoes/clogs, a Swiss knife, French perfume, etc.].

If you have worked or lived with Indians, a framed photograph with them as a gift would be viewed as a warm and friendly gesture.

Different flowers have different connotations across India. If you are planning to give flowers, do check with the florist as to what would be appropriate. A bouquet of roses, however, is the safest choice across the country.

Drinking alcohol is culturally not accepted in most parts of India. Many Indians do not drink at home. However, if your host drinks and keeps drinks at home, a bottle of scotch whisky or wine will be appreciated.

Be cautious in giving a leather item as a gift. Since many Hindus are vegetarians, they may not appreciate items made of leather.

A jewelry item is considered an intimate gift, and would be viewed as inappropriate if given by a man to an Indian woman. It is acceptable if the jewelry is given as a gift by a woman; however, gold jewelry is normally exchanged/given only among family and relatives.

What you should know before you negotiate- Diversity of Indian Business Culture

Like the rest of India, Indian business culture is also very diverse and heterogeneous. While the following points would help in negotiating a deal, it is important to be sensitive to, and appreciate, the diversity of Indian business culture, which varies across regions, sectors, and ownership patterns.

A large part of Indian businesses are family-owned or 'owned' by members of different social communities. Among these, Parsi, Marwari, Gujarati and Chettiar communities are the prominent ones, and have controlling interests in some of the largest Indian business houses.

Though many of these business houses are quite modern/western in their working and operations, and follow the international norms for doing business - nevertheless, it is useful to understand their specific community culture.

In addition, there are differences between the government-owned public sector companies, which are more often bureaucratic and hierarchical, compared to many of their private sector counterparts, and the 'new economy' service sector companies [IT, telecom, insurance, etc.], which are in turn more egalitarian and flexible than the traditional manufacturing-sector firms.

There are also regional differences in business etiquette. For instance, broadly speaking, the southern Indian companies are more conservative when compared to the north, or the western part of the country. These sectors, in turn, tend to be more individualistic and assertive than the eastern portion of India.

Language

Presenting and exchanging business cards are a necessary part of doing business in India. You must bring plenty since people exchange business cards even in non-business situations.

English is the common language for conducting business, and therefore, it is not necessary to get your card translated into any Indian language. If you are not from an English-speaking country, then you must get your brochures and other promotional material prepared in English.

Though widely spoken and used, there are nuances of Indian English which are quite native. For instance, there are local meanings of terms like 'Himalayan blunder' [grave mistake], 'godown' [warehouse], 'deadly' [intense or very good], etc. Similarly, you may find people using terms like 'cousin-brother' or 'cousin-sister', or overuse terms like 'actually', 'obviously', 'simply', etc., in their sentences.

In addition, the pronunciation varies widely across the country, which can sometimes make it difficult to understand spoken English. You can, however, request a person to repeat what s/he has said slowly. Such a request from a foreigner is not considered as a discourtesy.

Intermediaries and Contacts

Foreign joint ventures and technical collaborations are not new in the Indian business environment. Well-known American, European and Japanese companies have been doing business in India for more than two - and even more - decades. Therefore, if you are representing a well-known global company, you will find that, by and large, Indians are comfortable and open to negotiation, and an intermediary is not required to establish one's credentials.

If, however, you are representing a lesser known country or a small company, it will help to get some referrals from your other clients/partners in India.

Indian laws and bureaucracy are quite intricate and cumbersome. Besides the statutes of the Central government, there are numerous pieces of legislation which differ considerably across the states. It is, therefore, advisable to hire an Indian lawyer or liaison person, who can help you to maneuver through these intricacies.

Protocols

Though its importance may vary in degrees across regions and sectors, hierarchy matters in India.

Try to get your first appointment with the person who is high in authority in the concerned department/organization. It is likely that s/he may later direct you to meet someone in the middle-level hierarchy, who would be actually relevant for your business. However, coming through the superior person is likely to help when it comes to implementation of decisions.

You will often find that, as a sign of respect, the subordinates stand up when the boss enters the meeting room. This is a normal phenomenon in the Indian context. For many people coming from more individualistic cultures, this creates a dilemma - to rise or not. The best option is to get up from your seat and greet him/her personally.

Despite gradual changes in societal values, respect for age, loyalty to one's family, community or group, and practice of certain religious rituals are still observed in Indian work-settings, in varying degrees.

Women executives, in senior positions, are a relatively new phenomenon in the Indian business environment. If you are a woman, you will normally find people respectful and courteous, but not very comfortable in working with you for business deals. You may have to make extra efforts to get them to discuss business with you.

Negotiating Process

The pace of business meetings in India is comparatively far more relaxed than in some of the western countries, such as the United States.

Indians are somewhat lax about time. Even if you arrive on time, it is likely that the scheduled meeting may start with some delay, or that you are kept waiting. This often happens, and does not necessarily mean much. However, a long delay in the meeting can be a signal that you are being given less importance.

Indians do not directly jump into business negotiations; in fact, that may be seen as rude. Building a relationship is often considered a prerequisite to doing business.

Meetings normally start with small talk about non-work-related topics [ranging from weather to whether your journey was comfortable], before people start talking about business issues. Do not feel surprised if you are asked some 'personal' questions about your family, children, etc.

Similarly, showing hospitality is part of the negotiation process. Often meetings start by offering tea/coffee and snacks. It is courteous to accept the offer.

Compared to many other cultures, relationships and feelings play a larger role in decisions in India. In general, Indians tend to take larger risks with a person whose intentions they trust. Thus, one's credibility and trustworthiness are critical in negotiating a deal.

Indians are 'polychronic' people, i.e., they tend to deal with more than one task at the same time. So be prepared for some distractions/ disturbances during the meeting, e.g., a secretary walking in to get some papers signed, or the conversation sometimes digressing into unrelated topics. One must appreciate that such behavior/occurrences do not show a lack of interest or attention.

Indians are inductive in their approach to understanding things. In the Indian psyche, reality can be understood only in its overall context. Knowing the personal, social and historical contexts [of people, events, ideas, etc.] are a precondition to comprehending them accurately. Therefore, one should be prepared for questions and enquiries, which may not seem to be directly related to the subject. To people coming from more deductive cultures, this behavior often appears to indicate a lack of focus and digression.

PowerPoint presentations are generally accepted to start the discussion. It is necessary, however, to send a more detailed proposal in advance. Often, the details of the proposal are vetted by some middle-level executive, who will then brief the superior about them.

In general, Indians are cautious in accepting a new idea or proposal. Openness to a new idea depends not only on its quality, but also on its source and endorsement. That is, information about whom else has

implemented it or who has proposed it has a major influence on the decision about a new idea. In making a proposal, you must include such details accordingly.

Indians usually do not express their disagreements openly and directly; doing so would be considered discourteous. Instead, when differences arise, they may circumvent them by statements such as 'we will discuss this later' or 'I will have to check with others about this.'

Bargaining for the price or additional concessions is normal in India. Indian negotiators expect and value flexibility in negotiation. Therefore, sometimes a straightforward offer may be perceived as a rigid stand. It is always advisable to build some buffers in one's initial offer, which allow for bargaining later.

Do not insist on commitment in the first meeting. Making a decision, in Indian organizations, is often a long-drawn out process. This is not only because of the bureaucratic nature of many Indian organizations, but also because a decision may have to be ratified by people who may not be present at the negotiating table.

General Tips

Hospitality is a key value in Indian culture, and the guest is considered the equivalent to a god. Indians normally go out of their way to accommodate the requirements of the guests. Any breach of etiquette by the guest is normally ignored and never brought to his or her attention.

A foreigner visiting India is likely to receive social invitations from even minor acquaintances. This is mostly because Indians like to make a visitor feel welcome.

Visitors from some countries are often perplexed by the rather casual and unclear invitation extended to them to 'drop in anytime.' This is, however, a genuine invitation. Nevertheless, it is advisable to phone before going to someone's house.

Conversely, you should also not expect that your Indian guests will always inform you before their arrival. It is normal among Indians to 'drop in' for a social visit.

A direct refusal to an invitation [e.g., 'sorry, I will not be able to come'] is likely to be seen as impolite, or even arrogant. If you have to decline an invitation, it is more acceptable to give a somewhat vague and open-ended answer such as 'I'll try' or 'I will confirm with you later', etc.

It is common practice in India to offer beverages [tea, coffee or soft-drink] with some light snacks/ refreshments to a guest, even in business settings. When refreshments/ snacks or beverages are served, it is customary [though not mandatory] to refuse the first offer, but to accept the second or third. It would, however, be a breach of etiquette not to accept it at all. Even if you don't want to have the refreshments/

snacks, it is advisable to accept them--though it is acceptable to leave these offerings untouched later on in the visit.

Important Do's and Don'ts about Eating and Drinking

Eating and drinking are intimately tied to Indian customs and religions. In planning any invitations, a knowledge and sensitivity to these customs are very important.

For a large number of Indian Hindus, eating meat is a religious taboo. While planning a meal for your Indian guests [or placing an order in a restaurant], it is advisable to ask if they are vegetarians or non-vegetarians.

If you are hosting a dinner or lunch party, it is advisable to have a few varieties of vegetarian dishes. It is also important to keep the vegetarian and meat dishes on separate tables, and label them to enable people to select what they can eat.

Many Hindus keep a fast once a week, and during this time they can eat only fruits. When inviting people, do check and make arrangements for them accordingly.

Non-vegetarian Hindus do not eat beef, and Muslims do not eat pork. Muslims eat meat which is 'halal' or ritually slaughtered. Jains eat cereals and lentils, but do not eat meat, honey, and even most vegetables.

In planning for [or ordering] non-vegetarian dishes, chicken, lamb or fish are safe options.

Indians are very particular about cleanliness. It is essential to wash both of your hands before and after meals.

Traditional Indian dishes are eaten with the hands. When it is necessary to use your hands, use only your right hand, as the left hand is considered unclean. It's considered acceptable, however, to pass dishes with the left hand.

Offering food from your plate to another person is not culturally acceptable, since this practice is seen as 'unclean.'

Drinking is prohibited among Muslims, Sikhs and in many other Indian communities. However, with changing times, and especially among urban educated Indians, this is not strictly observed.

It is better to ask your guest: 'What would you like to drink?' rather than 'Can I get you a beer?' Even guests who drink will not drink alcohol on certain occasions such as religious festivals or if there is an older, highly respected relative present. Therefore, it is prudent to have fruit-juices and/or soft-drinks available for the non-drinkers.

Traditional Indian women, regardless of their religion, don't smoke or drink. Among urban elite Indians, however, some women do drink wine or beer, and also smoke.

Compared to a few years back, most well-known brands of hard liquors [whiskey and scotch] are now available in India. Many Indian brands are also as good as the global brands. However, most Indian drinkers feel that an imported foreign brand of drink is superior to Indian brands.

Business Entertaining

Business lunches are preferable to dinners in India. However, in recent times, business dinners and 'power breakfasts' are also becoming popular.

Mostly, business meals are organized in either high-class restaurants or in five-star hotels. Some of these places are very much in demand, and you will need to book your table in advance.

In large cities [e.g., Mumbai, Delhi, Bangalore, Kolkata, Chennai, etc.], restaurants offer a wide choice of cuisines, ranging from traditional Indian food to Chinese, Thai, Continental, etc. In selecting the restaurant, you must check what cuisines the restaurant offers to suit the tastes of your guests.

Most restaurants have separate smoking and non-smoking sections, and you must select the space according to the preference of your guests.

Most Indian dishes are quite spicy to the western palate. While ordering Indian food you might want to ask the waiter/steward how spicy a given dish will be.

Toasting is not a normal custom in India. However, in business meals where drinks are served, it is normal for the host to toast by raising the glass and saying 'cheers.'

If a business associate invites you for a meal, unless it is an official function, it is customary to arrive a few minutes late.

Businesswomen can take Indian businessmen out for a meal without causing awkwardness or embarrassment. A male guest, however, may insist on paying for the meal. Conversely, if you are a male, and are invited for a meal by an Indian businesswoman, it is expected that you will offer to pay [which, though, may be politely declined].

Normally, excessive tipping is not encouraged, but a certain amount of tip is expected. In most restaurants, 10% is a sufficient tip, which may be added to the bill. You can, however, give an additional tip by leaving the change to show your appreciation.

Social entertaining

If you are invited for dinner at a home, it is advisable to arrive 15 to 30 minutes late.

In many Indian homes, one is expected to remove his or her shoes before entering. Observing this custom is particularly important if you or your family have received a personal invitation or if the function you are attending is a familial one.

In many Indian homes, women remain mostly in the confines of the kitchen. They see their contribution in making the guest feel at home in terms of the food they cook [or supervise to get cooked]. Appreciating and praising the food are considered proper etiquette, since it is a compliment to the lady of the house.

Saying 'thank you' at the end of the meal is considered as an inappropriate and impersonal gesture. Instead, offer to reciprocate by inviting your hosts out to dinner. This invitation will be seen as that you value the relationship you have established with your hosts.

If you are hosting a social event, it is desirable to contact every person by phone personally, even if you have already sent a printed invitation. Indians do not normally 'R.S.V.P.' Invitations should be sent out early, and phone calls should be made close to the day of the party.

Be prepared for the fact that your guests will be late, since arriving punctually for a social invitation is considered bad manners. Also, some of your guests may not turn up at all, even after promising that they will.

Do not be surprised if some of your Indian guests bring their own guests. Such behavior is considered as a sign of their close informal relationship with the host, and not bad manners. In such situations, the host is expected to remain warm, gracious and accommodating.

Since it's difficult to predict when the guests will arrive, or how many will attend, it is sensible to make arrangements for a buffet rather than a formal 'sit-down' meal.

A variety of catering services are available if you don't want to cook. Some restaurants and hotels also cater, or you can host parties on their grounds.

Acceptable Public Conduct

The traditional way of greeting in India is performed by holding your palms together, as in praying, and saying 'Namaste' [nah-mas-tay] or 'Namaskar' [nah-mas-kar], with a slight bow.

While, the Namaste or Namaskar are Hindu ways of greeting, they are also accepted among all other communities. These other communities, however, also have their own traditional greetings. For instance,

among Muslims, the traditional greeting is 'Salaam-Wale-Kum', which is responded to by saying 'Wale-kum-Salaam.' Similarly, Sikhs traditionally greet each other by saying 'Sat-Siree-Akaal.'

Shaking hands is also an acceptable way to greet people among urban and westernized Indians.

Among the younger urban Indians, a 'Hello' or 'Hi' with a wave of the hand is also an acceptable form of greeting when making informal contact.

In general, Indian society is conservative about heterosexual physical contact and relationships. Refrain from greeting people with hugs and kisses.

Shaking hands with women, since it involves physical touch, is not universally accepted in Indian society.

Among the urban westernized Indians, you may find some Indian women offering to shake hands.

However, it is advisable to shake hands only when it is offered. In most other situations, 'Namaste' is the safest way to greet--in fact, it will also be appreciated as a gesture of friendliness.

It is customary to allow women and guests to proceed before yourself.

The acceptable way to beckon someone is to hold your hand out, palm downward, and make a scooping motion with fingers. Beckoning someone with a wagging finger, with the palm upward is seen as an authoritarian/ condescending signal, and will be perceived as an insult.

Do not point to someone with your finger, since that is likely to be interpreted as an accusatory gesture.

Use of hand/palm or chin is a more acceptable way of pointing towards someone.

Standing erect with your hands on your hips is likely to be seen as an aggressive and dominating posture.

Among Indians, it is normal for them to use their hands to gesticulate while talking with each other.

Folded hands, or hands in one's pockets while talking are likely to be perceived as arrogant gestures.

Whistling and winking are usually perceived as rude and unacceptable behaviors, as they have sexual connotations.

Talking to a woman who is walking alone is not advisable, since it is likely to be seen as a proposition or other inappropriate gesture.

Seniority, age and authority are respected in India, both in business and in public life.

More tips

Feet are considered unclean in India, so avoid pointing your feet at another person. In the case that your feet or shoes touch another person, you are expected to apologize by saying 'sorry.'

Indians do not maintain continuous eye-contact while talking with others. Direct eye-contact may be seen as intrusive. On the other hand, do not feel uncomfortable if you find an Indian gazing at you; this is because Indians are curious--to the extent of sometimes being intrusive--about foreigners.

The comfortable distance to be maintained during an interaction is much closer in India than in most Western countries. In general, a distance of about 2 or 2 ½ feet is seen as comfortable. However, since India has very high population density, in public spaces [e.g., public transport, a queue, etc.], don't be surprised if you find people almost rubbing against you.

The public spaces [e.g., markets, roads, public transportation, etc.] in India are far more crowded than in the West. You need to be careful while crossing roads, and of pick-pockets who can steal your purse/wallet.

Being a poor country, you are likely to find beggars in most public places. It is advisable to ignore them, since if you give them alms, you are likely to be pestered by many others.

Most Indians are very courteous to foreigners. However, many also see foreigners as a target for being swindled. You need to be careful about people who try to give you 'great deals'--do check their credentials before giving them money.