

India Cultural Etiquette



Meeting and Greeting

- Westerners may shake hands, however, greeting with 'namaste' (na-mas-TAY) (placing both hands together with a slight bow) is appreciated and shows respect for Indian customs.
- Men shake hands with men when meeting or leaving. Men do not touch women when meeting or greeting. Western women may offer their hand to a westernized Indian man, but not normally to others. Traditional Indian women may shake hands with foreign women but not usually with men.

Body Language

- Public displays of affection are not proper.
- Indians generally allow an arm's length space between themselves and others. Don't stand close to Indians. Indians value personal space.
- Indian men may engage in friendly back patting merely as a sign of friendship.
- When an Indian smiles and jerks his/her head backward -- a gesture that looks somewhat like a Western "no" -- or moves his head in a figure 8, this means "yes."
- The Western side-to-side hand wave for "hello" is frequently interpreted by Indians as "no" or "go away."
- Use your right hand only to touch someone, pass money or pick up merchandise. The left hand is considered unclean.
- Do not touch anyone's head. The head is considered sensitive.
- Feet are considered unclean. Feet are sacred for holy men and women. Pointing footwear at people is considered an insult.
- Indians are very sensitive to being beckoned rudely. Hand and arm waved up and down (Western "good-bye") means "come here." To beckon, extend your arm, palm down and make a scratching motion with fingers kept together.
- Never point with a single finger or two fingers (used only with inferiors). Point with your chin, whole hand or thumb. The chin is not used to point at superiors.

Corporate Culture

- Business cards are exchanged and Indians are very conscious of the protocol. Always present business cards when introduced. English is appropriate for business cards.

- Decisions are strongly influenced from the top. Usually one person makes all major decisions. Attempt to deal with the highest-level person available.
- It is considered rude to plunge into business discussions immediately. Ask about your counterpart's family, interests, hobbies, etc. before beginning business discussions.
- Business is slow and difficult in India. Be polite, but persistent. Do not get angry if you are told something "can't be done." Instead, restate your request firmly but with a smile. Plan on several visits before you reach an agreement.
- You may be offered a sugary, milky tea, coffee or a soft drink. Don't refuse. Note that your glass or cup may be refilled as soon as it is emptied.
- Indian counterparts may not show up for scheduled meetings. Be prepared to reschedule.

Dining and Entertainment

- Initial business entertainment is done in restaurants in prestigious hotels. Business can be discussed during meals. Allow your host to initiate business conversation.
- Never flatly refuse an invitation to a home or dinner of a business counterpart; if you can't make it, offer a plausible excuse.
- Spouses are often included in social/business functions.
- Strict orthodox Muslims don't drink any alcohol. Most Hindus, especially women, do not consume alcohol.
- Arrive 15-30 minutes later than the stated time for a dinner party.
- At a social gathering a garland of flowers is often placed around a guest's neck. Remove it after a few minutes and carry it in your hand to show humility.
- Allow hosts to serve you. Never refuse food, but don't feel obligated to empty your plate. Hindu hosts are never supposed to let their guests' plates be empty.
- If hosts eat with hands, assure them you enjoy doing the same. If utensils are not used, use your right hand and your first three fingers and thumb only.
- Take food from communal dish with a spoon; never your fingers. Use chappati or poori (bread) torn into small chunks to scoop up food.
- The host pays for guests in a restaurant.
- Guests give gifts to the host and the host's children as a "thank you."
- You should reciprocate invitations with a meal of comparable value. Never invite someone to a far more lavish dinner -- it might embarrass them.

Dress

- For business, men should wear suits and ties. During summer months, you may omit the jacket.
- Women should wear conservative pantsuits or dresses.

Gifts

- Give gifts with both hands. Gifts are not normally opened in the presence of the giver.
- Gifts from your country are appreciated (perfume, chocolates, small china or crystal objects).
- Gifts are not normally expected at the first meeting. Gifts may be given once a relationship develops.

Helpful Hints

- When an Indian answers, "I will try," he or she generally means "no." This is considered a polite "no."
- Many Indians do not wear shoes inside a home. Follow your host. Make sure your socks are clean and do not have holes.
- Apologize immediately if your feet or shoes touch another person.
- Ask permission before smoking. It is considered rude to smoke in the presence of elders.
- Do not show anger.

Especially for Women

- India is a difficult place to do business, but particularly tough for women. India is a male-dominated society. Western women may be accepted, but must establish their position and title immediately to warrant acceptance.
- Women might not be included in social events or conversation.
- Western women may invite an Indian man to a business lunch and pay the tab without embarrassment.

Resource: http://www.ediplomat.com/np/cultural_etiquette/ce_in.htm