



# India - Language, Culture, Customs and Etiquette

## Facts and Statistics

**Capital:** New Delhi

**Population:** Approximately 1,338,696,600 (April 2017).

**Religions:** Hindu 81.3%, Muslim 12%, Christian 2.3%, Sikh 1.9%, other 2.5%.

**Government:** Federal republic.

## Languages

The states of India all have different official languages, some of them not recognized by the central government. Some states have more than one official language. Bihar in east India has three official languages - Hindi, Urdu and Bengali - which are all recognized by the central government. But Sikkim, also in east India, has four official languages of which only Nepali is recognized by the central government. Besides the languages officially recognized by the government, there are other languages and their speakers are struggling to get recognition.



## Society & Culture

### Hierarchy

- The influences of Hinduism and the tradition of the caste system have created a culture that emphasizes established hierarchical relationships.
- Indians are always conscious of social order and their status relative to other people - family, friends or strangers.
- In schools, teachers are called gurus and are viewed as the source of all knowledge. The patriarch, usually the father, is considered the leader of the family. Every relationship has a clear hierarchy that must be observed for the social order to be maintained.
- The "extended family" in India creates a myriad of interrelationships, rules, and structures. Along with mutual obligations comes a deep-rooted trust between relatives.



### Just Can't Say No

Indians don't like to say 'no'. Instead of disappointing you, they will offer you the response that they think you want to hear. This behaviour should not be considered dishonest. An Indian would be considered very rude if he did not try to give a person what he wanted. Since they do not like to give negative answers, Indians may give an affirmative answer but be deliberately vague about any specific details.

### Greeting People

- Due to the hierarchical culture, greet the oldest or most senior person first.
- When leaving a group, you must say goodbye to every person individually.
- Shaking hands is common. Men may shake hands with other men, and women may shake hands with other women. However, men and women do not shake hands because of religious beliefs.

## Names

### Hindus:

- In the north, many people have both a given name and a surname. In the south, surnames are less common and a person generally uses the initial of their father's name in front of their own name.
- The man's formal name is their name "s/o" (son of) and the father's name. Women use "d/o" to refer to themselves as the daughter of their father.
- At marriage, women drop their father's name and use their first name with their husband's first name as a surname.

### Muslims:

- Many Muslims do not have surnames. Instead, men add the father's name to their own name with the connector '*bin*'. So, **Abdullah bin Ahmed** is Abdullah the son of Ahmad. Women use the connector '*binti*'.

### Sikhs:

- Sikhs all use the name '*Singh*'. It is used as a surname or before the surname.

## Gifts

- Indians believe that giving gifts eases the transition into the next life.
- It is not the value of the gift, but the sincerity with which it is given, that is important to the recipient.
- Yellow, green and red are lucky colours, so try to use them to wrap gifts.
- Hindus should not be given gifts made of leather.
- Muslims should not be given gifts containing pigskin or alcohol.
- Gifts are not opened when received.

## Food and Entertaining

- Although Indians are not always punctual, they expect foreigners to be.
- Take off your shoes before entering the house.
- Always dress conservatively.
- Politely refuse the first offer of tea, coffee, or snacks. You will be asked again, and then you can accept. Saying no the first time is considered polite.
- Hindus do not eat beef and many are vegetarians. Muslims do not eat pork or drink alcohol. Sikhs do not eat beef.
- Lamb, chicken, and fish are the most commonly served main courses for non-vegetarian meals as they avoid the meat restrictions of the various religious groups.
- Much Indian food is eaten with the fingers.
- Wait to be told where to sit.
- The guest of honour 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. Always comply.
- Always use your right hand to eat, whether you are using utensils or your fingers.
- Leaving a small amount of food on your plate indicates that you are satisfied. Finishing all your food means that you are still hungry and will be expected to eat more.