

INDIAN CULTURE

1. General

This presentation is about the Indian culture in India. The culture of the Indians here in South Africa is more westernized in various degrees, depending on the generation.

India does not have a single homogeneous culture that pervades the whole country. India has been formed from many different states that have been joined together over time, hence there are a huge variation of distinct cultures. It is often said: “no matter what you say about India, the opposite is also true”.

Indians are typically friendly and hospitable people. Indian logic is significantly different from the Western. For Indians, the feeling level is primary and it is essential not to hurt people’s feelings. Indians have developed a subtle and complex style of communicating that gives priority to preserving each other’s emotional wellbeing. However, because India is a hierarchical society, this principle applies to guests, elders, equals and superiors, but not necessarily to those of lower status.

Izzat is one’s honour, self-respect and self-esteem. How much respect is given to a person is determined by strict but unwritten hierarchical rules, which every Indian learns from infancy. These rules govern all aspects of behaviour in India, and how individuals and groups relate to each other. An essential part of izzat, honour is face. The Indian place an enormous importance on saving face.

It is important to respect all religions in India. Insulting any religion can be dangerous to the person doing it.

Indians tend to do whatever needs to be done without a fuss. For instance, poor people do not have the luxury of being finicky about where and how to sleep. Many people simply spread a cloth or newspaper on the floor and wrap themselves up in a blanket, or even lie right on the ground without anything. This is the norm for poor people everywhere in India. Preconceived signs of poverty we may recognize are sometimes just plain old cultural differences. In some places, people favour sleeping on mats on the floor rather than in beds, prefer walking barefoot and are accustomed to eating with their fingers.

Jugarh is a word that means improvisation, finding alternative ways of doing things, making do with resources at hand, or taking adverse

situations and finding a way to turn them around. This creative ability is an essential part of the national spirit and is found everywhere: in the educated and uneducated, the rich and the poor alike. However, many of the greatest masters of *jugarh* are extremely poor people who have little or no education. They have to be, in order to survive.

2. The Indian way to say “no”

Very frustrating for non-Indians is the problem of understanding the subtleties that Indians use in communicating yes and no. Because the conversations are so different from those of most other cultures, non-Indians typically have trouble understanding the tendency of Indians to say yes when they really mean no. To Westerners who don't understand the cultural context, this may seem really insincere, but it's really a different style of communicating. Someone may be saying the word yes, but simultaneously signalling no. Indians generally know perfectly what it meant. Because the culture give great importance to honour – for which reason it's considered rude to cause someone to be uncomfortable, embarrassed or upset – Indians typically will do almost anything to avoid overtly saying no. The word no is considered harsh and even downright rude in many circumstances. When an Indian wobbles his head from side to side it means yes or ok rather than no, as many Westerners expect. This wobble is a movement of the head from side to side in sort of a figure eight. Although this head-wobble is common in many parts of India, there are also many places where it is not used at all, so you have to observe, what the local custom is. No problem, sure, ok and other similar expressions have the same essential function. Without any other positive indications, they are just polite words of acknowledgement and nothing more. A genuine yes answer will normally followed by a definite statement that clarifies the matter, and may also be accompanied by the head-wobble described above or a local equivalent. Watch the body language as you listen to what the person says as well what he/she doesn't say, which is equally important. Indications of discomfort usually mean that the answer is no. Negative answers are necessarily subtle, and this is where you get into trouble. When a person is not saying a clear and definite yes, most probably it is meaning no. “I will try” might mean exactly that, but more often means no. “I let you know” most likely means no. Don't expect that you get an answer. Changing the subject instead of answering the question is a clear indication of a negative answer. Responses that contain words

like maybe usually mean no. A common nonverbal way of saying no is to hold the hand up and rotate it from side to side as if in greeting (so don't wave like this to mean hello). It can also mean "go away" or "I really don't care". Accompanied with a smile, however, it can also mean maybe. Questions should be put in a way that do not require a yes or no answer. For instance, instead of asking the driver whether he knows how to get to an address, ask him where it is. If he says he will ask someone or if he simply can't answer coherently, it means he doesn't know. For example if you are trying to buy a pure cotton shirt, ask what the shirt is made of rather than asking if it is pure cotton. Don't let the merchant know what you want or he/she will simply tell you what you want to hear.

2. Indian Body Language

Many physical gestures have different meanings in India than in the West. You can beckon someone to come to you by holding your palm down and bringing your hand towards yourself in a sweeping motion. This gesture is also the proper way to hail a taxi, rickshaw, etc.

Pointing at people with the index finger is considered rude and accusatory in India. Indians gesture with the whole hand instead. Indians sometimes point with their chins, though this is not acceptable if pointing to someone older or of higher status.

Avoid standing with hands on hips with elbows out or Indians may think you are angry and aggressive.

A jerky forward thrust of the chin is an unrefined way of asking people what they want. It can also mean something like "What's this all about?" But in some places, tossing the head back, if accompanied with a smile, can also mean yes.

Winking is considered rude because it has sexual connotations.

3. Many ways to Say "Hello"

There are many different traditional greetings in India, but the most common is Namaste, which is said with hands pressed together at chest height with fingers pointed up. Namaste is understood almost everywhere, even if other greetings are locally preferred, and is used for both formal and informal greetings. When greeting an older person, or someone of higher status, one can also say namaskar, which seems slightly more

formal, though some people always prefer to use namaskar. You can also bow your head slightly, but you should generally look at the person you are greeting. It is enough to perform the gesture without speaking, and the meaning will be understood. Many people just touch their right hand to their heart in silent greeting.

Because India's culture is hierarchical, you should always greet the eldest and most senior people of a group first, and then continue down the social scale to the youngest, most junior person. You should also take leave of each person individually. This is especially important in Business contexts, where it is expected.

4. Conversing with Indians

As Indians will typically start off by asking personal questions about you and your family, it's good to reciprocate with similar questions about theirs. Indians – especially those who are used to seeing foreigners – are prone to asking questions that may seem too intimate, often within minutes of being introduced. This is because they are trying to zero in on your social and economic coordinates to know who you are in terms of social standing, wealth, power, family, education, connections, religion, respectability, etc., all of which comprises a person's *auqat*, or place in the social hierarchy. The rules of social interactions, which have everything to do with *auqat*, are deeply ingrained in every Indian from infancy. For most Indians, caste is still a major part of this equation. *Auqat* determines how much respect you will be given and how you will be treated in any particular situation, so it is intimately connected with your *izzat* or honour.

Indian society is exceptionally hierarchical. In any significant inequality in terms of age or social standing, there is a certain amount of avoidance of one sort or another. For instance as a sign of respect, Indians typically don't make eye contact when talking to someone who is older or of higher status.

5. Sexual Issues

When it comes to sex, most Indians are extremely conservative. Sexual matters are considered private and are rarely discussed. Also, men and women don't mix as freely as in Western countries. Physical contact with a person of the opposite sex is a cultural taboo that should be respected in public. Even holding hands is not acceptable in most places.

In traditional Indian society, there is considerable separation between men and women. Men are expected to keep a respectful distance from women they are not married to, and they are also expected to refrain from any physical contact in public, however slight. For a man to touch a woman in public, regardless of the intention, is offensive almost everywhere in Indian society. In extremely conservative communities, it is forbidden for any man but the husband to even look at the face of his wife. In a typical gathering, men and ladies won't mix much, and they may be seated on opposite sides of the room.

Men should refrain from addressing a woman who is walking or sitting alone. It's inappropriate and may be taken as a sexual proposition no matter how innocent the intentions.

Casually touching people whilst talking to them is inappropriate at least with someone of the opposite sex. Even shaking hands with someone of the opposite sex should be avoided except in international corporate settings.

On the other hand Indians often hold hands with people of the same sex as a matter of friendship. This is not usually an indicator of homosexuality. If someone of the same sex takes your hand, try to refrain from squirming. If you pull away, the person will be deeply offended. Just accept their action as the gesture of friendship it is meant to be.

It is considered inappropriate for a man to compliment an Indian woman who is not his wife or close relative. And refrain from complimenting young children. Many people are afraid that compliments will attract envy or misfortune, so you should try to resist the temptation to tell the mother how beautiful or how cute her children are, especially if she is from a traditional family.

Few people in India know how to swim well. If you swim anywhere other than in a swimming pool, you will have many people watching you with great interest and possibly alarm.

6. Indian Hospitality

Indians are extraordinarily hospitable people. For most people it's a point of honour and a sacred duty to feed one's guests and take care of their needs. Likewise being a guest is likewise important, as it gives others the opportunity to serve you.

It is traditional to greet a guest with a garland, although you may not get this treatment very often. The garland is usually accompanied by a tilak (application of sandalwood paste or a red powder on the

forehead). Whenever you are given a garland, the proper response is to take it immediately off to show humility.

When someone invites you for dinner, you should always say that you would love to come, whether you really want to come or not. If you intend to accept the invitation, you should arrange a specific date and time.

Otherwise the plan will likely be forgotten. Refusing an invitation outright is impolite, and doing so may even be regarded as a sign of arrogance. You should avoid making a definite commitment if you know you may not be able to keep it.

When invited for dinner arriving right on time is generally considered impolite. Generally one should arrive 15-30 minutes late. Dinner can easily be served an hour or two late. Most socializing is done before dinner. Indian guests typically leave immediately after dinner.

In a traditional Indian home the whole family rarely sits down together. Guests are served first, then the men, then the women and children. The cook, whether it's the wife or someone else, generally eats last. In any case, traditional wife usually doesn't eat until she has finished serving everyone else. In many parts of India, to leave a little bit on your plate is a sign that you are full; otherwise, your hosts will keep piling on. In other places, however it is considered disrespectful not to finish everything that is on your plate.

It's impolite to thank your hosts for a meal. Instead, tell your hosts how delicious the food is. You can also invite them for a meal in return, which will show them that you value the relationship you have with them.

While you are sure to enjoy Indian hospitality in general, there may be times when you don't feel up to eating anything. In that case you can often get away with just having tea. When your hosts are determined to feed you, getting out of a meal can be tricky. By far surest and most polite way to get out of eating is to tell your hosts, that you are fasting, regardless of the real reason. Fasting is understood and appreciated by virtually everyone, and no offence will be taken.

Most Indians feel that by honouring a guest, one is honouring God and this idea that hospitality is a sacred duty is deeply embedded in the culture.

Indians generally don't show up at the specified time, since punctuality is considered poor form in most circles. Most guests will be at least 15 minutes late, and some may not show up at all, perhaps due to family or business crisis that has suddenly arisen. On the other hand, some of your guests will probably bring friends – another quite normal practice in India.

While traditional Hindus and Jains are vegetarians, many westernized Hindus eat some non-vegetarian food, but not beef. Jains are usually pure vegetarians, and strict Jains don't eat dairy products, eggs, onions, garlic, potatoes and other root vegetables, and sometimes chillies. Most Buddhists (with the exception of some Tibetan Buddhists) and many Sikhs are vegetarians. Muslims are usually non-vegetarians, but they don't eat pork, and many don't eat crab and duck. Many Indians observe specific dietary restrictions during certain religious festivals and/or from alcohol. Although many Indians drink alcohol, from the point of view of religion, it is generally unacceptable. Most Indian women don't drink, even if their husbands do.

Indian rarely eat anything without offering some to however whoever is present. It would be considered extremely rude, for instance, if you were out with friends and stopped to buy yourself an ice cream without offering to buy one for everyone.

7. Hindu Wedding

Hindu wedding traditionally last a few days. Many different ceremonies are involved, most of which you will not be likely to witness. The one you will see most often is when the groom will ride a white horse or horse-drawn chariot through the streets to the marriage hall. The groom is typically preceded by a uniformed band playing cacophonous tunes at ear-splitting levels; several people carrying tall arrays of flashing lights on their heads; a big, noisy generator to provide power for the lights and amplifiers; and a group of male friends dancing wildly as the procession moves slowly through the streets, along with an entourage of relative, friends and bystanders.

The actual marriage rites, which are almost always religious in nature are typically followed by a reception with music blaring from poor quality loudspeakers at top volume for several hours. Alas, musical ability does not seem to be a prerequisite for most bands! If you are invited to a wedding, unless you are hard of hearing and love music, which is deafeningly loud, bring along some earplugs and comb your hair so it covers them if possible. They won't even begin to block out everything, but at least they should prevent any damage. Most Indians seem a little hard of hearing, and weddings are surely one of the chief causes.

After the marriage the bride typically goes to the broom's house, which may be shared with a large joint family including parents and grandparents together with several brothers and their families along with,

perhaps with a few others under the same roof or in the same compound. In a traditional family, the mother-in-law instruct the new bride in her duties, and the bride serves her in-laws as well as her husband. In a large extended family, the oldest married (not widowed) woman in the house rules over all the others, so there is a certain pecking order. Although most interactions between them, will be behind scenes this point may help you understand the household politics in an extended family, as well as the hierarchy.

Upscale big city weddings are astoundingly flashy: the ladies typically wear designer silk saris or suits covered with gold embroidery, beads, sequins, crystals etc., and accessorized with an incredible amount of flashy jewellery as well. Even for modest weddings, people put on their best clothes and jewellery.

Most marriages are still arranged by the relatives of the bride and groom, although this trend has been changing, especially in the metropolitan areas. Foreigners from cultures where individuality and personal freedom of choice are valued most highly tend to be extremely critical of arranged marriages. However, this issue is not as simple and straight-cut as it may seem. In India, family and tradition are far more important than the individual; and marriages arranged by families who care deeply about their children's happiness and wellbeing are often very successful.

Dowry is a touchy subject in India, so you should avoid the subject or at least keep your questions about dowry general and refrain from getting personal. As noted above, although most people agree, at least in public, that dowry is a bad thing, the practice continues anyway. Even though there are significantly more boys than girls in India, the parents of girls are often afraid that without giving dowry they won't find a husband for them.

It's traditional for women to have mehendi (henna) designs drawn on their hands and sometimes also on their feet when they are attending weddings or other celebrations. They are essentially temporary tattoos that usually take several days to wear off. The black henna often contains a dye that can cause serious skin reactions.

Married women who are Hindu typically wear a bindi or decoration between the eyebrows. These are distinct from tilaks, dabs of red or orange paste on the forehead that are a form of Prasad given at the temple to both sexes of any ages. In addition to the bindi, many women wear red powder (sindur) along the part in their hair that also symbolises their status as a married woman.

8. Hands and Feet

In India, everyone who is physically able to do so uses the left hand for toilet functions, so it is considered unclean. Avoid eating and giving or taking anything with the left hand. Gifts are always received with both hands. The left hand can be together with the right hand or else just supporting the right wrist. It is customary to wash your hands before giving or receiving prasad – which is any food or other item that has been offered in a religious ceremony or at a temple – or any sacred item. In Indian culture, the act of giving is much more important than the gift itself or even whether the recipient actually likes the gift. Gift giving should never be careless. When given with sincerity, a humble gift is greater than the most expensive and beautiful gift given reluctantly or from a mere desire to impress.

Never point your feet at any person or at any religious shrine or image of a deity, especially the soles of the feet, because doing so is a great insult. The feet are considered unclean – and shoes are even worse than feet. Sitting Western-style with one foot resting on the other knee, because your foot will almost always be pointed at someone, and that person may be offended.

Always apologize if your shoes or feet accidentally touch another person. This apology doesn't have to be verbal, though. Indians often make this kind of apology with a little gesture, first extending the palm of the right hand towards the person the person and then bringing it back towards the heart. If you put your feet up on a chair, take your shoes off. Shoes should always kept on the floor.

Sometimes young people touching the feet of elders. This is a way of showing respect or seeking blessings. By tradition people also receive the blessings of saints by touching their feet. In many other circumstances as well, people will touch the feet of someone, but the person whose feet are being touched is always superior in position and/or age.

If a child touches your feet, accept this gesture gracefully and touch lightly on the head or shoulder as a blessing. Just as soon as they learn to walk, children from traditional families are taught to touch the feet of elders to receive their blessings. If an adult touches your feet, it's customary to tell the person that it's not necessary and take the persons arms to raise the person, though you can also give your blessing in the same way. In India the head is regarded as the seat of the soul; so apart from giving your blessing, never touch anyone's head.

If a beggar tries to touch your feet, you can just back away and say no. Putting your hand up with palm directed towards the beggar to indicate that

she/he should not come closer also serves the purpose of giving a blessing, the gesture is essentially the same, though it's not what she/he is after.

Shoes are often left at the door of Indian homes and always outside temples at shrines. Anytime you see shoes at the door, you should always assume that you should take yours off, too.

9. Other Points of Etiquette

Always let people do their duty, especially when you are a guest in someone's house or even at a hotel. This is especially important in business contexts, where you should take care not to lower yourself in any way. Indians get upset if they see you do any work that they consider part of their job, especially when it's something menial – even something as simple as carrying your own suitcase to the door, or taking a cup to the kitchen.

Whistling is considered rude because it has sexual connotations.

It is inappropriate to smell flowers that are for sale in a shop or that are to be offered for a religious ceremony or at a temple, or to be given to someone as a gift. The reasoning here is that smelling a flower is like taking a bite out of an apple, only it's much subtler.

10. The Caste System

Caste is still an essential part of the average Indian's identity. So even though many people would like to dismantle India's caste system, it is still deeply embedded in society. There are four major casts – Brahmins are the priestly caste; Kshatriyas the warrior's class; Vaishyas the merchants; and Shudras the workers – but there are also many others, and every cast has sub-castes. There are also those who are considered to be lower than Shudras or without a caste. They are, from the point of view of the government, all lumped together as Dalit, with the exception of the tribal peoples. Dalit (“Oppressed”) is the politically correct name at the moment; they were formerly called Harijans, (“Children of God”). The most politically incorrect name, one that should be never used, is “Untouchable.” Most Dalits belong to the so-called “Scheduled Castes.” The many tribal peoples of India, who are also called Adivasis, are allotted “Scheduled Tribe” status.

Ironically, the government of India continues to propagate the caste system by making “reservations” for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (which are considered to be disadvantaged and backward) in education and government, as well as allotting them special welfare benefits. This policy has caused much divisiveness and disharmony, but there is no end in sight.

There are many rules of conduct specific to each particular caste and sub-caste. The highest Brahmin castes have the most complex and stringent rules, which not only determine who one can marry, which foods are allowed, what work one can do, etc., but also include very rigid rules relating to contact with people of lower castes. Strict rituals of purification are prescribed in case one has become polluted by contact with something or someone forbidden.

The caste system was originally about a person’s work and family dharma. It wasn’t until later that it became the abusive system that it is today. The idea was that when a family has been doing the same kind of work for many generations, then that activity comes easily and most successfully to them and their descendants, and it was thus felt to be the most evolutionary activity. This aspect of the concept of caste – the family duty or dharma – is still a practical reality for many Indians, right along with the oppression and abuse that they may suffer as a result of that dharma. . People in certain areas of India (particularly the northern parts) can be very cruel to people of low casts.