

# India – people, culture, communication

## A guide for businesses



### The country

The subcontinent of India lies in South Asia, between Pakistan, China and Nepal. It covers a total land area of 3.3 million square kilometres – around 13 times the size of the UK. With just over one billion citizens, India is the second most populous nation in the world, after China. 28% of the population lives in urban areas, and 14 million live in the capital city, New Delhi. India is a democratic republic made up of 25 states and seven union territories.

The Indian subcontinent holds as many variations in religion, customs, art and cuisine as it does in topography. Its multilingual population speaks over 800 dialects, and the constitution recognises 18 regional languages. English is the major language of trade and politics.



India's history stretches back more than 5,000 years, and experts believe that a sea trade existed between north-western India and the Persian Gulf from 2000 B.C. Aryan tribes from the northwest invaded about 1500 B.C., and their merger with the earlier inhabitants created the classical Indian culture. Arab incursions starting in the 8th century and Turkish in the 12th were followed by European traders, beginning in the late 15th century.

By the 19th century, Britain had assumed political control of virtually all Indian lands. Nonviolent resistance to British colonialism under Mohandas 'Mahatma' Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru led to independence in 1947. The subcontinent was divided into the secular state of India and the smaller Muslim state of Pakistan.

Today the northern states of Haryana, Punjab, Himachal Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Jammu and Kashmir, together with the Union Territories of Delhi and Chandigarh, are the powerhouse of the economy. Punjab, described as India's breadbasket, has the highest per-capita income.

### The people



Painting of Mahatma ('Great Soul') Gandhi in the Gandhi museum, Madurai, S. India. PHOTO: [www.geocities.com](http://www.geocities.com)

India is an ancient civilisation and its people have a predominantly religious attitude to life, marked by clear authority structures and distinct social status lines. The Indian government is committed to breaking down caste differences; however, it is important to remember that certain values and attitudes enable Indians who live in extreme poverty to understand and accept their lot in life, even if it is not easy to bear.

India is one of the most ethnically diverse places in the world, and its distinctive culture is the product of numerous waves of migration over several thousand years. It is a nation of contrasts: though it is economically self-sustaining, 46% of its adults remain illiterate. Infosys Park in Bangalore, India's answer to Silicon Valley, generates \$4 billion per year and has an annual growth rate of 50%; meanwhile, more than 300 million Indians live in abject poverty with no pure drinking water, primary health care or basic sanitation.

### Business culture & etiquette

#### Hierarchy:

- The hierarchical nature of Indian society demands that the boss is recognised as the highest individual in authority. When establishing business contacts, aim for those in the highest position of authority since decisions are made only at this level. In any event, you will often find that subordinates are reluctant to accept responsibility.

#### Establishing relationships:

- In India, there is no business without friendship, and credibility is established through relationships. You may find that people are reluctant to do business with strangers, so try to make initial contact indirectly through intermediaries.

- In meetings, take plenty of time to build up trust before getting down to business. Always present your business card (you do not need to translate it into an Indian language).

- It is important to maintain harmony, avoid conflict and confrontation during discussions. Mask any feelings of frustration with a smile. Negotiators tend to be sensitive to honour, 'saving face' (*izzat*), dignity and self respect. It is important not to allow your host to 'lose face' (avoid, for example, contradicting your host in public).

#### Perception of time:

- Schedules and deadlines tend to be quite flexible. Indians appreciate punctuality but don't always practise it themselves. Keep your schedule flexible enough for last-minute changes.

## Language

- **Official language:** Hindi is the official national language and is spoken by about 45% of the population.
- **Multilingual society:** over 800 dialects are spoken, and the Indian constitution recognises 18 regional languages.
- **English:** is the authoritative legislative and judicial language, and is widely used in finance and higher education.

## Tips for effective communication

### 1. Be clear and concise

- Less is more: use short, simple sentences.
- Don't use idioms, irony, jargon or dialect expressions.

### 2. Speak more slowly

- Communicate your message in bite-size chunks, and pause regularly.

### 3. Reinforce your message

- Maintain eye contact so your listener benefits from facial expression and lip movement.
- Help your audience understand by getting **LOUDER** on key words and using intonation to communicate meaning.
- 'Triangulate' your ideas: repeat them three times in slightly different ways.

### 4. Double-check understanding

- Yours and theirs! Jot down names, numbers and technicalities.
- Ask your audience to repeat key points or arrangements back to you.

### 5. Be open-minded

- Ask open-ended questions.
- Be objective and build on others' ideas. Listen to make sure you've understood accurately.
- Suspend judgement and don't reach conclusions too quickly.

## Body language: some tips

- **The head tilt:** this distinctive rotational movement of the head has several meanings: with a smile, it can mean "yes", "I understand" or "maybe". Often, it means "I couldn't care less!" A more vigorous head tilt can signify excitement or an angry rebuttal.
- **Whistling, winking** and **pointing** are considered rude. Indians point with a jerk of the chin.
- Grasping your own **ears** signifies repentance or sincerity.

## Women in business

Though women have occupied top positions in Indian society, by Western standards India is quite chauvinistic. A woman inviting a male colleague to her hotel room for a business meeting, for example, is quite likely to be misunderstood. Indian men prefer shy, self-effacing women and are generally not accustomed to dealing with women in authority. Being warm, friendly and natural should help ease the situation.

## Sources

Research and text: CIA Factbook [www.cia.gov](http://www.cia.gov)  
UK Trade & Investment [www.uktradeinvest.gov.uk](http://www.uktradeinvest.gov.uk)  
Mattock, J. (1999) *The Cross-cultural Business Pocketbook*. [www.pocketbook.co.uk](http://www.pocketbook.co.uk)  
Kuperard (2003) *Culture Smart! India*. [www.cultureshockconsulting.com](http://www.cultureshockconsulting.com)  
Donna Humphrey, Senior Lecturer, Nottingham Trent University [www.ntu.ac.uk](http://www.ntu.ac.uk)

Map: [www.geocities.com](http://www.geocities.com) and [www.donalbain.de](http://www.donalbain.de)  
Photographs:

Information correct on 18 November 2004.

## Religion

**Hinduism:** over 80% of Indians are Hindus. Hinduism has no founder or prophet and reincarnation is its basic tenet. Hindus believe their present position in life is on account of their karma or actions in past lives. People live their lives in accordance with a predetermined destiny, and life is a cycle of births and rebirths. The ultimate quest is for *moksha* or liberation from the life cycle by living a pure and perfect life. Popular Hindu deities include Brahma, the creator, Vishnu, the preserver, and Shiva, the destroyer. The three are often depicted in a trinity.



Taj Mahal in the morning.  
PHOTO: Jörg Lippmann, [www.donalbain.de](http://www.donalbain.de)

### An essential part of doing business:

Hinduism is central to life in India and permeates work, education and politics. In offices, it is common to see prayers offered to a Hindu deity. If you are setting up a new project, plant or machinery, your Indian counterpart will most likely pick an auspicious date based on astrological advice.

**Other religions:** Muslims number around 10% of the population. Christians, Sikhs, Jains, Buddhists and Bahais also have a strong religious presence.

## Social customs: some tips

**Greetings:** there are several styles of greetings in use, so it is best to wait for your counterpart to initiate the greeting. The traditional Indian greeting is the **namaste**. To perform the *namaste*, hold the palms of your hands together (as if praying) below the chin, nod or bow slightly, and say "namaste" [nah-mas-tay].

**Gifts:** many Indians are exceedingly generous, and you may be invited to their homes. Business and hospitality are intrinsically linked. Once you arrive at an Indian home, you will sometimes be adorned with a garland of flowers, which you should remove immediately as a sign of humility. When receiving a gift, it is customary not to open it in front of the giver. When offered a gift, it is impolite to refuse it.

**Dining:** washing your hands both before and after a meal is essential. When refreshments are offered, it is customary to refuse the first offer, but to accept the second or third. To refuse any beverage will only be perceived as insult. Most traditional Indians are teetotalers and vegetarian, so their eating habits need to be respected. Westernised Indians are more outgoing and do socialise and drink alcohol.

**Left hand:** do not use your left hand, particularly when eating: it is considered unclean. Gesture and eat with your right hand.

**Shoes:** are often removed before entering a building – follow the lead of your host. Feet are considered unclean, so never touch anyone else with your shoes or feet.

## Signposting and resources

- **BLIS Professionals** ([www.blis.org.uk/professionals](http://www.blis.org.uk/professionals)) – an online, quality-assured database of translators, interpreters, language trainers and cultural consultants in your area. You can search for BLIS providers offering Indian languages services in the East Midlands.

**RLN East Midlands:** promoting a greater national capability in language and cultural skills for business and employment.  
Tel: 0115 854 1399  
Fax: 0115 854 1617  
[www.rln-eastmidlands.com](http://www.rln-eastmidlands.com)