



INDIA – what to expect

“Khamaghani” - Welcome to India!

India is a land of contrasts and diversity with a rich culture. The following brief guide will tell you what to expect, how to behave and how to develop trust and friendships while in India.

Key Facts

- India is the **7th Largest country** in the world and the world's **2nd** most populous country, as you will see India is a very busy country with a population of over 1,129,866,154 (July 2007 Stats).
- The Religion of India is quite diverse with **83% Hindus**, 11% Muslims, 2.5% Christians, 2% Sikhs, 1.5% Buddhists. The official language of India is Hindi, although many people speak English, especially within the cities.
- The time difference in India is GMT +4.5 hours (Summer) and GMT +5.5 hours (Winter). India's Country Telephone code is **0091** and the cheapest form of contact during your time in India is through the use of an Indian Sim card, which are widely available.
- India is a very diverse country full of contrasts, yet more than **one third of the world's poor live in India**, mainly in the rural areas.

India's Religions and Beliefs

Hinduism is the dominant religion in India (83%) so most customs and beliefs are based on a Hindu perspective. Taboos are attached to all religions in India- For Hindus, one must be aware of the sacredness of the cow and the avoidance of cowhide products (such as shoes and bags), and for Muslims, there is a taboo regarding pork and pigskin products.

Hinduism

Hindu is a very important religion, having over 800 million followers. Hindus themselves often use the term '*Sanatana dharma*,' to refer to their religion as this means the 'the eternal way of life.' The Vedic Scriptures are the authoritative basis for Hinduism and a central belief is the existence of a cosmic or natural order, a balanced way of living- physically, socially, ethically, and spiritually. Hindus believe in one God **Brahman the Supreme** and the Trimurti (the threefold manifestations) symbolize three aspects of Brahman; *Brahma* is the creator and first member of the trinity, *Vishnu* is the preserver or sustainer, and *Shiva* is the completer or destroyer.

Some animals, such as monkeys, snakes, elephants and eagles are revered in the Hindu faith, and temples to Hanuman, the monkey god, are to be found in every city, town and Hindu village.

The Caste System

One of the most talked about and least understood parts of Indian Society is the traditional Caste System, which affects politics, social relations and business. The caste system has evolved over thousands of years as a powerful way of organizing an enormous amount of people. Hindu society is divided into four main castes: *Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Sudras*. These four castes are traditionally said to have been created by Brahma from different parts of his body, descending in power from the Brahmins to the Sudras. However, there are further castes below these four, and one, which makes up around 15% of India's population consists of the outcastes, or '**untouchables**' who do all the dirty 'unclean' occupations such as cleaning and waste disposal. The politically correct term for them is Scheduled Castes, although Mahatma Gandhi named them 'Harijan' meaning 'Children of God.' More recently, the name **Dalit** has been used, as this translates as 'down-trodden, oppressed' which many believe is a more appropriate term for the group.

The belief in Dharma (the obligation to accept one's condition and perform the duties assigned to it) and karma (the law of consequence/fate) are central to the whole principle of caste. It is believed that individuals are reincarnated on earth according to past behaviour, therefore a person's present situation is the consequence of past actions. Therefore, by being dharmic and obedient to the rules of their caste, it is believed they will have a chance to be born into a higher caste in future.

India's Values and Attitudes

Family Strength - Indians take great strength from their families, which are much larger and extended than in Western nations. The Indian family size is growing and often members of the family will work together to support the family business or occupation. Also, an important part of India's tradition is respect for elders, and this is shown in the respectful treatment of older family members. The father is seen as the head of the household: sons and daughters may live in the house until marriage and beyond.

Warmth and Gentleness - The Indians are taught to cultivate a spirit of warmth and hospitality to others, which mainly stems from their belief in karma and reincarnation. Indians generally greet each other and say goodbye with palms held together as if saying a prayer, and say 'namaste' which means 'I recognize the self in you.'

Food and Drink - Indian cuisine is very diverse, and there are hundreds of tastes and flavours to be tried. Indians are often very pleased with foreigners who are open to trying and tasting Indian food offered to them which they have not experienced before. Do not refuse refreshment in India without good reason as refusal is seen as an insult. Remember to always wash your hands before and after a meal, and that it is seen as unclean to eat with your left. It is not safe to drink unsterilised water in India so if possible drink water from a sealed bottle or drink water which has been boiled first. **Chai** is one of India's specialities, it is a sweet tea and will be offered to you at all times, everywhere you go in India.

Time - In India, time is not an important issue, Indians expect to put human relationships as a priority as they wish to spend time building these relations. Indians may take a long time to build up a strong relationship with someone new, so lots of time is invested often pays off, whereas time rationed usually doesn't. Three aspects of life you're assured of during a visit to India are slowness, delays and lots of paperwork. Punctuality is not usually an Indian quality, therefore your time in India may help to improve your levels of patience and tolerance!

Other Indian Values - Indian culture is **family orientated** and patriarchal. The strongly religious society has strong respect for age, tradition and sacred symbols. People dress and present themselves modestly and don't tolerate behaviour which goes against their religion. The Indians are very proud of their country and believe in simple material comforts and rich spiritual accomplishments and close family and social bonds. Some practical aspects of Indian society is the expectation and custom to remove your shoes when entering a traditional Hindu home. Also it is understood that the left hand is unclean, and is never used for eating with or shaking hands with people.

Attitudes towards Foreigners - The Indian people are friendly, polite and very interested in foreigners. Courtesy and hospitality to foreigners are ingrained in the Indian society, and you will probably be surprised and touched by acts of hospitality that cross religious boundaries.

Body Language - Body language in India is subtle but important. Nodding the head as in the West means 'yes' and shaking the head from side to side means 'no.' But the most common gesture in India is the rotational movement of the head from side to side which has several meanings. With a smile it may mean 'Okay I understand' or it could be 'maybe.' Traditionally the head and ears are sacred in Indian culture, so never pat a child on the head and the feet or shoes should not touch anyone else as they are considered unclean. Whistling and winking are seen as impolite, as is pointing with your finger.

Social Relationships and Physical Contact - As mentioned above, Indians place a great importance on family relationships and Indian families are extended, incorporating grandparents and other relatives. Also, an Indian wife will never say her husband's name aloud as it is considered disrespectful, as he is the head of the household. So when addressing him she will use other obscure references such as 'look here' or 'hello'.

Indians are not 'touchy feely' and disapprove of public displays of affection between the sexes. Physical contact between men and women, even a simple hug or kiss, is considered provocative behaviour and is strongly rejected by Indians. Also, it is not socially acceptable for an Indian woman to be touched by any male other than her husband or son, and then by her husband only in private. So males should not shake hands with an Indian woman unless she offers it first. You often see men holding hands in India, although this is a bonding gesture and has no sexual overtones.

Dress - The Indians are quite **conservative** in their dress and will expect you to dress neat and modestly in respect to their culture. Casual 'Western' dress in India is mostly unacceptable as many Indians are shocked to see a visitor to India in shorts and a vest/skimpy t-shirt. Therefore it is always best to **be cautious with how you dress**, and for women it is especially important to cover your chest, shoulders, midriff and knees, so as not to attract any unwelcome attention from Indian men or disapproving stares from locals. The amount of harassment received by a Western women is directly related to the amount of flesh she is exposing.

HAPPY STAY IN INDIA!