



India, the Goddess of Southeast Asia

by Anne Dean, Editorial Director, Living Abroad LLC

India is often depicted personified as a goddess, with the Himalayas representing her crown, and her two arms outstretched to Pakistan and Bangladesh. India's Ganges River is deemed holy, and being the primary source for the country's irrigation system, functions symbolically as its bloodline. India is a diverse country, not only in its many cultures and religions, but in its varied landscapes and climates.

India is considered to be the largest democracy in the world and has a parliamentary system of government. Its economy is predominantly agrarian, however, the country has a large manufacturing base and is known as one of the world's major industrial powers. During recent years, economic reforms and liberalization policies have enabled India to attract multinational companies. About 16 percent of all the world's people -- just over one billion -- live in India. It is surpassed only by China, which has a population of about 1.3 billion.

Many expatriates suffer culture shock during their initial time in India, as the way of life here differs greatly from that of other cultures. Luckily, there are many expatriate communities in all of the main cities. This diverse land of culture cannot be absorbed in one week or one month. It will take time to fully understand the magnitude of its vast differences. Expatriate workers tend to enjoy the relaxed pace of Indian workplaces, and are judging Indian job offers not solely by paycheck comparisons, as they find their money can go much further in India.

India is home to numerous different ethnic groups. Among the most prominent are the Tibetans in Ladakh, Kashmiris in the far North, Bengalis in the East, Aboriginals in the island areas and Dravidians in the South. In addition, Aryans, Europeans, Arabs and Mongolians populate the North and the Western Coast. Although these numerous ethnic groups have many different beliefs and traditions, it is their grand diversity that makes India such a powerful cultural entity.

Indians are extremely family oriented and exhibit strong ties to religion and the spirit. Their social mannerisms are subdued and self-controlled--evocative of a quiet self-confidence. Displaying affection to another person in public, even to a spouse, is considered improper. While Indians enjoy asking people about their personal preferences, such as interests, hobbies, and sports activities, it is best to avoid discussing issues such as sex, political situations, religions or even the weather.

When meeting someone for the first time, the typical Indian greeting is known as "namaste." This involves pressing your palms together (fingers up) below the chin and inclining the head slightly, while repeating the word "namaste." When introduced to a man, it is customary to shake hands. If it is a woman, make a namaste. Generally, Indians will not shake hands with a woman.

Indians tend to be very hospitable. If you are invited to an event or to an Indian home by an Indian friend or colleague, accept only if you are absolutely sure that you can make it. It is impolite to make a commitment without keeping it.

Women should always dress conservatively, and cover up as much of their body as possible. Indian women wear a "sari," which is a traditional wrap dress. The "bindi" or dot on the forehead is worn by both single and married women. Do not compliment a woman unless she is a close relative.

The people of India speak 14 major languages, as well as more than 1000 minor languages and dialects. Out of the countless spoken languages and dialects, 18 are specified in India's constitution, including Hindi, Urdu, Bengali, Marathi, Gujarathi, Oriya, Assamese, Punjabi, Kashmiri, Tamil, Teluge, Karnataka, Malayalam, Sindhi and Sanskrit.

Hindi is considered to be the nation's major official language and the most widely spoken. Hindi, however, is not widely used in South India. Tamil, instead, is the primary language in this region. Urdu, a closely related form of Hindi, is India's other most widely spoken language.

Although English is spoken by only about two percent of the population, it still plays a large role across the country and even in remote villages you may be able to find at least a few individuals who speak English. It is also used by the central government for communication purposes and is a common language among highly educated Indians. In some cases, English even serves as a link between Indians from different regions of the country. Many other European languages are not widely spoken in India and, in fact, remain unknown to Indians.

India is a secular state and fosters the practice of all religions. There are many different religious groups throughout India, including Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, Buddhists, Jains, Zoroastrians, and Jews. Over 80 percent of the population is Hindu, but there are also nearly 100 million Muslims, 25 million Christians, 22 million Sikhs, seven million Buddhists, and a number of other religious sects. Hinduism, with its caste (class) system, places heavy emphasis on the role of dharma or "duty." There are well over 6,000 castes and more than half of the population belongs to the lower caste or are considered "untouchable." Even today, the caste system is a vital part of life in rural areas. Caste-based violence has been known to occur in rural areas, but city residents are generally more tolerant of caste issues.

The cow is considered sacred by Hindus. In fact, killing a cow in India is equivalent to murdering a human being. Kerala and Bengal are the only two states that do not have some form of cow protection legislation. The killing of the sacred cow is among one of the most important religious taboos to honor. A cow is considered by many Hindus to be one of the holiest creatures on this earth, and it is strongly advised to accept and respect this belief.

Expatriate communities throughout India have established their own places of worship. The majority are Christian churches, but there are also several Jewish synagogues. Because of its large expatriate population, Bangalore is home to quite a few Christian churches.

Some regions of India are sensitive and, therefore, require special permits to travel through or within. Often it is the border areas, due to political sensitivity, that are restricted. Aside from that, India has an extensive network of transport ranging from high speed trains to Victorias (horse-drawn carriages). Among the major problems with transportation in India is traffic. Sidewalks and streets are usually congested with pedestrians, buses, taxis, cars, auto-rickshaws, bicycles, cows, goats and the occasional elephant. Many vehicles and other elements of everyday life tend to fly past or at you from all directions. In order to travel safely in the cities or around the entire country, you must be aware of all the chaos surrounding you. If you need to remember just one road rule, it is that sacred cows always have the right of way.

The official unit of currency for India is the rupee. The importation of local currency is prohibited, but there are no restrictions on the amount of foreign currency taken into India, if a Currency Declaration Form is filled out. By declaring money, it enables the expat to exchange all currency, as well as depart with all your unspent currency. An encashment certificate is needed to re-exchange excess rupees. If the form of foreign currency is not listed on the Currency Declaration Form, however, written permission is needed from the Reserve Bank of India to leave with such currency. No Indian currency may be taken out of the country.

India is full of competent doctors and dentists, a large number of whom speak English. Medical facilities in New Delhi, Mumbai and Kolkata are good, and the standards are high. In Madras, facilities and treatment are good, but standards are not as high in comparison to the other main cities. Most medical treatment is relatively inexpensive, but the nursing staffs are usually poor. In fact, most patients are cared for by their families, friends and colleagues. In some facilities, family may even supply the food, and retrieve medications from outside sources. Private clinics typically cannot handle serious emergencies, but numerous well-staffed hospitals provide modern equipment and procedures. Although standards vary, a good private clinic will offer a clean and well-maintained facility, as well as a friendly and helpful staff.

India offers many educational opportunities. There is an extensive list of schools including international schools, private schools and state schools. International schools offer a wide range of curriculums including US, UK, AP, national and IB (International Baccalaureate). New Delhi and Mumbai offer spacious, well-equipped international schools, but other smaller schools offer opportunities for numerous nationalities. International schools are only open to foreign nationals, so there is practically no Indian integration. There are American, British, French, Japanese and Scottish schools scattered throughout the country, as well as numerous local Indian national schools.

Although cities in India are relatively safe for foreign nationals, crime rates have been increasing. Visitors should be especially wary of thieves. Risk exists everywhere, but the chances of getting robbed are slightly higher in certain areas, such as in New Delhi in the crowded areas of Old Delhi and Paharganj, and around the Red Fort. Poorer districts and tourist attractions such as these should be avoided at night. However, it may be comforting to note that petty theft common in the city is often non-violent and limited mostly to pick pocketing. Foreign nationals should also take extra precautions while in public transport areas and shopping centers in New Delhi and other cities.

Indian workplaces are becoming more multicultural due to the growing number of expatriates working in areas such as business process outsourcing, hospitality, information technology and media. India is now starting to attract more professionals from the United States, Europe, and Asia, as a result of jobs cuts in the West. Many foreign workers also believe that spending some time working in India will enhance their attractiveness to future employers.

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