

Online Free Resources

We develop people – they develop your business

With India now having a strong global business presence, which is expanding continuously, it is crucial that as UK business professionals, we are aware of how to behave and interact appropriately with fellow business professionals from this Continent.

Top Tips on Working with Asian Cultures

Written by [Katie Day](#)

The subject is huge, and with cultural differences within India itself, the subject is worthy of a book rather than a short article.

However, let me give you my top tips for successful business interactions:

- Never touch a person's head, even to pat a child, the head is the seat of the soul
- Beckoning someone with the hand or finger is insulting as is standing with your hands on your hips
- Never point your feet at someone. If your shoes or feet touch someone else, make sure you apologise immediately
- The word 'no' is considered harsh in Asian culture. Evasive refusals such as 'maybe' or 'I'll try' are preferred and regularly used
- Always use formal titles when interacting with Asian clients, however many times you've met them
- The use of leather products including belts, handbags and briefcases may be considered offensive
- It is generally not socially acceptable for Asian women to be touched by any male other than husband or child. This is obviously changing as more and more Asian women are entering the corporate world and travelling globally for business, but if in doubt only shake hands with an Asian woman if she offers her hand first.
- Asians take themselves very seriously so the UK dry sense of humour and gentle banter that we take for granted is unlikely to be well received
- Be aware of the deeply established caste system and understanding dharma and karma – explained more fully in another article
- It is inappropriate for a man to make any comment about a woman's appearance
- It is considered impolite to address a person who is older or holds a higher status by their first name. In Hindi, the first name is usually followed by "ji" to show respect.

The business etiquette within India is changing rapidly as more and more Asian people are entering the global business arena. But be aware that the above points are very well ingrained in their psyche so always err on the side of caution and be led by your client/colleague. You are far more likely to need to adhere to letter to the above if you are visiting the Continent as opposed to receiving visitors in the UK.

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Understanding the Caste system in India

The first three classes of the Asian Caste system are:

- **Brahmin**, (priestly)
- **Kshasthya**, (warrior)
- **Vaishya** (or general populace) - agricultural workers and artisans and now including traders and money-lenders.

These are said to have been derived from the tripartite division of ancient Indo-European society, as evidenced in Greece and Rome.

The **Shudras**, or servants, were later added when the Indo-Europeans settled into the Punjab and began to move down into the Ganges Valley.

The fifth group, roughly fifteen per cent of the population, consists of the outcasts or untouchables who do all the dirty jobs. The politically correct term for them is Scheduled Castes, although Mahatma Gandhi gave them the name of **Harijan – ‘God’s people’**.

Finally there are the **Hijras**, who are distinguished by their distinctive style of dressing. There are approximately a million of them living in organised groups all over India. The only non-hereditary group, they comprise of transsexuals, asexuals, transvestites, eunuchs etc.

Hijras come from every religion and caste and obtain their living by singing, dancing and making lewd jokes at weddings and other ceremonies. They are at once hated, feared and respected.

The caste system has evolved over thousands of years as a powerful way of organising and administering an enormous mass of people.

Understanding dharma and karma

The notion of dharma (the obligation to accept one’s condition and perform the duties appropriate to it) and karma (quality of action) is intrinsic to the whole principles of caste. According to these religious beliefs, each person is reincarnated on earth according to past behaviours. At this time they have a chance to be born into another, higher caste, but only if they have been dharmic – obedient to the rules of their caste in their previous life on earth.

Karma discourages people from attempting to cross caste lines for social relations of any kind. In this way, no one can escape from the cycle of dharma and karma, which has been pursued without envy if they are poor and without self criticism if they are rich.

Members of a higher caste often assume privileges like jumping to the top of the queue and expecting instant service in shops etc. They are mostly only recognised by the way they dress and their sense of superiority and attitude to others around them.

If you are interested in a workshop on this subject then please call us on 0845 626 2244.