



Cultural Do's and Don'ts with South Asian Indians By Sarah Gogel

NB: Take the lead off your clients and observe how they are interacting with each other first and foremost. These cultural do's and don'ts are simply a guide to have in the back of your mind while working with this cultural group that is so diverse in all respects.

First of all, here is a list of facts to know about Indians which can give you a greater awareness about your clients:

- Hindi, Urdu, Tamil, Bengali, Kashmiri, English are the official languages of India.
- India is predominantly Hindu, then Muslim, the Christian. Hindus do not eat beef or pork, Muslims do not eat pork and traditionally they do not drink alcohol.
- There is a great difference in cultures between the North of India and the South, as well as between rural and urban families. Traditionally the South worships more the Hindu god of Vishnu.
- Sikhs from Punjab usually wear turbans, beards and steel bracelets on their right wrists, having a religious significance. The Hindu woman will wear her sari, while as Punjabi women might wear more scarves and shawls with loose-fitting blouses and bellowing pants.
- Depending on the Hindu caste, different gods and goddesses might be worshipped. You can figure out which caste your client is from by asking an Indian colleague of yours about the last name, since one can usually tell by the last name.
- Lakshmi (goddess of wealth), Saraswathi (goddess of learning), and Parvati (Shiva's wife) can be good references to put into practice psycho-education.
- The division of castes is essential to keep in mind while working with Hindu families, and the States of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh (UP) uphold these divisions more than other states. There are the Brahmins (highest caste), followed by Kshatriyas (or "warriors", *rajputs* being a sub-caste), followed by Veshias (or "farmers"/"merchants", *banya* being a sub-caste in which Gandhi fell into), followed by Sudras (ie "dirty", or non-landed farmers who work for others), followed by the Harijans (ie "untouchables", or what Gandhi termed the "children of God").
- The State with the most Muslims is Uttar Pradesh, in numbers (as it is the largest state of India) and Jammu & Kashmir in percentage-wise. Working with a Hindu family will be a different experience than working with a Hindu family.
- India is one of the oldest civilizations in the world that dates back to more than 5000 years.



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- A girl is taught to love and serve her mother-in-law as her own mother. This is emphasized in traditional Hindu scripture like the Upanishads. When there is interpersonal violence among families, most often the woman is harassed by her mother-in-law.
- Parent care is the task of the eldest son and his wife. Parent care by the daughter is infrequent as she marries and goes to live with the family of her husband. Devotion to the family is essential.
- As a rule, an Indian woman is not only married to her husband but is committed to serve and obey his parents and close relatives as her duty. She enters into marriage not only as a wife but also as an obedient daughter-in-law. The issue of dowry can be a cause for intimate partner violence and at times murder.
- 46% of women are married before 18 years old (UNICEF Report, 2005).
- The precepts of Hindu dharma and karma potentially inculcate the duty-based interpersonal code of obligations among Hindu Indians.
- Hinduism offers its adherents four different paths through which they can achieve spiritual liberation or “*moksha*” (i.e., knowledge, work, devotion, and psycho-spiritual exercises). This concept is also known as “*nirvana*” among the Buddhists.
- The relationship between a therapist/helper and a patient/client can be very familiar like close family relatives.
- Stress might not be perceived as requiring the expertise of psychologists/psychiatrists; instead indigenous forms of medicine and healing, such as yoga, exorcizing evil spirits, Ayurvedic and homeopathic medicines, and religion are seen as the real medicine of the mind and heart.
- Many Hindus in the United States practice rituals such as celebrating annual religious festivals, attending services at the temple, and honoring the multiple Hindu deities.
- Gujrati and Punjabis from urban areas are generally the most integrated immigrants among the Indians, especially in New York.
- Worldly desires might be traditionally seen as leading towards unhappiness.

Do's

- Do try to work in conjunction with the traditional healers of the community of your client, find out their telephone number and whether the family is ok with you contacting them. Often once the relationship is established with the traditional healer, you can tell the family who you are already in contact with, which could put them at ease.
- Do try to greet your client saying “*Namaskar ji*” or “*Pranaam*” for the sophisticated meaning of “I bow down to you to greet you dear Sir/Madam”. You can then also ask “*aap kaisen hain*”, which means “how are you doing?” (in a very polite way)”. Once you become more familiar with the family, you



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can say “*Namaste/Pranaam, kainsen hain*” (to adults) and “*Namaste, kaise ho*” (to a younger client).

- Do put your hands together in the form of praying below your chin, in order to say the above greetings, and slightly bow or nod. You can also shake hands, depending on the scenario below:
- Do let the woman lead the salutation greeting, if you are a male, wait to see whether the woman extends her hand or bows to you, if you are a woman, you can take the lead on what you feel comfortable or take the lead on.
- Do be aware that shaking your head from one side to the other of the neck in a fast motion, can both mean “yes” and “no” and generally means that there is an understanding. If you need clarification on whether it is “yes” or “no” you can ask “*ye ji han*” (is that “yes”?) or “*ye ji nehin*” (is that no)? Usually the word “no” will be avoided in order to avoid disagreement.
- Do try to use professional titles such as Professor and Doctor, or Mr., Mrs. and Miss.
- Do ask the family where they are from in India. Small fact: Bombay is since 1995 called Mumbai so you should refer to it as such if you are to take the lead in asking where the family is from. If family says “Bombay” you can respond “oh, Mumbai”? and they will appreciate.
- Do ask the family when they came to the USA. There is a big difference between what they call “ABCs” or “American Born Confused Desi” (those born in the USA) and “FOBs” aka “Fresh off the Boat” (new immigrants).
- Do not rush deadlines as impatience can be seen as rude and disrespectful.
- Do create the process of decision-making as slow and thoughtful.
- Do realize that if you are in session with the elderly member of the family, it is important to have them take the lead of the conversation. Also you should greet them first out of respect.
- Do realize that if the woman is wearing only white cloth that she is most likely a widow and that this carries a great significance among Hindus. This can be further explored as you get to know the family better.
- Do engage in small talk with families about their families. Expect them to ask you in return about your families and do share some basic information.
- Do understand that having a girl as opposed to a boy might be less valued in Indian families.
- Do discuss the parent’s comfort with the type of sex ed. you will be using for the psycho-education part of therapy, if necessary. You should know that six states in India have banned sex ed. so it is a good idea to discuss this controversial topic beforehand in order to be on the same page.
- Do discuss the forms of punishment and discipline used in the families, which tend to be interpreted as very “harsh” or physical in the USA. Do compare and contrast differences throughout sessions.
- Among Muslims, do be aware of the concept of *izzat*, ie self-respect or saving face as this might be a challenge to overcome together with your client in



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terms of your communication, notably about cognitive distortions. For Muslims, the duties are mainly towards serving Allah. For Sikhs, the concept of *simran* is quintessential towards their motivation to dedicate themselves to the work of God without personal gain.

- If you are working with a Muslim or Sikh family, do explore the following points of values and sacred texts, respectively the Q'ran and the Guru Granth Sahib, as described below in more detail among the Hindus.
- Do discuss the role of Karma in your client's life, since often times the concept that everything happens for a reason is very much part of your client's being. Do explore with them how they interpret the saying "*dukh meri jivan hai*" meaning that "my life is nothing but sadness". Do keep in mind that there is a culture of guilt and this should be further explored as well.
- Do also discuss the role of Dharma in your client's life, that each individual is conceptualized to be inherently part of a social body; dharma represents moral duty, code for conduct, right action, an inherent character dominate towards the community. The values of honor and integrity should be explored as they are among the most important in this culture.
- Do find out how the Hindu scriptures such as the Upanishads or the Bhagvad Gita, encourage your client to begin their day with morning prayers and meditation, or influence your client to believe that work is done for the sake of working not for any rewards. Your client might wish to reject any type of life pleasures and try not to crave them, especially if they wish to be a yogi.
- Do adapt your relaxation exercises to the traditional music which your client might like to listen to, such as music by Ravi Shankar, or other mantras which you can find out about in order to create a routine for meditation.
- Do use the power of the "Om" in session to start and finish, either by chanting or bringing up in order to appease stressful situations.
- Do ask whether among Hindu families the art of molding the natural environment so as to suit the needs of human beings is followed, a tradition called *Vastu Vidya*.
- Do bring into your sessions such respected figures as Gandhi in order to discuss concepts of respect, non-violence and equality. A good reference for Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs alike is Kabir, considered a Saint, a mystic and a matchless poet. Maulana Azad, a freedom fighter, is another amazing figure revered by all, notably Muslims.
- Do try to use video clips or songs of Bollywood movies (the equivalent to Hollywood in India) in your sessions as many of your clients will adore such famous actors as Aishwarya Rai and Amitabh Bachchan.
- Do be aware of the different festivals which occur during the year and that are followed by your clients. These festivals are rich in color, devotion, practices and you can find out how and where your clients are celebrating them.



Don'ts

- Do not point your feet towards the person out of respect, if you happen to touch your client with your feet, do apologize.
- Do not grasp your ears as this expresses repentance.
- Do not point to an object in your office with your finger, rather you should do so with your chin.
- Do not backslap as this is not a sign of affection.
- Do not use your left hand to accept gifts or hand shake, as is seen as unclean.
- If you are sharing a meal with your clients, don't hesitate to also eat with your hands as this is more than accepted and respected.
- Do not whistle as this is considered impolite.
- Do not open gifts that are offered to you or expect your clients to open them in front of you either.
- Do not pat the head of a child as it is considered the seat of the soul.
- Do not discuss the issue of caste unless the family brings it up.
- Don't bring up the bad things about India, before the family might.
- Do not to bring up controversial topics like riots between Hindus and Muslims or the partition— especially among Punjabis, unless they bring it up. Most Punjabi families lost family and territory during the partition of August 1947 which led to the creation of Pakistan and India.
- Do not mention UP/Bihar caste system unless it is brought up.