

Exploring the Culture of India



Background

India, located in eastern Asia, is one of the most ethnically diverse countries in the world, with many religions, languages, and sects. The country consists of 29 states, 6 union territories, and the Delhi national capital territory. India has many religions, including Hindus, Jains, Sikhs, Muslims, Christians, Buddhists and more. Each group celebrates holidays based on their religion. Most people in India can speak two or three languages.

Traditions and Customs

It is considered polite to ask permission to use a person's first name and to smile in conversations. They respect personal space - arm's length. Indians tend to be indirect in communication, and refusals are considered impolite. They avoid conflict, respond better to open-ended questions, and use body language to respond.

It is generally taboo to shake hands with a member of the opposite sex unless they offer to do so first, to wink or whistle, and to kill animals, especially cows. Many Indian families practice fasting to cleanse and purify their minds and bodies. Thriftiness is valued, and Indians put a high value on considering the needs of others first.

The Festival of Lights, called Diwali or Dipawali, is India's biggest and most important holiday each year. They light lamps or candles to celebrate the triumph of light over darkness. Other holidays include Republic Day, Independence Day, and Gandhi Jayanti Day.



Education and Literacy

Indian families value education greatly, as most immigrants have strong English skills and are highly educated. The official languages are Hindi and English.



Health Disparities

Most Indian families in the U.S. have an increased risk of diabetes, hypertension, and cardiovascular disease, with complications.

Traditional Food Practices



- Every region in India has unique foods.
- Many Indians are vegetarian though more and more are eating animal products.
- Indians typically eat with their hands or with bread.
- Every Indian family has a spice box.
- Staples vary by region: Basmati rice is popular and eaten by families from the eastern and southern regions, and flat wheat bread, called chapatti, is eaten in the northern and northwestern parts. The bread is made from pearl millet. Food is served on a flat plate called a Thali.
- Meals normally include a puree of legumes called dal, vegetables, and yogurt.
- Fish, fresh water buffalo milk, fruits, and vegetables are widely consumed.
- Meats, including lamb, chicken, and eggs, are eaten by some depending on the region.
- Chai tea is the preferred drink in the north and east, and coffee in the south.

Considerations for WIC Educators and Counselors

- Which new foods or dietary habits have you adopted in the U.S.? Which ones from your culture have you not been able to follow?
- Do you practice fasting? If so, how?
- Who shops and prepares meals in your family? Which foods are avoided?
- What unique food practices do you follow during festivals, special days, or holidays?
- Are there any foods you avoid during pregnancy and postpartum? If so, what are they? Do you use herbs during these times?
- Offer education on the benefits of colostrum, as traditionally, breastfeeding or chestfeeding begins after the colostrum has been fully expressed.



References

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