

## Stretching the Comfort Zone in India

*Native New Yorker David Juman shares his experience adapting to life in India. Looking at how time and self-reliance are construed in India, David explores the challenges of moving to a new culture and explains how he learned to stretch his "comfort zone" to appreciate the Indian approach to life.*



*In India, you'll find fewer warning signs on roads than in the U.S. When signs are posted, they often serve more as suggestions rather than rules. Here, though a Kerala grain truck cautions "think twice", goats ignore the warning*  
Photo: David Juman

by David Juman

If there's anything I've learned as a native New Yorker now living and working in India, it's that it pays to be flexible. When I first arrived in India, I faced the challenge of coming to grips with a culture fundamentally different in many respects from the one I've known and taken for granted for so many years. From the degree to which religion and spirituality permeate daily life, to the personal space afforded the average individual, India and the US can at times seem like polar opposites. Even some of the basics—like managing appointments and navigating the streets of India—require a shift in thinking. As I have learned to stretch my "comfort zone" and understand and appreciate these differences, what had been

a foreign and sometimes frustrating cultural experience has become recognizable and, increasingly, quite comfortable.

### Give or take a few hours

#### Time management in India

As more and more companies in so-called developed nations look to India to carry out an ever-expanding range of business functions for them, the country has begun to set its clocks by those in the West. In all the major Indian cities, call center employees pay scant attention to the time zone in which they actually live and the normal

rhythms of day and night. Instead, these customer service reps and telemarketers, who interact largely with customers in the UK or America, work at hours corresponding to business hours on the other end of the phone or computer terminal. Call volumes are high; results are timed, measured and rewarded accordingly.

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However, the tight clockwork that characterizes the call center world is to a large extent an exception, and in general Indians tend to be more laid-back when it comes to issues of promptness and paying attention to deadlines. The more common India is the one in which shops open relatively late, the exact hour dependent not on a fixed schedule, but rather on when the shopkeeper happens to arrive (9:30, 10, 10:30...). Some time ago, I needed to schedule a Saturday morning business meeting with the CEO of an Indian firm I was working with and whose office I was sharing at the time. I asked him whether 10am would be too early for him, and he replied "Of course not," assuring me that he would reach the office by 8:30am, followed by the rest of the team at 9am. In light of this, I planned to arrive early in order to do some final preparation before the meeting. Arriving at 9am, I found the office still gated and padlocked. No one, not even the security man, had turned up yet. Such over promising and under delivering with respect to meeting deadlines is by no means confined to the office, however. The phenomenon extends to parties and performances starting far later than noted on the invitation, workmen turning up at one's home at all hours (except the one that was agreed upon!) and work projects getting completed well past the stated deadline.

Of course, the extent to which time seems to have little meaning for some people varies much

from place to place within India. Hence, Mumbai (formerly Bombay) has a fast pace often compared to that of New York City. On the other hand, smaller and relatively sleepier cities like Hyderabad and Pune can be particularly frustrating in this respect, especially if one is more accustomed to the fast-moving, "time is money" atmosphere characteristic of large, Western cities. However, armed with the knowledge that the clock in India is generally more elastic than in many other places, one can make the best of it, and enjoy the benefits of a less stressful and more relaxed approach to time. So, when people promise your clothes will be ready in ten minutes, the boss will be back in half an hour, or the report will be finished right after lunch, they're all more or less approaching time management from the same angle, and assuming that you will too.

### Caution: Uneven Surface Ahead Signs point to greater self-reliance in India

One aspect of life in India that can sometimes make it less advisable to relax is the greater need to keep one's eyes and ears wide open when negotiating the day, especially when one is a foreigner dealing with situations heretofore unfamiliar. In the West, as one moves about in day-to-day life, there is a greater degree of cushioning and guidance being exerted by the government and other "powers that be." Hence, the traffic signal tells you when it's safe to cross the street, the supermarket sign directs you to ketchup in Aisle 7, and the ketchup bottle reveals the product's ingredients and complete nutritional information! Large signs warn that you're near a railroad crossing, or if a section of rough road is approaching. In fact, the relatively large number of lawsuits in the U.S. stems partly from the belief that the government, product manufacturers or other outside parties are responsible for providing the information or other cues to facilitate the public's safe passage through the day, and that they should be held accountable when things "go wrong." There's a strong sense in the West that we are all entitled to this level of protection, cocooned from life's little (and not so little) stumbling blocks, and that if a problem occurs, it must certainly be someone else's fault, and not our own.

India, in contrast, is a country that still struggles under the weight of some massive problems – providing clean food and water, dealing with overpopulation, disease, poverty, etc. Partly because of this, the government is simply not in a position to match the West when it comes to providing the same level of day-to-day guidance. As a result, there is significantly less “spoon-feeding” with respect to managing the ins and outs of the everyday: trains depart without warning announcements; most parking lots do not have painted lines outlining where to position your vehicle; menus do not generally feature little red chili peppers next to the spicy selections, and so on. On the roads, there is precious little enforcement of traffic rules, and broad pedestrian sidewalks are relatively uncommon. So, keep your eyes wide open, and be sure to look both ways before crossing. In short, individuals are expected to be self-reliant and alert when going about their business, and exercising common sense is the best way to guard against disaster.

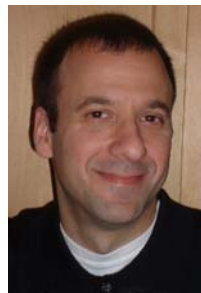
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Now clearly, much of the protection and guidance taken for granted in some places is desirable, beneficial and quite comforting. After all, it's just plain nice to ride on well-paved roads, with clear signs indicating which way to go and the car radio informing you of traffic conditions up ahead. However, there's also something energizing and empowering in knowing that sometimes you just need to use your own head and figure things out for yourself. No signs, beeps, announcements, or detailed instruction pages. Granted, this can be difficult and frustrating at times, but often there's a big payoff in terms of confidence, knowing you're capable of rising to the challenge.

Negotiating the cultural differences in India has been an ongoing exercise and learning experience for me, one that I suspect and hope will continue even when I no longer live here. Whether trying to understand the traditional role of women in Indian society, or just making sense of what's available at the local market, I have found it to be an enriching experience. And regardless of the particular challenge, I've found that keeping an open mind and doing my best to stretch my comfort zone has helped me along the way. ✧




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