



Customs and Manners

Children Corner



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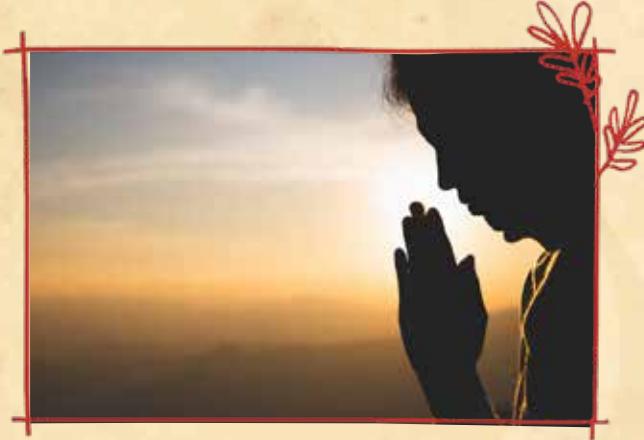
Customs and Manners



Customs and manners are expressions of the ethics and social conduct of a given society. They include forms such as greeting and the style of conversation. The following section briefly discusses some of the conventions of greetings in India.

When people meet, they greet each other with the palms joined together in front of the chest and say, 'namaste', meaning 'salutations unto you'. This hand gesture symbolizes the essential oneness of people. Just as two hands, though different from one another, belong to the same person, two individuals, though different, belong to the same source, the Lord. When one greets another person this way, one naturally looks upon that person as non-separate from oneself. Any further interaction evokes care and understanding. Monks express this vision of oneness by touching each other's feet when they meet, uttering the words, "Om namo nārāyanā ya" – salutations unto Lord Nārāyaṇa .

Namaskāra



Life is considered a gift of the Lord, rich with opportunities for growth and learning. Since life's experiences bring about maturity, older people are respected for their age. This respect is expressed in the form of namaskāra, prostration, which is offered to older siblings, parents and elders. Since knowledge is also highly regarded, reverence is expressed towards teachers, monks and other learned people with namaskāra.

The word 'namah' derives from the root 'nam' meaning 'to bend down'. To bend down in the front of another is a sign of humility as well as respect. As the ego causes isolation from others, bending down is also a gesture that suggests resolution of isolation from the other person.



Sāst ḥ ḥāga-namaskāra

Lying down flat on one's stomach, with the eight parts of the body touching the ground, is known as sāst ḥ ḥāga-namaskāra, salutation with eight parts. The following verse defines sāst ḥ ḥāga-namaskāra: Urasā śirasā caiva manasā vapusā girā padbhyaṁ jānubhyaṁ karābhyaṁ namaskāro'st ḥ ḥāga ucyate "A salutation is said to be eight-limbed when it is performed with one's chest, head, mind, body, speech, feet, knees and hands.



Abhivādana-namaskāra



In this form of salutation, one touches the earlobes with one's fingers and with head bowed, introduces oneself to elders. In this introduction, one gives one's name and gotra, family lineage, sūtra tradition and the branch of Vedic learning to which one belongs. One then does sāst ḥ ḥāga-namaskāra

Something to think about...

What are some of the customs your relatives observe and what do they signify? In what ways do you show respect to your teachers, your parents and your siblings?



Other Forms of Respect

Respect is expressed by remaining in standing position in the presence of elders, teachers and monks. Also, while conversing with them, one covers one's mouth with the fingers of the right hand. Other expressions of respect are sitting at a level lower than people to whom one shows respect; not pointing one's feet towards them; not speaking unless spoken to; and speaking politely. A commonly observed symbol of respect in North India is to cover one's head with a scarf or sari when going to meet elders and monks, or to visit a temple.

One customarily carries an offering when having an audience with a teacher. The offering may be in the form of fruits and flowers.

One of the smṛtis says:

Rikta-pānirṇā paśyeta rājānam daivatam gurum

May one not visit a king, a temple, of one's teacher empty-handed. One may also offer clothes or money. In approaching and taking leave of one's teacher, one offers salutations by bowing one's head, touching the feet of the teacher, or by doing sāstṛ ḥāṇamaskāra.

There are many other customs and manners that have evolved through the ages which carry the spirit of the religious life of the Hindus. They provide the necessary structure for a way of life in keeping with the Vedic vision.

Something to think about...

What are some of the customs your relatives observe and what do they signify? In what ways do you show respect to your teachers, your parents and your siblings?