India: Public Health, Gender, and Sexuality

Country Overview & Packing Guidelines

Spring 2027

Country Overview

GENERAL INFORMATION

India offers the complexity of history, geography, diversity and culture. India is a large country, comprised of twenty-eight states and nine union territories. It includes a diversity of ethnicities, languages, and religions. The official language of India is Hindi and English, although twenty other "official" languages are also recognized. Many people speak English, and most national universities conduct their classes in English.

India's population, at over 1.47 billion, makes it the most populous country in the world. Sixty-eight percent of Indians still live in rural areas, but large cities include New Delhi, Kolkata, Mumbai and Chennai serve as major centers of political, economic, and cultural activities, as well as governance and rapid urban growth. The national capital city of New Delhi, where our program starts, is a mega-city of 32.94 million people. Some areas of the country, such as the far North, are sparsely inhabited, but most of the country is densely populated with husty-busty urban areas and extensive farmed rural areas.

India is a democracy with a parliamentary system governed by a prime minister; the president holds a purely ceremonial position. Indians exercise their democratic rights with great enthusiasm in every five years: freedom of the press, speech and assembly are hallmarks of the society.



India was the birthplace of Buddhism, Jainism, Hinduism, and Sikhism. It is also home to a second largest Muslim population after Indonesia, as well as small communities of Parsees (Zoroastrians), Baha'is, Jews, and Christians. By and large, most people are tolerant of other religious traditions.

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CLIMATE AND GEOGRAPHY

India is about half the size of the continental U.S., with widely varying terrain and climatic conditions. The climate of North India and Delhi is extreme, with painfully hot months in summer and surprisingly cold temperatures in winter. Mid-June to mid-September is the monsoon season, while November to February is the driest, coolest period; the period from April to June is the hottest.

New Delhi/India: AVERAGE HIGH/LOW TEMPERATURES (°F)

JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY
70/45	75/48	88/58	97/68	110/97

SEPT	OCT	NOV	DEC
105/75	93/64	84/52	73/46

LOCAL CUSTOMS



Local customs closely tie greetings and mannerisms in India, and the way people greet each other can vary by region, religion, and cultural background. In both formal and informal settings, people often use the "namaste" a as a sign of respect.

Gender-specific considerations are an important aspect of Indian customs. Generally, people of different genders do not initiate physical contact, such as a handshake. In both urban and rural areas, people of different genders tend to interact with greater formality and respectful distance. All genders should dress modestly and avoid overly casual or revealing attire when visiting religious and sacred places.

LOCAL DIET

Participating in the local food culture is a central aspect of daily life in country. Special or restricted diets may not always be fully understood by your host family, although they may have previously hosted a student with similar dietary restrictions. By trying to replicate your diet at home you may miss out on an important part of your host culture.

Mealtimes vary by region in India. However, typical mealtimes in India include breakfast (8-10 a.m.), lunch (1-3 p.m.), and dinner (8-10 p.m.), with many people also enjoying a late afternoon high tea. Meals often feature staples like rice, wheat-based flatbreads (chapati or naan), cooked green vegetables and lentils, with significant use of spices such as cumin, turmeric, and coriander. Due to cultural and religious influences, especially Hindu (North India) religion, a significant portion of the population is vegetarian, making India highly accommodating for vegetarian diets. While vegan options are available, it's important to consult with the host because dairy is a common ingredient in Indian cuisine. Halal food is widely available,

particularly in Muslim-majority areas or major cities, while kosher options are limited but possible in some urban centers like New Delhi or Mumbai. There are many gluten-free options due to the use of sorghum, corn, millet, chickpea, etc. in various Indian regional foods.

Note: if you have special dietary needs, including allergies, please inform the office of Student Health, Safety & Wellbeing prior to the start of your program (studenthealth@sit.edu). We will advise you on realistic expectations about avoiding or incorporating certain foods within the program context.



SAFETY, SECURITY, AND HEALTH

Maintaining good health is essential to having a successful study abroad experience.

SIT recommends you do research prior to departure about the health, safety, and security specifics of the country(ies) you plan to visit. Consult the U.S. Department of State website and search their Countries and Areas Archive for international travel information and current travel advisories for each country. Search the Center for Disease Control Traveler's Health page to see travel health notices and vaccine requirements and recommendations for any country(ies) you plan to visit.

SIT recommends doing research ahead of time to stay up to date on It will be critical that you educate yourself about the potential health and safety hazards that may exist in your areas of travel and make informed decisions about what preventative measures to take prior to departure. You should also reference the Health, Access, and Identity information on your program's webpage.

If you have any questions, please reach out to the Student Health, Safety, & Wellbeing Team. Students are thoroughly briefed on safety considerations during in-country orientation and are updated throughout the semester if and when circumstances change. For information regarding safety and security, emergency communications, SIT policies, health and personal property insurance, and general program tips, please read the Safety, Security, and Health document and Student Handbook.

HOUSING

As many SIT Study Abroad alumni will tell you, the homestay experience can be one of the most rewarding and most challenging aspects of the program. We hope you will come prepared for the experience and committed to moving beyond cultural immersion as you begin to question,

distinguish, and analyze the host culture vis-à-vis your own culture and come to a deeper understanding of both.

Family structures vary in every culture. SIT Study Abroad values the diversity of homestay families, and your family may include a single mother of two small children or a large extended family with many people coming and going all the time. Additionally, please bear in mind that, in many countries, the idea of what constitutes a "home" may be different from what you expect. You will need to be prepared to adapt to a new life with a new diet, a new schedule, new people, and new priorities, and expectations.

Each program's homestay coordinator will be responsible for placing students in homestays. These placements are made first based on health concerns, including any allergies or dietary needs, to the extent possible. **Please note: In order to ensure the best fit for students and families, SIT may make final adjustments to homestay placements after student arrival in country. Therefore, SIT will not provide information about your homestay family before you depart for the program.**



We seek to foster increased cross-cultural understanding in students by immersing them in local culture through daily life in a new family and community. Students are expected to assume roles as family members, respecting and following host family norms around communications, visitors, and activities of daily living.

On this program, you will be staying in homestays in Delhi and on the Himalayan excursion.

OTHER ACCOMMODATIONS

Students should expect to share a room with one or more students during orientation and while on excursions. During excursions, students will stay in homestays, hotels or small guesthouses. In ISP period, most students live in accommodations suitable for their fieldwork needs, such as NGO run guesthouses, hotels, and paying guest, Airbnb, etc.

TRANSPORTATION

The program-based Delhi is a busy city, full of cars, buses, rickshaws, Metro, bicycles, cows, dogs, and even the occasional horse, bullock, elephant, or camel. The city boasts a registration of four million cars, so be ready for heavy traffic. In most cases, you will travel by Uber/Ola/Rapido and Metro to and from the program center each day. Uber/Ola/Rapido taxis

are also available at reasonable prices, although they are more expensive than the metro. Majority of Indians prefer to travel between cities via long-distance trains. The trains are cheaper and faster. For many Indians, flying is an expensive alternative.

COMMUNICATION

While you may want to be in regular communication with friends and family from home during the term abroad, please bear in mind that different time zones, unreliable phone lines, and changing program activities can complicate communication.

It's important to be clear with family and friends about your availability during the term. Many students recommend making an appointment to call home or to receive a call. You should also consider the impact of constant communication with friends and family at home on your cultural immersion.

Visit our Contact & Communication page for practices on program communication, emergency communication, and home institution communication.

PHONES AND INTERNET

Cell Phone Policy

As part of SIT's commitment to student safety and security, all students are required to have a working cell phone capable of making and receiving both local and international calls, including a data plan so that your phone is operational when you are away from wi-fi. If needed, during orientation SIT staff can assist students in purchasing a local SIM card and acquiring minutes for calls and texting. Failure to maintain a working phone capable of making and receiving calls/texts will be considered a conduct violation and a breach of our student code.

.For staying connected in India, using local SIM or eSIM cards is often the most affordable and effective option for mobile phone service. Major providers like Jio, Airtel, and Vodafone offer prepaid plans with data, calls, and text messages at affordable rates—typically starting as low as 200-300 INR (approx. $2.50-4 USD) per month for basic plans. Ensure that you have properly unlocked your phone to accept the Indian eSIM. Once you connect to your Indian eSIM, your USA eSIM will disappear from your phone.

Wi-Fi is widely available in cities at hotels, cafes, and some public places, though connection quality varies. In rural or remote areas, service can be unreliable, so it's advisable to have a backup plan if your travel itinerary includes these areas.

The SIT policy encourages students to set up local numbers upon arrival and during orientation. It will facilitate easy communication with program staff, peers, and parents and family back home. Please keep in mind that the India Standard Time (IST) is UTC+5:30, which means a 9.5-10.5-hour difference from EST in the U.S., depending on daylight saving.

WhatsApp is a commonly used app in India for urgent contact needs, as it operates over data and offers free international communication. Email remains reliable for non-urgent communications, though response times may vary. For efficient contact back home, it's wise to plan calls around local morning or evening hours when the time difference allows for convenient overlap.

The SIT program center provides internet access between 09:30 to 16:30 on weekdays.

MAILINGS

Unlike receiving a package here in the US, receiving a package at your program site is usually **expensive** and **problematic**. Customs agents must inspect all packages and you, as the recipient, are responsible for duty and storage fees. In addition, there are cases of items being lost in the mail or taking so long to reach the recipient that the recipient is nearly back in the US by the time the items are received. For these reasons, sending packages should be done only for emergency situations. Additionally, sending valuables is highly discouraged. Mailing prescription medication abroad is illegal.

For this program, **DHL, FedEx, and UPS services are available in India**. Despite cheaper prices, reliance on the US Postal Service is not advised due to delays and unreliability. When given the option, it's always a good idea to send packages certified and with a tracking number that allows the sender to track the package.

Packages should be sent to the following address via ***DHL, FedEx, or UPS***:
Student Name
Ground floor
168, Pocket- 2
Jasola Vihar
New Delhi 110025 India

MONEY

India's currency is the Indian Rupee (INR), and cash is still widely used for many transactions, especially in smaller towns, markets, and local shops. ATMs are widely available in cities and larger towns, offering a convenient way to withdraw local currency. However, rural areas often have limited access to ATMs, so it's wise to carry cash when traveling outside urban centers.

ATMs generally accept international debit and credit cards, but it's advisable to inform your bank about your travel to India to prevent any card restrictions. Most hotels, restaurants, and major retail stores accept credit cards, but smaller vendors and some service providers may only accept cash, so it's advisable to have a mix of cash and cards.

To securely manage money, students might consider using a money belt or a small, portable lockbox for valuables. Opening a local bank account in India can be complicated and often requires a longer stay and additional documentation, so it’s typically not feasible for short-term visitors. Instead, withdrawing larger amounts as needed and storing money safely is advisable. Splitting funds and keeping small amounts on hand can help in case of loss or theft.

Check current exchange rates: http://www.oanda.com/currency/converter/

If using a debit and/or credit card, you should contact your bank and/or credit card companies regarding your travel plans. If you don’t inform these companies that you will be away, they will often assume the card has been lost or stolen and will put an immediate hold on the card. You should also check on costs of withdrawal, as these costs vary and can sometimes be very expensive. Renewing and receiving reissued credit and debit cards while on the program will be an expensive and highly inconvenient process. Before you leave for your program, please check the expiration dates on your cards to ensure that they will not expire while you are abroad. It is also very important that you make photocopies of all your debit/credit card information and leave them with someone you trust in case your card(s) is/are lost or stolen.

We suggest that you budget between US$1350 to $1500 for out-of-pocket costs not covered by the Tuition and Housing Fees. To determine where you might fall in this range, please examine your spending habits during a typical semester at your home school and consider any exceptional expenditures you may have on the program. Please carefully consider your personal spending habits when creating your out-of-pocket expense budget. Some items to consider are meals not provided by the program, textbooks, Independent Study Project or Internship-related expenses not covered by the program, interpretation services, medical expenses, personal spending, and gifts. Use the average estimates below as a guide to help you plan for out-of-pocket expenses.

Personal spending (from past student suggestions):	600 USD
Books, printing, supplies:	50 USD
Up-front medical costs:	500 USD

Potential ISP extra expenses:	200 USD
Visa:	40 USD
Estimated total:	1390 USD

Please note that up-front medical costs can vary widely. Though you are completely covered by SIT's travel insurance BlueCross BlueShield, which you can read more about on our Participant Insurance page, you still may need to pay up-front for medical care and then file for reimbursement.

VISITORS AND FREE TIME

SIT strongly discourages and will not provide support for any visitors to students during the term, due to the rigorous nature of the program and the disruption that such visits cause in program flow and group dynamics. Students should be sure that relatives and friends are aware of this policy and that visits are scheduled for dates after the formal conclusion of the program. Students will not be excused from program components to attend to visitors. See the Attendance and Participation Policy.

If a visitor does come while a program is in progress, they must plan their own independent accommodations; SIT Study Abroad homestay families can accommodate only their assigned student and, due to cultural and contractual understandings with SIT, should not be asked to host students' guests.

INDEPENDENT TRAVEL

Please read our full Independent Travel policy for our definition, guidelines and how to access our independent travel notification form. Please note that independent travel is only allowed during program free time and students will not be excused from program activities to travel. SIT is not responsible for any costs of student independent travel including logistics, preparations, cancelation fees, change fees, and any other costs associated with independent travel. We highly recommend you wait to book any independent travel until AFTER arriving on program and receiving the final academic schedule from your program.

During the program, students follow an intense schedule of classes and field-based learning assignments, even during the ISP. Free time for pursuing an independent interest or hobby during the program will be limited. Your admissions counselor can advise you about particular interests you may have. For example, if you must keep in shape for your next athletic season,

or if you play a musical instrument and want to know whether to bring it, we can help you to understand your schedule and any concerns or limitations that may exist.

CODE OF CONDUCT AND POLICIES

SIT maintains a Code of Conduct and clear institutional policies regarding student behavior through a commitment to mutual learning and respect for others. Visit the policy page for detailed policies around academic integrity, alcohol and drug use, anti-harassment and non-discrimination, attendance and participation, credit hours, equal education opportunities, grading, housing, independent travel, prohibited activities, religious holiday observance, sexual harassment and misconduct, and withdrawal among others.



Packing Guidelines

LUGGAGE

Please pack lightly and include only necessary items. You should be able to carry all your luggage significant distances on your own. Try to minimize both the number of bags and weight of your bag(s) since you will likely be acquiring more belongings while abroad. We recommend a small daypack, which will also be useful for short excursions when on the program.

If carrying prescription medications, you should carry a letter from your doctor to prevent any concerns at customs or in transit. (Please see the “General Health Tips” section in the Safety, Security, and Health pre-departure document.)

Please check the current requirements of the Transportation Security Administration (http://www.tsa.gov) as well as those of the airline on which you are flying for domestic and international baggage restrictions.

CLOTHING GUIDELINES

Students should strictly adhere to local dress standards due to their high visibility in the community. Revealing, ripped, showing cleavage, or stained clothing is unacceptable for students.

It is necessary to wear a top that fully covers your upper body, extending down to your buttocks and pants below the calf area. We recommend wearing clothes that are appropriate for mild cold and warmer weather.

EQUIPMENT

It is a good rule whenever you travel to pack all your gear inside your pack in waterproof bags. If you are bringing expensive camera gear or other equipment, have a strategy to protect it from dust, heat and humidity.

You do not need to bring bed linens or pillows, but a small fast-drying travel towel is handy. You do not need sleeping bags, tents, or other camping equipment.

COMPUTERS AND OTHER ELECTRONICS

It is recommended that you bring a laptop computer. If you bring a laptop, the computer will be your personal property and responsibility. It is recommended that you insure your computer, smartphone, or other valuables for full coverage in the event of loss or theft(SIT insurance does not cover personal property).

Please see the following website for information about electricity, voltage and electrical adapters. http://www.worldstandards.eu/electricity/.

GIFTS

As you might imagine, it is best to be prepared with a gift to offer your homestay family in gratitude for their hospitality and as a means to share a part of your culture with them. We suggest one or two gifts that the whole family can enjoy. You may also wish to consider gifts for people outside your homestay family. Try to choose gifts that represent you or the part of the country and/or community you live in. Think about what your city, state, or local artisans produce. Draw upon your personal interests or hobbies for ideas. Pack a couple of small gifts for children, such as small games, bubbles, or a Frisbee. Even if your homestay family does not have small children, chances are that you will engage with children in your homestay community. Once you

are on the program and learn more about the local culture, you will discover other ways to thank your family. Remember to bring pictures of your friends and family to share.

Former students have recommended calendars, picture books, postcards, music, or souvenirs from your college bookstore as gifts.

If you have specific prescription medications, particularly brand-name or less common drugs, it's best to bring a sufficient supply, as Indian equivalents may vary in formulation. Some specific brands of cosmetics, sunscreen, or skincare products may not be available or come in a limited variety, especially in rural areas. While feminine hygiene products are readily available, the selection of tampons is more limited than that of pads, particularly in smaller towns.

ALUMNI CONTACTS

If you have further questions, please contact your admissions counselor and/or ask an alumni contact: https://studyabroad.sit.edu/admissions-aid/application-process/contact-a-former-student/.

Packing List

These packing guidelines are based on suggestions from past students and your academic director.

Packing List sample:

GENERAL

- 1 nice outfit suitable for a social events or special site visits
- Lightweight clothes including pants, long-sleeved shirts, light T-shirts
- Underwear and socks (10-day supply)
- Warm pajamas or nightgown
- Slippers or flip flops (for use inside house. Flip flops are not recommended for use outdoors because of the cobble stone sidewalks and roads.)
- 1 pair comfortable sneakers
- 1 pair sandal
- 1 pair nice shoes
- Rain gear (waterproof jacket, poncho, or umbrella)
- 2–4 pairs pants or jeans
- 1 long skirt and/or dress
- 5–6 mixed long and short-sleeved t-shirts
- 2–3 button-down shirts
- Sweater
- Jacket or fleece
- Scarf
- Bathing/Swimming suit
- A Bathing Towel
- Optional – workout clothes

TRAVEL DOCUMENTS

- Passport
- 2 photocopies of your passport stored separately from your actual passport
- Printout of e-visa approval email
- 2 passport photos
- Any relevant vaccine records/documents

HEALTH/TOILETRIES

- Adequate supply of any medications you use regularly
- Small first aid kit (most supplies can be bought here)
- Extra eyeglasses and/or contact lenses
- Sunscreen (at least SPF 30)

- Sunglasses
- Bug Spray
- Wide-brimmed hat or baseball cap (for sun protection)

OTHER IMPORTANT ITEMS

- Medium-sized day pack (to pack clothes for 5–6 days for excursions)
- Small, quick-drying towel
- Flashlight
- Reusable water bottle
- Small luggage lock
- Laptop computer *(please insure it)*
- Students are encouraged to bring a battery-operated carbon monoxide detector

