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Indians flock to learn secrets of western dining and grooming

Mumbai image consultants charging £1,000 a day to teach etiquette, reports **Vidhi Doshi**

When Akshay Shah watches his hero – the suave, quick-witted corporate lawyer Harvey Specter in the US television series *Suits* – he says to himself, “Akshay, you should be like him.”

Aged 24, Shah already runs a successful real estate firm in the Indian financial capital, Mumbai, but something about the character’s behaviour inspires him. “It is just the way he’s suited up, the way he speaks, it’s everything,” he says. “I want to be like him, I want that same confidence.”

Shah felt his own success was incomplete. “My brother had studied and worked in the UK for three years, and I just felt he had something that I didn’t have,” he says. “I was successful, but I wasn’t like other successful people.”

For Shah, European and American manners that he associated with success were appealing. “The way they eat, the way they dress, their politeness, I wanted to upgrade myself to be like them,” he says.

Shah is one of hundreds of thousands of Indians who have taken classes with a new cadre of professional image consultants who teach the social graces and etiquettes associated with old, upper-class Europe. While the finishing schools of the 19th and 20th centuries are now outdated in the west, an industry of manners worth more than 6bn rupees (£70m) has mushroomed in the east in the last five years, as young, urban Indians prepare to embark on global careers.

“It was things like having patience, offering your seat on the bus, or speaking with a good accent,” says Shah. “It’s not more important than having knowledge in

your field, but it gives you an advantage. It means a client is more likely to ask you to join him for an event or meeting, because you won’t embarrass him.”

Maya Daswani, who runs Persona Power, a Mumbai consultancy, says that many of her clients are intimidated when they go to Europe or America to study or work. “They have the academic and technical knowledge, they have no problems at all with that. But they lack confidence. I have one client who went to study at Oxford University. And when she went there, she found she wasn’t popular. So she came back, and started taking classes with me to learn how to speak properly, how to make casual conversation, how to approach people.”

Sessions with consultants include how to speak in the “right” accent, Titanic-style fine dining, personal grooming and other “soft skills”. “People do know how to eat with a knife and fork, but sometimes they use them like daggers,” Daswani says. “Simple things, like how to pronounce the word ‘comfortable’.” Indians emphasise every syllable, and say “come-for-table”, and I correct them.”

Clients include schoolchildren, MBA students, corporate firms, and even housewives, as Indians scramble to adapt to the globalised world. A single day’s session with a high-end consultant such as Daswani can be worth up to £1,000. “I have parents literally begging me to take their children, some as young as three,” she says. “It’s not because there’s anything wrong with them, it’s just that they want their kids to have an advantage in life.”

As India emerges as a global power after two decades of rapid development, even its diplomats sometimes feel out of place at international events. Many Indians have taken to hiring consultants after rumours



Etiquette training for staff at the Indian Institute of Petroleum Management in Haryana, India. Photograph by Niklas Halle'n/Rex

that the prime minister, Narendra Modi, had used them in his journey from right-wing fringe politician to international leader. “Because of Modi, many politicians have started taking classes,” says Bijal Mamniya, director of Panache Image Consultants.

Mamniya recalls one client who came to her after a holiday in Mauritius. “It was her first trip out of the country, and she was with all these German and French people. She was vegetarian and didn’t know how to behave when they served seafood. She went to the beach wearing jeans, and saw all these Europeans wearing bikinis. She felt so uncomfortable, she came to me to learn how to fit in.”

Mamniya continued: “Indians have always emulated British culture. Britain

‘Indians have always emulated British culture. Britain ruled us, and they still rule us, mentally’

Bijal Mamniya, style consultant

ruled us, and they still rule us, mentally. Things are changing but it is still a part and parcel of our life.”

She argues that Indians should be free to emulate whichever culture inspires them. “If you want to be traditionally Indian, then that’s fine. But when I go to European countries, I love the way that

they are. Just because I’m Indian, why should I not do that?”

“India has the best culture, and Indians should be very proud,” says Konkana Bakshi, a former beauty queen and owner of the Savoir Faire finishing school. “When we see a French woman in India, we feel so in awe. But they also see our culture as colourful, and exciting. It’s not just us learning their culture, they also want to learn ours.”

Bakshi argues that Indians should embrace their own traditions when they go abroad. “Other countries find us exotic, extravagant and magnanimous with our hospitality.”

“European culture is all about subtlety. To build a relationship, it’s all about finding the right balance.”

Savoir Faire’s
Konkana Bakshi.

