

Why Indians Are Obsessed With “Sir”: A Colonial Hangover or a Language of Discrimination?

In India, one word echoes across classrooms, offices, and formal conversations — “**Sir**.” From school students to corporate employees, we’re conditioned from childhood to address anyone senior in age, position, or rank with this title. But have we ever stopped to think: *What are we really saying when we use it?* Is this constant “Sir-ing” just about respect — or is it a symptom of something deeper, something more harmful: a mindset shaped by slavery, classism, and discrimination?

Let’s dive into the cultural roots of this habit, how it differs from its original English meaning, and why it’s time to rethink it.

1 The Real Meaning of “Sir” in English

In the English language, *Sir* isn’t just a polite word to throw around casually. Historically, it’s a title of honor — a formal recognition given by the British Crown for exceptional service. Think of names like:

- **Sir Isaac Newton**
- **Sir Alexander Graham Bell**
- **Sir Winston Churchill**

👉 In British tradition, *Sir* was used as a prefix with the person’s name — *Sir Arthur Conan Doyle* — not as a daily title for seniors or bosses. It signified knighthood, not mere seniority.

👉 In modern English-speaking countries — the UK, US, Europe — *Sir* is rarely used outside of formal settings like customer service, the military, or royal contexts. Calling your professor, boss, or colleague “Sir” in daily conversation would feel strange — or even offensive — because it suggests unnecessary distance or fake respect.

2 The Indian Twist: Sir = Saheb, Seth, Malik

In India, *Sir* took on a totally different meaning.

👉 It became an English substitute for words like **Saheb**, **Seth**, or **Malik** — honorifics deeply tied to power, class, and ownership.

👉 Instead of being a rare title of distinction, *Sir* became a tool of daily submission. We’re taught to use it automatically for:

- Teachers

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- Bosses
- Older colleagues
- Even strangers in authority

👉 And it doesn't stop at just formal contexts — even in casual interactions, people feel compelled to sprinkle *Sir* into every sentence, as if it's the only way to be polite.

3 The Root of This Habit: Colonial Hangover + Caste Hierarchy

♦ Colonial legacy:

During British rule, Indians were conditioned to address officers and rulers with titles like *Sir* or *Madam* — not as genuine marks of respect, but as reminders of subjugation. Even after independence, we didn't shed this linguistic habit.

♦ Caste system parallel:

The caste system in India reflects a similar pattern. Those at the top — the so-called “upper castes” or people in prestigious jobs — are given automatic respect, while those in so-called “lower” jobs or manual labor are often looked down upon.

👉 *Sir* fits into this structure: it reinforces the idea that people with higher positions or “better” jobs deserve greater reverence — not because of their actions, but simply because of their title or role.

4 The Dark Side: Classism and Discrimination

● This obsession with titles feeds classism.

By making *Sir* a requirement for seniors, we keep alive the idea that someone above us in hierarchy is inherently superior — not just more experienced, but somehow “better” than us.

● It encourages discrimination.

Those in so-called petty or blue-collar jobs rarely get called *Sir* or *Madam*. Instead, they're often spoken to rudely or without any honorific. This shows how the system of titles promotes inequality — respect is reserved for those with power.

● It stifles equality in workplaces.

In modern, professional settings, seniors aren't our owners or masters. They simply have more

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responsibility or experience. Yet, the constant use of *Sir* and *Madam* creates a power distance that discourages free communication and ideas.

5 What Happens If You Don't Say Sir in India?

👉 In India, trying to address a senior by their name, as people do in the West, can feel like a social sin.

👉 People might look at you as if you've committed a crime — like showing arrogance or being badly brought up.

👉 In offices, this can harm professional relationships, even if your intention is to promote equality and openness.

In contrast, in Europe, America, Japan, or China, using someone's name — even a senior's — is normal, respectful, and seen as confident.

6 Respect Comes From Behavior — Not Titles

It's important to understand this:

- ✅ Saying *Sir* doesn't automatically mean you're respectful.
- ✅ Respect is shown through how you treat people: your tone, your empathy, your listening skills, your fairness.
- ✅ Real respect is earned — it can't be forced through titles.

A senior deserves your cooperation and acknowledgment of their experience — but not linguistic submission.

7 Is India Changing?

There's hope.

☀️ In **startups, tech companies, and creative industries**, first-name culture is slowly taking root.

☀️ Many **progressive teachers and managers** now encourage juniors to skip unnecessary titles.

☀️ **Global exposure** through media, travel, and remote work is helping break old habits.

But large parts of our society — government offices, traditional businesses, schools — still cling to this outdated system.

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A Call for Change

If we want to build a fairer, more equal India, we must begin with **how we speak**.

- 👉 Let's stop making *Sir* a tool of classism.
- 👉 Let's teach our children that respect comes from actions, not titles.
- 👉 Let's break free from the chains of colonial and caste-based language habits.

Because the day we stop needing titles to feel respected — that's the day we truly move forward.

Final Thoughts

The obsession with *Sir* in India isn't just a linguistic quirk. It reflects deeper issues of class, caste, and colonial mentality. It's time we asked ourselves: **Are we giving respect — or are we just feeding inequality?**