

## **Germany and India – The role of civil societies in our times**

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### **I. Introduction**

Does it matter whether our civil societies engage in larger numbers than today in shaping perceptions of each other, in learning from each other and in cooperating together in this or that field? Doesn't it suffice to perceive of each other through the English speaking media and through official channels, whenever a matter of concern to each other or to the world at large requires some decisions or action?

You may say: "No, it does not matter."

But the truth of the matter is that people - that means some sectors of civil society at both ends - apart from professionals and officials in politics, economics and culture or in the social field - do have concerns, interests of some kind and may develop perceptions as a result of direct or indirect contact.

The internet-German-Indian information service of the German-Indian Society in (DIG – Deutsch-Indische Gesellschaft) registers about 17.000 visits monthly. The German Indian Society in Germany looks back to a history of more than 50 years and has about 3.000 members in more than 30 regional chapters, which is quite remarkable. The Indo-German Society, New Delhi with similar independent structures in various regions of the subcontinent has been in existence since the early sixties.

Such bilateral societies are by no means the exception to the rule in the modern world.

### **II. The European-Indian Round Table**

To the surprise of certainly not only a few observers there is in place since a number of years a European-Indian Round Table. It had been initiated by the then Commissioner of the European Commission in charge of international affairs, Sir Chris Patton in preparation of the first ever Summit of the European Union and India that took place in Lisbon in June 2000. One of the 22 items of a joint European -Indian Action plan envisaged the establishment of a Round Table composed of representatives of the European and the Indian civil societies. Certainly it took some time to establish the frankness and openness that would be expected to prevail with activists from non-governmental organisations around the table. But in fact the round table is largely frequented by official representatives from trade unions and enterprise associations as well as representatives from cultural and other non governmental structures. At the European end the representatives on the round table are selected by the European Social and Economic Council established as an advisory organization to the European Commission – decades ago. In a similar way, also at the Indian end we witness a structured participation that meets with the Europeans. However, unsatisfactorily, as it may be looking judged by the way in which semi-official participation from civil society was brought about that means nothing, almost nothing was left to the genuinely non-governmental structures of society in the end a satisfactory degree of mutual openness and frankness could be achieved.

Therefore the growth potential of the European-Indian round table practice should by no means be overlooked and can be perceived as one of the more promising means for mutual

cooperation and perception - also on a bilateral basis. During the six years of its existence the Round table discussion focussed on controversial issues of trade, investment, migration, agriculture, environment media, tourism culture and sustainable development as well as on human rights. Even recommendations were addressed to the European Institutions, the governments of EU member states and of course to Indian authorities. An internet–forum on India and Europe is in preparation – for direct dialogue of people and organizations and as an information basis. On the occasion of the 9<sup>th</sup> session which took place in Hyderabad, the discussion focussed on controversial and complex issues such as cultural and religious pluralism in democratic societies. There were presentations on the part of NGOs critically approaching political issues such as reform proposals for the electoral system of India, on communal conflict resolution and social support for the poor.

Die dialogue moves to existential issues of our societies under the conditions of globalization – such as strategic partnership between Europe and India, multilateralism in international affairs instead of hegemonic structures, mutual understanding and dialogue, intertwining civil society structures of our two “worlds” Europe and India – that means border-crossing partnership among trade unions, enterprise associations, employer organizations and cultural institutions. Beyond the organized framework discussions the Round Table addressed and will continue to do so the issues and intricacies of cultural and religious pluralism – which constitutes so often the source of discrimination of sectors of our societies, of deprivation, prejudice and use of force in disputes at the local or national level.

Now the Round table discusses ways and means to introduce the results of this important and meaningful dialogue into our publics, the educational systems and into the broad spectrum of mutual perception. Multipliers are needed.

### **III. India and Germany within the scope of our civil societies**

If you compile information on all the activities undertaken within our respective civil societies with regard to India or Germany respectively, you will be surprised about the volume and the intensity of these activities. Among them are

- the Indo German Chamber of Commerce in India in the first instance. This bilateral Chamber was established in 1956 in Mumbai (at the time Bombay). It celebrates its 50th anniversary in 2006 and comprises about 7.000 members, among them 500 German companies and corporations. Offices are located in Mombai, Chennai (Madras), Kolkata (Calcutta), Bangalore, New Delhi – and in Duesseldorf (Germany). The structures do not receive any governmental subsidies. The Chamber is engaged in a process of putting up dozens of sub-regional offices all over India. A number of these small offices are in operation already.
- the German Cultural institutes (Max Mueller Bhavans in New Delhi, Kolkata, Chennai, Mumbai, Pune) and for the Indian side in Berlin play a very important role as multiplier. These institutes depend on governmental financial support, but in a way they provide the stage for cultural activities that are promoted and supported by civil society and their culturally oriented associations including performances of classical and other dances, Indian and European music, art exhibitions, and of course platforms for panel discussions on the issues of the day and the future. Language training constitutes an important component of their work. There is a larger demand for

German language classes in India than in the past. This demand has to be met, I presume by following suit the good example set by the Indo-German Chamber of commerce. Small cultural offices with a program for language classes and an internet based information centre could be the answer.

- the cooperation and exchanges in the educational, academic and scientific fields – organized by the institutions, but also by civil society
- Cooperation on social, environmental and education issues as promoted from within society mostly through nongovernmental organizations such as the Political Foundations (Konrad Adenauer Stiftung; Friedrich Naumann-Stiftung, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Heinrich Böll-Stiftung and Rosa Luxemburg-Stiftung) as well as through nongovernmental organizations such as BROT FUER DIE WELT or CARITAS supported by German or international Church Structures. Initiatives are directed at human rights and social matters as well as multi-cultural experiments (Aurobindo movement).
- Recently business supported Foundations have entered the arena of Indo German cooperation within the scope of civil societies. In cooperation with the Research Institute of the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation the Bertelsmann-Foundation initiated an Indian European Dialogue on the issues posed for our Cultures in facing the challenges of Globalization. It is bound to be continued.

Of course, cooperative projects of such non-governmental associations in a bridge building function between Germany and India constitute only a small fraction of what is accomplished by nationally rooted civil society activities in general terms in both countries – an indispensable element for grass root democracy and social integration of hitherto marginalized or deprived parts of our population.

At our end, in Germany, you find the multi-faceted situation reflected and represented in the 33 branch offices of the **German Indian Society** with about 3.000 members, half of them Indians living in Germany permanently in the first or second generation. The brochure on the 50 years of the existence of the German Indian Society (DIG), which was celebrated in 2003 offers a broad overview of the diversity of the society's activities in Germany and in India. In 1997, the Society organized a Conference at the "**Haus der Kulturen der Welt**" on "**50 Years Independent India**" The conference included structured panel discussions on the historical circumstances that led to independence, on India's social, political, cultural development and problems, on the literature in India in various regional languages. Or, more recently the Society organized conferences on "**Globalization and Cultural Identity**", on "**Religion and the Status of Women in India**".

In **Hamburg** this year there will held the **Forth South Asia Public Conference at Hamburg University**. In spite of shortcomings in its program – too many lectures, too many official statements, too few panels, too little discussions - it turned out to be a success because there is interest for India and South Asia among the public in Hamburg in spite of the fact that the "official Hamburg", as well as traders in Hamburg are interested foremost in China and in Eastern Europe. Topical issues at these South Asia Conferences in Hamburg were until now

- Mutual perceptions – Europe and South Asia
  - Confrontation or cooperation between civilizations
  - South Asia and the global economy
  - Social reforms in South Asia – a critical review

- “My South Asia” - Young people from South Asia and Germany discuss their vision of South Asia.

The German Indian Society also supported the development of textbook material on India and South Asia to be used at schools in Germany. The material is available now and is actively used in German schools. It leaves behind us the notion of India to be nothing but a country of Maharadshas, holy cows, suicides because of dowries and the country of widely spread poverty.

#### **IV. What is Europe – An Indian Perception?**

On the occasion of one of the festive events of the German Indian Society (DIG) to highlight its 50th anniversary the Society organized a panel on **“Europe and India”**. In their first reaction to the theme initially people were putting forward the question, why don't we discuss the relationship of “Germany and India”? A valid question, indeed, never the less, the integrated Europe, the united Europe constitutes the historical answer of nations after World War II to the European Wars of the past two hundred years - after the French Revolution. Given the perspectives of globalization and world wide activities of industries, traders and communications, no single country in Europe can successfully stir its course into the future alone. The development of a European Union able to act on the world stage on the basis of jointly worked out guidelines constitutes a necessity - for the sake of survival and competitiveness.

Inside of North America there were local wars after the establishment of the United States, but no wars that drew various continents into the militant rivalry of national states inside the continent. The European Union is still widely unknown in India, and until now not really taken very seriously on the global stage, in particular not in the military and security policy related dimension. Indeed there are limitations in this respect, mainly due to the fact that most if not all member states of the European Union are also members of the North Atlantic Alliance, and until recently, the North Atlantic Alliance was the unquestioned guarantor of the security on both sides of the North Atlantic. International Terrorism brought new challenges to the security of the world – not only of North America or Europe.

Nevertheless it should be noted - also on the international stage - that the European Union has adopted now – in parallel to the North Atlantic Alliance - a threat perception which defines exactly the same potential threats as was done by NATO at an earlier stage (WMD; Terrorism, Rogue States, Failed States Genocide). These potential threats cannot be mastered by any one nation alone – not even the United States, as we see nowadays in the Middle East. Saddam Hussein may have been deposed from power, but the US military commanders do settle neither the issues of internal security in Iraq nor the issues of the future political structures in the state of Iraq, which appears to be closer to disintegration than to reconstruction.

Following the current discussion in India about the partners of India in the world to engage for strengthening stability in Asia, India has difficulties to perceive a role for Europe in this endeavour. It rather seeks reliable cooperation with the USA, Australia and other countries in Asia and up to the degree possible with China, and in a way also with Pakistan.

India recognizes - it seems nowadays - that the past fifty plus years of developments in Europe could offer some interesting insights into the burdensome but promising policy of confidence building with opposing, with unfriendly countries after conflict and during the

transformation from confrontation to cooperation, even integration. For contemporary Indian observers of today it is difficult to understand that Germany, France, Poland und Great Britain and other states, not to overlook Russia in this context had been at loggerheads for centuries and engaged in regional and world wars for supremacy in Europe and against such ambitions of neighbouring countries.

It appears that large parts of the political class in India and for that matter perhaps also in Pakistan realize that the time has come to overcome mutual distrust and the nightmares of the past. The task for the future is to devise means for developing mutual trust, to identify confidence-building measures and to engage larger parts of the population and non-governmental structures in this all embracing process.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, I recall initiatives taken by representatives from various corners in Europe to suggest to India the development of confidence-building measures in the relationship with Pakistan and with regard to the controversial issue of Kashmir. At the time, the answer was: such methods don't work in South Asia in particular and in Asia as such. Now the situation has changed: Several institutes study the European experience in the development of concepts for conflict management and confidence-building measures in regions of tension, confrontation and in front of conflicting claims.

Such concepts are products of pragmatism, not of ideology. What is at stake? A serious conflict that could escalate into all kinds of war including nuclear war, a conflict that absorbs enormous amounts of funds in order to be prepared for the worst scenarios, a conflict where neither side can give in - without running the risk of the collapse of the political structure of the states involved, has to be managed in order not to get out of hand, in order to avoid war by misunderstanding, by misinterpretation. At the same time, you may wish to explore other avenues in order to bring about understanding and cooperation in other fields, in order to develop vested interests for peace on both sides thus softening up un-relented fixation on the dividing issues, in order to reduce the dependence on foreign countries in the defence of interests in the fundamental issues with the neighbouring Pakistan.

India and Pakistan may discover that shaping their future lies primarily with them, and that – in developing more substantive relations in exchanges of all kinds, and in developing confidence-building measures on a range of issues - the welfare and the wellbeing of their citizens can be better served than by asking them to line up as a part of the confronting armies.

## **V. India in Germany – Germany in India**

One of the few Indian Cultural Institutes, maintained abroad by ICCR, is located in Germany (Berlin) - rightfully so. It was named - for a certain period of time – the Tagore-Cultural Centre, given the great reputation that this man of outstanding cultural achievements enjoyed and continues to enjoy in Germany. Incidentally, the only Award for Indian Culture presented to the German Speaking people in Europe was initiated by the German-Indian Society in the year 1986. It is offered every third year to an outstanding presentation in German of manifestations of Indian culture. This Award also bears the name of Rabindranath Tagore.

On the occasion of India's role as focal country at the Asia Pacific Weeks in Berlin in 2003 - organized not by federal German agencies, but by the Berlin authorities - India presented itself foremost as a multi-cultural society, involved notably in the high-technology sectors of modern industry and in multi-cultural approaches in modern arts such as films, popular music.

The Indian Council on Cultural Relations – ICCR - may have been reluctant to depart from the presentation on the international stage of samples of classical Indian dance and music, but the German cultural centres such as the “Haus der Kulturen der Welt” (“House of the Cultures of the World”) did not hesitate to bring to Berlin - with astonishing success - samples of modern cultural life from India, controversial as these artefacts and manifestations may have been here and back home in India.

In India, there are centres such as the Max Müller Bhavans (MMB) and the bilateral Indo-German Chamber of Commerce offering information and dialogue on and with Germany. There is a monthly Magazine issued by the Chamber, and there is a monthly magazine “German News” issued with more than 100 000 copies by the German Embassy.

However, the by far largest amount of information on Germany brought to India comes through the electronic and other media in English, originating mostly in the USA and in England. That means the genuine European continent has little media access to India, directly from the continent to India.

Can we register regular conferences in India or for that matter in New Delhi with panel discussions on Germany or on Europe in these days? A representative of the Indian Institute for Defence Analyses recently ventured to say: “Until now the European Union failed to present itself in any credible way as a cohesive and trustworthy federated State. We are not sure what Germans intend to accomplish, and to what degree they are ready to engage themselves in India?”

From other fields of our society is known that a number of bilateral structures – for instance German-US-Centres, German-British structures, the German-Russian Forum, the German-French Youth Academy, organize from time to time, however on a regular basis public events, conferences to discuss developments affecting both countries internally and internationally and seek to enhance areas of mutual interest and interaction as well as cooperation among the civil societies of the respective countries This is done by the German-Indian Society as well, although not as frequently as other bilateral societies manage to do, however, the “beauty of the German-Indian Societies” has to be seen in its grass root organisations at the local, at the communal level – mostly in big or large but also in medium sized cities. They are well respected in their respective regions, serve as a model for intra-cultural dialogue, cooperation and care fore the community they live in. Their activities include the promotion of partnerships between schools in India and Germany, India related events in public education for the adult generation n and of course at the school level. They support projects for social development in rural areas of India and alike.

Unfortunately the Indo-German Society in India, which was founded decades ago, limits its activities to the New Delhi region and may be to Jaipur/Rajasthan, but there is no such network in the major cities of the country, Once a year, a Wilhelm von Pochhammer Lecture is presented to the public in New Delhi – expression of the high respect that this German diplomat gained in India with his great history “India’s Road to Nationhood – A Political History of the Subcontinent”, published in the seventies for the first time in Germany (Bremen). There is a potential for more centres of civil society based Indian-German cooperation within the Indian civil society. It only needs to be activated in a meaningful way. Some promising initiatives have been undertaken.

In light of the existing civil society based structures or platforms created by the state institutions but offered for cultural and social groups from the two sides, some conclusions and recommendations can be put forward:

- Civil Society initiatives should bring about public conferences once every two or three years – alternatively in India and in Germany – and in parallel in Europe – to discuss political, economic, cultural and social issues of our societies in this age of globalization and international instability. This could be done in panel discussions with important inputs from the audience
- That means we put aside - for a moment at least - the behind closed door discussions of our official structures, the academic teaching halls and the industrial board rooms and meet in the open – and invite the citizens in general and the media. It would not be the officials to determine what can be said, it would be the specialists in the various fields and the representatives of the various sectors and layers of our societies who discuss their views with officials, with economists and the "gurus" of the cultural stages from both countries.

A few years ago the 40th **Annual International Security Conference** took place in Munich. Decades ago it was financed by the Ministry of Defence and the Federal Information Office. It brought together the officials from NATO countries including the Ministers of Defence. Today participation is from all over the world. The Conference continues to be a kind of public hearing on the positions of governments and of the defence and security analytical communities on issues of external and internal security – facing new threats. Today, however, one of the non-governmental German Foundations finances this important international annual event. The messages from the conference hall reach all corners of the world.

Not long ago the non governmental public **World Social Forum** – a manifestation of a worldwide concern in response to the **World Economic Forum** - took place in Mumbai.

The **European–Indian Round Table** – as introduced by the European-Indian Summit in the year 2000 - serves as an impressive model and way of progressing from the general issues to the more specific ones, but still lacking the daring steps towards fully open conference halls – at least once and a while.

In the end a public impact should be brought about on issues facing Germany and for that matter Europe and India by public panel discussions of problems of the day or the time: today it would be

- globalisation and social security,
- globalisation and national identity,
- environment and the preservation of mother earth,
- the respect for human rights,
- sustainable development and
- the rule of law, as well as
- the legal status and the habitual status of women and of marginalized sections in our societies.

The initiatives of civil societies discussed in this essay would have something in common with the Mumbai Social Summit and the annual World Economic Summit as well as with the European Indian Round Table and the Bertelsmann Foundation India-Europe-Conference on Cultures facing Globalization, however in contrast to most of the other events they would be fully public and would have to be repeated in regular intervals at both ends – in India and in Europe.

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### 3. Abkürzungen

DIG	Deutsch-Indische Gesellschaft
EU	Europäische Union
ICCR	Indian Council for Cultural Relations
IDSA	Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
MMB	Max-Mueller Bhavan (Goethe-Institutes in India)
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
USA	United States of America
WMD	Weapons of Mass Destruction

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