

The Emancipation of Indian Dalits from a European Point of View.

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The *Dalit*-issue¹ that continues to plague the Indian nation is well known – in India itself and abroad. Many Indian citizens as well as considerable parts of the international community, sometimes much to the chagrin of the Government of India, are concerned. There is practically no doubt whatsoever in the public awareness regarding India that there is still a great deal of social discrimination² and deprivation of the approximately 160 millions of *Dalits* and another 60 to 80 millions of *Adivasis* - literally the “original inhabitants”, in India officially called “Scheduled Tribes” – existing, besides an awareness that this deplorable state of affairs is in gross violation of the Indian Constitution of January 26, 1950. Undoubtedly, the political leadership of the country, the “leadership” of the relevant institutions are fully aware about the undeniable fact that in future even more substantial funds have to be allocated, in order to alleviate the fate of these fellow citizens, which constitute altogether nearly about one fourth of the population.³ A great deal of efforts are undertaken to overcome these deficiencies – but will this support for the *Dalit* cause be in place in time, since they are predominantly the victims of hunger and malnutrition?!⁴ Or will the funds once again end up in other people’s purses as it is unfortunately so often the case?

Besides official institutions like the *National Commission on Human Rights*, organizations like the *Indian Institute of Dalit Studies* (IIDS), the latter erstwhile under the patronage of the late President of India, K. R. Narayanan, a Dalit by social background, and interestingly initially funded by the American Ford Foundation, as well as the *Jesuite Indian Social Institute* (ISI) do provide sufficient materials.

Socially committed Social Sciences and area studies about India, be it by European, other international – such as members of the International Dalit Solidarity Committee - or Indian authors have to develop comprehensive analytical tools and categories in order to express and substantiate adequately the *plight of the Indian people*⁵, of which *Dalits* form quite a significant part, thereby exercising also some intellectual pressure on the Indian Government and dominating sections of society, including sections of India’s intelligentsia. If we mention the “suffering of large parts of the Indian people”, we recollect in reconstructive comparison phenomena like “pauperism” with its implications of hunger and malnutrition affecting sections of the European populace in the 18th and early 19th centuries, as described and

¹ This means the “oppressed or excluded” as the officially so-called “Scheduled Castes” (SC’s) increasingly prefer to call themselves. The term „Harijans“ (“Children of God”), euphemistically coined by Mahatma Gandhi, is not any longer acceptable and increasingly regarded as derogatory.

² Walter Hahn (2006): The Platform “Dalit Solidarity in Germany” (DSID): Activities and the Internet. In: Klaus Voll/Doreen Beierlein (Eds.): *Rising India – Europe’s Partner? Foreign and Security Policy, Politics, Economics, Human Rights and Social Issues, Media, Civil Society and Intercultural Dimensions*. Berlin, New Delhi, p. 716-726

³ There is no dearth of well-documented figures and descriptions about the atrocities against Dalits and other weaker sections of Indian society, compare for instance Bibek Debroy / Shyam Babu (2005): *The Dalit Question – Reforms and Social Justice*. Globus Books, New Delhi

⁴ Jean Drèze (2006): *Democracy and The Right to Food*. In: Klaus Voll/Doreen Beierlein (Eds.): op. cit. p. 727-750

⁵ Klaus Voll (2005): *The Failure of Governance – Politics, Sociology and the Perspectives of Food Insecurity in India*. In: Uwe Kracht, Manfred Schulz (Eds.): *Food and Nutrition Security in the Process of Globalization and Urbanization*. LIT, Muenster, p. 702 - 711

analyzed in the works by August Bebel, Eduard Bernstein, Charles Dickens, Norbert Elias, Hartmut Elsenhans, Friedrich Engels, Eric Hobsbawm, Karl Kautsky, Karl Marx, Thomas Nipperdey and Hans-Ulrich Wehler amongst others.

Europe' Heritage as a model?

What has Europe historically and what have the different major European states and sections of their societies nowadays really to do with the situation of *Dalits*, particularly under the process of increased globalisation? Is it only an academic or at best a philosophical interest, emanating from the tenets of the era of enlightenment and the French revolution, based on the assumption of the basic equality of all human beings irrespective of their social status, gender, colour and religion, articulated by nostalgic proponents of universal human rights from good "old" Europe? In general, Europe achieved the social and educational modernisation of the working class, also through health and insurance systems, respectively educational institutions like the "People's High-Schools" ("*Volks-Hochschulen*") in Germany. Hans-Eberhard Dingels, between 1961 till 1995 International Secretary of the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), stresses the contribution of Jewish intellectuals, amongst other functions as Editors-in-Chief of the influential party press, and their impact on the emancipation of the working-class and Trade Union movement in their struggles against such odds like the German Officers Class and the remnants of the medieval system of guilds in the process of industrialisation.

Historically, the so-called "lower" sections of European societies and their respective political outfits, particularly in such core-countries like England, France and Germany, have played during the transition to predominantly industrialized economies a major role in the processes of democratisation and public education. Is it here, with a certain historical delay, that corresponding developments like a "silent revolution" and a "second democratic upsurge" can be observed in the Indian context since the 80's of last century and can there, irrespective of the numerous social, political and cultural differences, some general similarities be observed, without neglecting earlier emancipatory social and educational movements in India even during colonial times? Before addressing some of the similarities, we should realize the fundamental difference of the social and political potential of the "working class" during the period of mechanical industrialisation in Europe and North America and the fact that the *Dalits* and *Adivasis* were and are to an extent the "product" of religiously proclaimed exclusion, deprivation and discrimination. The labour force was indispensable for the industrial development of the then emerging industrialized countries and therefore constituted a political force to reckon with. Social-Democrats represented for decades the largest parliamentary party in the German Reichstag of Imperial Germany between 1871 until 1918. Bismarck's social legislation towards the end of the 19th century was meant to curb the growing strength of the Social-Democrats. Compared to this situation, *Dalits* were of a relatively marginal social and economic importance for India's overall economic development, although they continue to contribute to the processes of "original accumulation" as farm and child labourers etc. They constituted – together with other segments of the population – a "burden" from the point of view of those who created a system of "structural force" for them and they were living on the basis of subsistence – as they do still in large numbers today.

At the political level, the *Dalit* parties that finally emerged as a result of the gradual social and professional progress among *Dalits* with all their regional and internal differentiations, also brought about by their quota shares in education and access to state jobs, don't possess the economic expertise and visions for instance of the erstwhile *Social Democratic Party* in the

second half of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. They lack a deeper competence and therefore explanatory capability to thoroughly understand the complicated nature of the Indian power system, e. g. the nature of the “democratically legitimised State Class with its growing criminal and plutocratic tendencies”, the economic and societal foundations and basic interests of the Indian bourgeoisie⁶ and middle classes. Some insiders maintain, that the leadership of the *Bahujan Samaj Party* (BSP), currently the most powerful *Dalit* party, is actually adverse to a too comprehensive intellectual and economic expertise, although it harbours the potential for a social-democratic political movement with nascent signs of a people’s party, at least in Uttar Pradesh as far as the social composition of party candidates for the 2007 State Assembly elections in this most populous Indian state is concerned.

Dalits, irrespective of such outstanding personalities like Dr. Ambedkar⁷, K. R. Narayanan or Kanshi Ram and their rise to prominent positions, have not yet reached the stage, where their urge for identity and emancipation has led to mass phenomena like “*Von der Wiege bis zur Bahre*”, e. g. a life-long learning endeavour *from the cradle to the grave*, which has been so characteristic for the early working class movement in Germany. Instead, organizations like the *Dalit Sena* (“Army of Dalits”) did not have the visible impact as for instance its illustrious founder Ram Vilas Paswan, one of India’s most prominent *Dalit* politicians and a long-time Cabinet Minister, wants to make us believe, easily at hand with possibly very exaggerated figures.

The Social Welfare State in Europe is under severe constraints. For instance in Germany, the income and wealth gaps are constantly increasing, although Social Democrats have been leading a coalition Government for seven years and are since the 2005 elections the junior partner in a so-called *Grand Coalition*. But nevertheless, the heritage of the general and legal equality of all human beings is undisputed, without any insinuations of “untouchability” and “racial inferiority” ascribed to any segment of society.

Truth and Reconciliation Conference of Dalits and Caste Hindus

In the past, India has generated any amount of founders of religions, seers, saints and godmen, sometimes with tremendous political influence, and is producing definitely the latter variety also in present times. Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, himself revered by his followers as “His Holiness”, is the founder of the *Art of Living Foundation*, which is allegedly working in 25 000 villages, but he is above all internationally well connected, with a claimed outreach to approximately 3 million people in about 151 countries, also in affiliation with the UN system. He organized on the 9th of March 2007 a *Truth & Reconciliation Conference of Dalits and Caste Hindus* in the Hamsadhvani Stadium, Pragati Maidan in New Delhi, attended by about 2 000 people. The long list of the names of the Participating Organisations and Communities, more than 50 altogether and all with caste-based identities, revealed the true nature of the ensemble of Indian (sub-) societies and reads like a veritable *Who is Who* of Indian Castes and their representative organizations. This event gave the lie to all those who don’t consider the caste identity as the determining one in contemporary India and instead propagate all-embracing identities like class, gender or religion as more comprehensive ones. The tremendously complicated, covert and manifold masked Indian society contains also a *System*

⁶ Compare Chidanand Rajghatt & Agencies: India pips Japan in super-rich list. The Times of India, 10. 3. 2007, p. 1. India has the highest amount of Dollar billionaires in Asia.

⁷ Christophe Jaffrelot (2004): Dr. Ambedkar and Untouchability. Permanent Book, New Delhi

of *Apartheid*.⁸ Therefore, one has to envisage the emancipatory efforts of all social sections and especially of *Dalits* outside the upper-caste system within these parameters also.

“The house is on fire”, so R. Shankar, advocating “a peace which will bring a revolution and lead to a unified and beautiful society”. He referred to the historical contributions of *Dalits* and other representatives of so-called “lower sections” to the formulation of classical texts of Hindu (Sanatan) literature. “Moving away from Hinduism and converting to other religions has not helped the Dalits in their war against the oppressive caste system. Past wrongs cannot be undone through anger and rage. -...-Both Dalits and other caste Hindus have to change....It is time for reconciliation. If it doesn’t happen now, society will reel in cycles of revenge and counter-revenge. For justice and progress, there has to be reconciliation.”⁹

The 7-point action Plan, acclaimed by the participants, propagates the following: “1.Temple entry for Dalits: 2.Collective celebration including community feasts: 3.Abolition of separate utensils for Dalits: 4.Empowerment of women from economically weaker sections of society: 5.Providing educational facilities especially to weaker sections of society: 6.Providing spiritual and religious education to Dalit children, which they have been deprived of for hundreds of years: 7.Equality and justice for one and all without any discrimination.”¹⁰

At this stage it is not evident, if this effort, besides the expressed fear about the potential erosion of Hindu Society and the attempts to avoid this process, did serve also a political purpose, since Shri Agarwal, Member of Parliament of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and President of the All India Vaish Federation¹¹ as well as Udit Raj, President of the Indian Justice Party and also of the All-India Federation of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Employees, participated. U. Raj interestingly maintained, that India could not become a world power, if the internal divisions would not be eradicated. “You have all to drink poison, entrenched in our society.” He stressed that not a single *Dalit* could be found in the list of India’s one thousand leading entrepreneurs and that *Dalits* could not expect help from upper-castes. A Brahmin representative, who stated that in his organization’s temple in Patna the headpriest is a *Dalit*, claimed that the upliftment of *Dalits* would be instrumental to make India a super-power. Members of the Paswan¹² community maintained, that the 7-point programme is not anymore relevant for their people and that economic empowerment has gained the highest priority. He referred to the far more precise and sophisticated “Bhopal Declaration” with regard to the empowerment of Dalits. – It has to be seen, if this conference, “organized against resistance”, really constituted a “historic event for the transformation of India”, as claimed by Ravi Shankar. Interestingly, in the long list of social and religious reformers in India mentioned by him, he particularly referred to Gautama Buddha.

Short-sightedness of the elite and the middle classes or deliberate discrimination?

The all-pervasive argument in so many socially oriented discussions in India is: “India is too poor to afford all this”, like universal primary education, overcoming hunger and malnutrition, rampant hazardous and less hazardous child labour¹³ etc. But original capital

⁸ See a very comprehensive little booklet from the 1980’s of a Bangalore based Dalit organization with the topic „Apartheid in India“.

⁹ Extract from the invitation leaflet for this conference.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Vaishya do constitute the Banya or trader caste.

¹² Dalits in parts of Bihar

¹³ Manju Gupta and Klaus Voll: Child Labour in India: An Exemplary Case Study. In: Klaus Voll (. Ed.): Child Labour. Indian and International Dimensions and Strategies. Mosaic Bokks, New Delhi, 1999

accumulation in India, like historically in Germany and other European states, does also take place to a certain degree on the backs of the rural populace and the urban marginalized.¹⁴

Given the fast capital accumulation, as a result of the continuous high growth rates particularly during the last years, but already starting in the 1980's, the above argument, which was already not true in the past, does not carry any conviction anymore. In the past, one could wonder, why even fairly enlightened members of the upper and middle classes and castes resorted to these evasive statements and wasted unnecessarily so many mental and intellectual energies. Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh, asked about the reasons for the still low literacy rates, by any international standards, once stated: "I have come to the conclusion that the high amount of illiteracy in this country is a conspiracy of the elite."¹⁵

With the rise of new segments in India's entrepreneurial bourgeoisie, such impeccable and utmost successful modernizers in the field of Information Technology like Azim Premji and S. Narayana Murthy, the latter articulates sophisticated visions for a comprehensive industrialization strategy, do mince no words in analysing these structural deficits of India's society, economy and political decision mechanisms with regard to the lack of an adequate primary education, thereby reducing the full usage of India's manpower potential, particularly also in view of the lack of wide-spread vocational training. In this regard, Azim Premji is outspoken with very clear arguments. It is so evident and can be permanently experienced in daily life, that India requires at a large scale functional vocational training programmes. This could facilitate the political intention of job reservations for *Dalits* and other disadvantaged sections also in the private sector of the Indian economy. The productive energies of these deprived and at the same time aspiring Indian citizens could turn into a tremendous asset during India's *belated industrial revolution* with its growing influence in the world economy.

Historically, Germany's industrial revolution in the 19th century benefited also a lot from the introduction of universal primary education and the final abolition of child labour in a process covering several decades.¹⁶ The rise of the labour movement, its own educational efforts ("From the cradle to the grave") and the formation of a unified *Social Democratic Party of Germany* contributed in a long-drawn process towards an essential challenge of the intellectual and economic hegemony of the German bourgeoisie and its allied social forces, without questioning the overall system, if one leaves aside the Communist movement. Here, India is till now in a disadvantage, since the extreme cleavages between the so-called "organized" and "un-organized" sectors, the pre-dominantly party-affiliated role of various Trade Unions, which are since decades in their top ranks completely in the grip of professional, external and mostly Brahminical and other upper-caste leaders, are far more a barrier than an avenue for the social and economic emancipation of *Dalits* and other socially disadvantaged sections. Perhaps the intensifying "belated industrial revolution", so Oliver Müller, South Asia correspondent of the prestigious German economic daily *Handelsblatt*, could accelerate the decades old "silent revolution" (M. N. Srinivas), combined with an expansion of the "second democratic upsurge" (Yogendra Yadav) in an era of increased foreign direct investments in India. It has to be seen, if the continuous economic growth rates will have an impact on the living conditions of *Dalits* and other disadvantaged social sections.

¹⁴ Michael Köberlein(2003): Living from Waste. Livelihoods of the Actors Involved in Delhi's Informal Waste Recycling Economy. Verlag für Entwicklungspolitik, Saarbrücken.

¹⁵ Statement in 1999 during a Seminar on Labour issues and research in Delhi. Compare also the article by Sukhadeo K. Thorat (1999): Poverty, Caste and Child Labour in India: The Plight of Dalit and Adivasi Children. In: Klaus Voll (Ed.1999), op. cit., p. 154-175

¹⁶Klaus Voll: Child Labour in the 18th and 19th Century: The German experience. In: Manju Gupta/Klaus Voll (Eds.): Young Hands at Work. Child Labour in India. Atma Ram & Sons, Delhi/Lucknow, 1987, p. 69-90

The growing requirements for qualified factory workers and craftsmen could open wider venues for different sections of society, also with the projection of the inherent age-old dignity and skills, like in the past in the transition from guilds to specialised workers training in Europe.

Europeans Between Lack of Interest and Concerns

The vast majority of Europeans currently living in India show overall no real concern for those, who are at the receiving end of the “in-built structural force” in India’s society and its political power-system, although there are also a few laudable exceptions, which hopefully practice what they advocate and don’t remain only declamatory. At the official levels, the Europeans overwhelmingly prefer to deal with the political, economic, social and cultural protagonists of the predominantly urban and upper-caste elite. They are, (un-) knowingly (?) or willingly, undoubtedly discriminatory “casteists” – let us exclude for the purpose of the argument the lack of sufficient interactions with Muslims and other religious minorities - and do not provide any or definitely insufficient job opportunities within their organizations and offices in India to people outside the spectrum of the “twice-born”, e. g. the upper-castes. They are, as it is for instance so evident within the UN-organizations, firmly in the hands of the networks of these sections of the privileged elite, which indirectly also reflects the bias of the educational system, in particular in higher education. Therefore, it could be already a tremendous achievement, if Europeans would, in the areas where they still command influence, positively discriminate also in favour of NGO’s led by *Dalits* themselves, besides others led by persons not belonging to the privileged upper-castes, and to award in particular also individual scholarships to these sections of society.

Yet, well-meaning European and Western friends of India¹⁷ do express their concerns about the extreme inequalities and various discriminations within the multiple layers of Indian society and their many sub-societies and strata. Born out of Europe’s historical experiences, the statement, “If You don’t mobilize Your backwards, You Yourself will become internationally backward”¹⁸, appeals also to the collective self-interest of the Indian elite and the middle classes in particular, in order to realize the full use of the existing manpower potential in India on its way to a major global role and to reduce unnecessary social costs. After all, India will possess in a relatively short historical time a bigger work-force than the faster ageing and less growing People’s Republic of China, besides becoming the state with the biggest population world-wide.

One can observe even today in the era of globalisation a dysfunctional waste of energies and time on the part of the urban upper- and middle classes, which are more or less identical with upper castes, to dilute adequate discussions about social reforms and the improvement of the situation of *Dalits*. Instead, India requires at its current historical stage a new “social formula” (Gaetano Mosca) or “social contract”, in order to mobilize its full potential with the participation of the entire social strata. Here, political foundations and established cultural organizations could exercise an influence with true inter-cultural dialogues between India and various European countries.

¹⁷ “True” friends of India are certainly those, who do not emphasize in a one-sided manner the projection of growth-rates without deeper thoughts of the social and ecological consequences.

¹⁸ This statement has been frequently used by me (Hans-Georg Wieck) in conversations with leading Indian politicians during my years as Ambassador to India between 1990 till 1993.

Political Assumptions and wider perspectives

After independence, the Congress Party, which ruled India uninterruptedly till 1977, co-opted the then existing *Dalit* leadership and received - as a part of its various caste-alliances - over a long period a tremendous percentage of *Dalit* votes. The efforts of Dr. Ambedkar, to create through the Republican Party of India (RPI) also an own political identity for *Dalits* failed over the years, caused by a lack of a Pan-Indian presence and by numerous splits.

In 1984, after the formation of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), Atal Bihari Vajpayee, earlier India's Foreign- and later its Prime Minister, had been quoted in the political journal *India Today* with the following statement: "The formation of the Bahujan Samaj Party will transform fundamentally the political landscape of Northern India." This political foresight proved to be valid in particular for Uttar Pradesh, the most populous state of the Indian Union with about 160 million inhabitants, where the BSP leader Mayawati led three times short-lived coalition governments and where the BSP is considered as a major well-entrenched political force with good electoral prospects. Yet till now, the BSP could make only very limited inroads in states like Madhya Pradesh,¹⁹ Uttarakhand and Punjab, not to speak of other parts of India. As a consequence, the BSP, originally very clear in its rejection of the political and social influence of the upper-castes and their (*Manuvadi*) parties, tries increasingly to appeal, besides its traditional support-basis of *Dalits*, *Chamars* in particular, and amongst sections of the Muslim electorate, to parts of the upper-castes and particularly to the relatively numerous Brahmins in Uttar Pradesh. Perhaps, nascent elements of a *Dalit Social Democracy* can be discerned, although neither the late Kanshi Ram nor his disciple Mayawati, a former school-teacher, have been ideologically very differentiated and disregarded respective attempts of ideological and intellectual inputs with the aim of further ideological sophistication.

Many mainstream parties and particularly the Communist Party of India/Marxist (CPI/M) are uncomfortable with the existence of the BSP and want to submerge the *Dalit*-question into the wider notion of "class". The CPI/M, the "last bastion of political Brahminism"²⁰, and also not the Communist Party of India (CPI) have really raised the *Dalit* issue adequately. When the late Indrajit Gupta, then General Secretary of the CPI, raised this question in the 1990's and demanded representation of *Dalits* etc. in leading positions of his party, there was a storm of protests. Interestingly, the CPI indicated support after the forthcoming Uttar Pradesh elections for a potentially led BSP-government.

The largest empirical research in the 1990's clearly demonstrated, that *Dalits* used their voting rights as a deliberate weapon and a kind of last resort within the Indian power system. Particularly in Uttar Pradesh, *Dalit* voters are alienated from the BJP and Congress, pan-Indian parties, yet with a limited country-wide reach. It will be interesting to observe, if this trend will continue in the 2007 election in this state or if the looming danger of a renewed religiously inspired and communal fundamentalism, trying to project the enemy within and targeting Indian citizens of Muslim religious belief, will raise its ugly head again, like it happened 1992 in Ayodhya and 2002 in Gujarat, which could also lead to religiously inspired fascist tendencies, in order to avoid urgent and overdue economic and social reforms. Therefore, "the integration of *Dalits* into the Indian Society – A key question for the Future of Indian Democracy"²¹ is a most relevant issue for the rise of India as a stable and important

¹⁹ Sudhai Pai (2005): Political Mobilisation: A Comparative Study of Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh. In: Bibek Debroy/Shyam Babu, op. cit., p. 213 ff.

²⁰ A notion coined by me, Klaus Voll

²¹ This is the English translation of an article in German language by Hans-Georg Wieck: Die Integration der *Dalits* in die indische Gesellschaft – Eine Schlüsselfrage für die Zukunft der indischen

global player in the International System of the 21st century, similar to the often painful processes of the integration of disadvantaged sections into various societies in Europe in the 19th and 20th centuries. The situation of *Dalits* constitutes a part of India's back-yard of extreme under-development, which is in the medium- and long-term not really presentable to the outside world, given its aspirations to be a future world-power and its recognisably growing cultural influence. Given its vast historical experience in its long-drawn processes of industrialization, Europe's central heritage and message emanating from the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries are that social change in favour of the disadvantaged sections of society are a central precondition for powerful and cohesive states in the wider contexts of the International System, which would be also in the wider interest of increased relations between the European Union and India in the years and decades to come.

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Since 2004, together with Dr. Uwe Skoda, he edits the Series *Berliner Studien zur Internationalen Politik und Gesellschaft* (*Berlin Studies in International Politics and Societies* - since 1976 - , Weißensee Verlag, Berlin – www.weissensee-verlag.de - and Mosaic Books, New Delhi,). He has edited and written various books and articles on African and Indian affairs. As a result of his specialization on Indian Politics and India's Foreign and Security Policy, he has delivered lectures at Universities and Think Tanks in various European countries.

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Functions since 1954: Member of the German Foreign Service 1954-1993, Director Politico-Military Planning, Federal Ministry of Defence (1970-1974), Ambassador to Tehran/Iran (1974-77), Ambassador to Moscow/Soviet Union (1977-1980), NATO-German Permanent Representative (1980-1985), Ambassador to New Delhi/India (1990-1993), President of German Foreign Intelligence Agency (Bundesnachrichtendienst) (1985-1990).

Functions after retirement: Advisor to President Shevardnadze/Georgia (1993-95) and Head of the OSCE Advisory and Monitoring Group in Belarus (1997-2001); Since 1996 Chairman *Deutsch-Indische Gesellschaft* (DIG / German Indian Society);

Numerous publications on international affairs, among others on India and on German-Indian Relations.

