

Germany and India – The Role of Civil Society in this relationship
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Hans-Georg Wieck

The Role of Civil Society in International Relations

Does it matter whether civil society in Germany and India 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, Civil Society does not matter in international relations."

But the truth of the matter is that people, that means some sectors of civil society at both ends – apart from the professionals in politics, economics and culture or in the social field – do have concerns, interests of some kind, perceptions as a result of direct or indirect contact. An they generate influence on the decision making process of governments and parliaments.

The Internet-based information service of the German Indian Society registers about 5.000 to 10.000 visits monthly. The German Indian Society in Germany looks back to a history of 50 years and has about 4.000 members, which is quite remarkable. India and Germany matter within the scope of our civil societies.

If you compile information on all the activities undertaken with an Indian-German touch you will be surprised and I do mean it. Among them are activities

- of the Indian-German Chamber of Commerce in India in the first instances, but also
- of the business community (German-Indian joint ventures, German industrial and commercial companies as well as of academies and research institutes
- on social, environmental and education issues – mostly through Non-governmental Organisations and notably the Political Foundations (Konrad Adenauer Stiftung; Friedrich Naumann-Stiftung, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Heinrich Böll-Stiftung and Rosa Luxemburg-Stiftung) as well as the Churches and of course
- in cultural fields including classical dance and pop art, Indian and European music, exhibitions and conferences among others organised by the German Cultural Institutes in India and the Indian Cultural Centre in Germany

At our end, in Germany, you find the multi-faceted situation reflected and represented in the 30 branch offices of the **German Indian Society** with about 4.000 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**" with an impressive success in having 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 we organized conferences on "**Globalization and Cultural Identity**", on "**Religion and the status of women in India**". There is also a non-governmental structure – the Indian Institute in Munich that celebrated its 75th anniversary in the course of this year.

The **Second South Asia Public Conference at Hamburg University** will take place this year. In spite of shortcomings in its program – too many lectures, too many official statements, too few panels, too little discussion – the First South Asia Public Conference organised at the University in 2003 was a success. There is a sizeable public in Hamburg interested in South Asia – but this broadly based interest could never manifest itself on the occasion of a public conference on issues of common concern. In general you have to say that the official Hamburg, as well as the traders in Hamburg are traditionally interested foremost in China and in Eastern Europe.

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. It leaves behind us the traditional perception of India to be nothing but a country of Maharadshas, holy cows, suicides because of dowries and the incarnation of country wide poverty.

There is great hope that the “Association of Indo German Societies in India” will broaden and deepen its activities in New Delhi and spread it across the subcontinent. There is ample space for interaction between these Societies in Germany and in India.

India in Germany –Germany in India

One of the few Indian Cultural Institutes maintained abroad by the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), is located in Germany (Berlin). Rightfully so; it is named Tagore-Centre, given the great prestige that this man of so many cultural accomplishments enjoyed and continues to enjoy in Germany.

We witnessed an impressive presentation of India as focal country at last years Asia Pacific Weeks in Berlin (organized not by federal German agencies, but by the Berlin authorities). India presented itself in the first instance as a multi-cultural society, involved notably in high-tech in its economic development and in multicultural approaches in modern arts such as films, popular music. The Indian Council for 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 modern cultural life from India, controversial as it may be here and back home in India. This presentation was received with great enthusiasm.

In India, you have centres such as the Max Müller Bhavans (MMB) and the bilateral Indo-German Chamber of Commerce offering information and dialogue on and with Germany. 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 Great Britain. That means the genuine European continent has but a low voice directed to India, directly from the continent to India. Can we see regular conferences in India or for that matter in New Delhi to take place with panel discussions on Germany or on Europe in these days? A representative of the Indian Institute of Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA) 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, I realize 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 – large public events, conferences to discuss developments affecting both countries internally and internationally and seek to enhance areas of mutual interest and interaction among the civil society of the respective countries.

So, my conclusion is this: Civil Society should try to establish a tradition of public conferences once every two or three years – alternatively in India and in Germany, later on in Europe – to discuss political, economic, cultural and social concerns of contemporary civil society. This would be done in panel discussions with important inputs from the audience. That means we would 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 - in the presence of the media. It would not be for the officials to determine what issues could be addressed, it would be the specialists in the various fields and the representatives of the various sectors and layers of our societies who determine the agenda of the day and discuss their views with officials, with economists and the "gurus" of the cultural stages from both countries.

In February 2004, the 40th plus 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. It continues to be a kind of public hearing on the positions of governments and of the defence and security analytical community. 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.

In the end such an impact should be brought about in both our countries by public panel discussions of issues 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” or the “Protection of and Respect for individual Human Rights and the Rule of Law”, or the “Legal Status and the habitual Status of Women and of marginalized Sections in our Societies”.

I hope, that my talks on the occasion of my current visit – the first one to India in eleven years after my departure in 1993 as German Ambassador to India, eleven years during which I followed events in India and the relationship with Germany/Europe rather closely as highlighted by a number of publications – will help to develop a project in this field.

It will be discussed with non-governmental organizations in India and in Germany.

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Hans-Georg Wieck