

## **Helmut Reifeld: World Power Despite Poverty. India Exists Only in the Plural**

Infinite poverty and unworldly esotericism on the one hand, dropout mysticism and self-discovery romanticism on the other – these were the images that symbolised India in the early nineties. Today's India, however, is characterised by information technology, rising markets, and services that are in great demand. One reason why India has always been a place of great dreams lies in the fact that there has never been one uniform India, and that, as ever, it is composed of many, sometimes contradictory, realities.

After the fall of the Soviet Union, India lost old friends and acquired new ones, including Germany. In this context, the Hanover Fair speaks for itself, nor should we forget the Frankfurt Book Fair, where visitors were impressed by the large number of translations of important literary works from India published by now. India's development throughout the last few years, supported especially by its economic upturn, is impressive indeed. Meanwhile, many new publications even speak of India as a 'world power'.

Among the new books which focus on India's economic development, those written by Oliver Müller and Olaf Ihlau are especially worth mentioning. Müller skilfully describes the speed with which India, formerly an underdeveloped agrarian country, managed to transform itself into a modern knowledge-based society. According to Müller, its motto was 'more growth, more market, more education'.

India is growing at a tearing pace: As predicted in a recent study, the country will grow faster than any other country in the world until 2020, and its economic output might even double every twelve years. At 250,000, India is training four times as many engineers as the US even today. In India, graduates who start working after receiving the same education as others elsewhere in the world are not only younger, they are also more willing to work and more process-oriented. What is also important is the market. It solves all those problems the state, which is still archaic in part, is not yet able to cope with. The results of 'LPG' – liberalisation, privatisation, and globalisation – are clearly visible even in the smallest village. And finally, there is education. India is powered by that nexus of economic dynamics and political freedom which creates change and releases energies. This, in turn, promotes education. India endeavours to obtain a top position in research and in the technological development of Western business enterprises. What is more, the country has done wonderful things in the administration of the production and service sector. It seems that India is optimally prepared for 21<sup>st</sup>-century competition.

Müller and Ihlau both offer numerous examples of this development. They both point out the challenges the West has to face as a result of India's success. On the other hand, they do not conceal the deficits which still exist in the country of the 'knowledge revolution' – such as bad educational conditions in rural areas and a high level of illiteracy.

Those who want concise information about the Indian market and the competition there, especially businessmen without prior knowledge in the field, should take a look at a book written by Volker Zotz. His information is compact and manageable, even though it does not fully live up to the ambition of communicating basic facts about the country's culture, society, and economy.

A more comprehensive guide, which focuses on comparing India and China, comes from the pen of Karl Pilny. His book also addresses newcomers from the economy, yet his information is sometimes rather vague and, unfortunately, entirely undocumented. Pilny concentrates on the confrontation between the two 'giants', India and China, looking at it rather more from the Chinese point of view. The political sphere, on the other hand, holds another view: In his book, *Making Sense of Chindia*, Jairam Ramesh, economic adviser to the Indian government, defends the position that India and China are the natural allies of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Next to literature which primarily deals with India's economy, there are also some new publications which address India as a whole. Well-researched introductions have been written by Christian Wagner and Harald Müller, who both know the country very well. In answering the question about what keeps India together, democracy is of paramount importance. The two authors do not conceal the negative sides of a polity overshadowed by corruption and clientelism as well as by patronage and personality worship. However, these do not outweigh the positive aspects, which include a functional separation of powers, a free press, an almost autonomous judiciary, a pluralist system, strong federalism, and a mixed economy. Wagner and Müller do point out the tension between democracy and poverty. India is not only a high-tech country; it is a gigantic subcontinent whose infrastructure shows great deficits, whose health-care and education systems are in poor shape, and where one third of the population lives below the poverty line. In view of all that, Müller asks about the 'great puzzle' of Indian democracy, and what it is that holds the country together. He points out that the people have been living with pluralism for centuries. He also shows that, on the one hand, the country is able to live with all its contradictions and that, on the other, its modernisation does not have to follow Western models at all.

Others are pursuing the same question: What holds India together? David Ludden, for example, highlights the search for collective identities in South Asia, viewing it as a uniform cultural area. He tries to establish a connection between the 'essentialist' approach, which regards human beings as heirs to a social identity, a cultural characteristic analogous with a genetic disposition, and the 'constructivist' approach, which says that human identities are mouldable, numerous, ambiguous, changeable, and context-related by nature. Ludden's analysis is convincing; throughout, he enquires after the conditions and interests prevailing at the time when an interpretation of history originated, but he also describes geographical facts as the framework of new religions or the impact of spiritual factors. At the end of his book, Ludden describes a series of religious though alterable worlds, expressing his concern about the future of Hindu nationalism, which is increasingly opposed by all those who wish for India to remain multi-religious.

At the core of a study by Anton Pelinka, which appears rather old-fashioned, lies the development of India's independence against the background of the myths that formed around Subhas Chandra Bose who died in 1945. Pelinka regards the Bose story as a counterpart of the myth of Ghandi, for although Bose was denied a historical opportunity, he might have opened up an alternative line of development for India. Pelinka's proposition is more than questionable, yet his book deserves mention.

Sudhir and Katharina Kakar similarly pursue the question of what holds India together, justifying their unequivocal 'Yes' to Indian identity by cultural psychology. Their book deals with family relations, castes, perceptions of corporeality, healing methods, myths, legends, and the way groups and individuals tend to 'visualise' others. According to the authors, working relationships in India are marked by a distant attitude towards power, a 'humane orientation' in professional life, and loyalty towards families, organisations, and colleagues. The images they address are

context-related and alterable; and their development does not always run smoothly, even though the overall picture of Indian identity painted in the book is predominantly positive.

What is also worth mentioning in this context is *Bollywood*, a novel written by Shashi Tharoor, an author with a profound knowledge of India's self-image. The title of the book, a combination of 'Hollywood' and 'Bombay', alludes to India's film industry, which is a first-rate factor not only economically but also psychologically and politically. Producing 800 films every year, India is a country where actors become politicians and films generate values. *Bollywood* reflects the relationship between film production on the one side and politics, religion, and crime on the other. Tharoor does not only describe the world of his book, he lampoons it as well.

Martin Kämpchen knows Indian everyday life well. His expert knowledge covers poor rural India as well as the religious, cultural, and literary life of the country. He has now published some of his essays and culture-critical analyses which reflect his way of dealing with India's multi-faceted religious life, at the same time showing his intention to build bridges and challenge clichés. Another recently-published book depicts the development of a village, which the author followed for two decades. The report describes not only the concerns and needs of the villagers but also how much they enjoy life. It reflects 'everyday life' in this world of villages, showing a part of 'India from within'.

An exceptional work by Niels Gutschkow is a volume of photographs of Benares, that holy city which to Hindus is what Mecca is to Muslims. Considered the centre of South Asia by its inhabitants for more than a thousand years, the entire city represents a holy though not easily accessible universe which the author nevertheless calls an 'organised area', a nested world full of 'holy sites' which he puts into a systematic order to bring it closer to the reader.

An illustrated book by Joachim K. Bautze focuses on India's diversity. The country with the largest number of official languages, home to most world religions, may only be ruled through federalism. Thus, the author divides India into 28 federal states to organise his book – a work which turned out very well except for a few dimensional defects.

The new publications reviewed here certainly offer a solid basis for taking stock of the strong and weak points of today's India. Its strong points include a stable democracy, a lived pluralism, and the people's awareness of their own freedom. The weak points, on the other hand, are a deficient infrastructure, uncontrolled bureaucratic growth, and an absurdly strict labour law, at least from the point of view of foreign investors.

Indians find it easier to accept the conditions of globalisation than Europeans. In his book, *The Argumentative Indian*, which has not yet been translated into German, Amartya Sen investigates why this is so. There are three things that Sen thinks are of importance – the roots of India's democracy, Indian secularism, and the centuries-old tradition of living with plurality.

Sen talks of the 'miniaturisation' of the human being, the assumption that it could be invested with one single identity, religious, ethnic, or geographical. In India, on the other hand, each person has always been perceived as an entity characterised by numerous cultural, social, political, and rational determinants. Furthermore, Sen reminds the reader of the Indian tradition of public dispute, stating that the latter is not at all a purely Western invention, as India had always wished for a fearless and public dispute about freedom and justice. Moreover, Sen mentions secularism, which is firmly established in India and whose roots lie in the sceptical, agnostic, and atheist elements of Hinduism as well as in the attitude of some mughals, who favoured a dialogue between the religions. To Sen, public dispute is essential as it is not only a

sign of India's *joie de vivre* but also what ultimately holds the country together.