

ASIEN AKTUELL

What the Indian Election Results Could Mean for Germany

Rahul Peter Das¹

Before trying to determine if the recent Indian election results could mean anything for Germany, and what that could be, it is necessary to look first at the perceptions the two countries have of each other, since that directly affects their relations, and actions of the respective governments with regard to each other. Of course, anything one may say on this matter cannot but be subjective, since judging perceptions, opinions and feelings is basically a subjective affair, and since the database in this case cannot be comprehensive. Nevertheless, an attempt shall be made here to enumerate certain characteristics, even though there may well be quite different opinions on the matter.

Let us first consider the German image of India. Like all of South Asia, and irrespective of diplomatic or official pronouncements on occasions of bilateral ceremonies, or of highly publicised cultural happenings, India not only has relatively low priority in the public and most probably also official German view, but also does not seem to be realistically assessed. This problem is periodically – and fruitlessly – addressed in German academic publications, so a repetition of the various relevant observations and arguments is superfluous here. Suffice it to say that the general German view, which seems also to be reflected in that of most official and government views when it comes down to policies and actions, is often that of a virtual India, informed by certain clichés. Of course, these clichés can all be substantiated by various facets of contemporary Indian reality, but the point is that a comprehensive and trustworthy picture cannot be gained by adding up such clichés.

¹ "Still Shining? – India after the 2004 Elections" was the subject of a symposium organised by the Humboldt University at Berlin on July 2 and 3. This symposium was attended not only by German experts on South Asia, but also by prominent Indian scholars and Indian diplomats including the Ambassador to Germany. In his contribution to this symposium, Rahul Peter Das, professor of South Asian studies at the Martin Luther University, Halle-Wittenberg, looked at possible effects the election results might have on Germany. His observations, edited for a print medium, are reproduced here.

This state of affairs is not only, but also due to, and mirrored in, the academic world. As a case in point, a recent comprehensive study on the state of South Asian studies in Germany came to the conclusion that there are hardly any facilities in German universities for the appropriate study of contemporary South Asia. This was held to be due primarily to academic categorisations, and it is well known that such categorisations may be influenced by perceptions. It is, in this regard, a great pity that the GDR version of South Asian studies, which was linked with the practical necessities of the GDR government, that saw India as one of the more important countries of the world, was totally disbanded after reunification precisely due to this linkage. It was replaced mostly by the West German variety, which with regard to practical knowledge of and guidelines on contemporary South Asia is, to put it bluntly, mostly irrelevant.

But it serves no purpose to elaborate further on this point here. Rather, it suffices if one realises that general German perceptions of India are not usually those of India as a state like any other state, with all its good and bad sides. In fact, members of the Indian security establishment often privately voice the opinion that the European, and particularly the German, view of South Asia and its problems is not informed by empiricism, but by ideologies and moralism. This may or may not be an accurate assessment, but it is true that a glance at even the best German newspapers does show that whatever is written on India, and on South Asia in general, is usually not particularly helpful in understanding the complicated, many-layered, and often contradictory reality, and very often still carries a patronising tone of speaking to or about people lacking proper awareness, a tone hardly found today in English language publications.

There is one notable exception, though, and that is the world of German business. Unnoticed by most of the German public, and maybe also much of the German establishment, German businesses have quietly been setting about analysing and assessing India and its potentialities in a manner more in keeping with what we know of the Anglo-Saxon world and its interactions with contemporary South Asia. This has had manifold consequences as regards German business involvement in this part of the world. However, business too is based not only on hard facts, but also on perceptions and other non-empirical factors, and the general climate with regard to India has had consequences in this sphere too.

But let us move to the other side of the equation, namely the Indian perception of Germany. Here too, unfortunately, there is dire need of a reality check. Germany is rightly seen as one of the most important economies of the world, and also as one of the major powers, if not the major power, within Europe, with a commensurate global standing. However, the Indian public, as well as the Indian establishment, seems woefully unaware of German realities. One of the things that strikes most observers is how heavily the Indian perception of Continental European countries is coloured by an Anglo-Saxon bias, previously British and today more and more

North American. But non-Anglo-Saxon European countries and cultures cannot be understood on the same terms as the Anglo-Saxon ones, and policies and actions geared to the latter are not necessarily appropriate for the former, all the more so since official and non-official Indian interactions with other countries and societies in general seem often to be based on parameters appropriate only for domestic affairs.

It is thus no wonder that, at a seminar organised by the Indian Embassy some years ago in Berlin, a participant expressly remarked on a long and harmonious Indo-German relationship of mutual misperception. It is obvious that if this might be true, then policies and actions based on such misperception will lead to commensurate results, and this also applies in the case of the new Indian government. This is the reason why the matter of perception merited being mentioned in some detail here.

There are many areas with bearing on Germany in which one might look for possible consequences of the change of the guard in India, but, comprehensiveness being impossible in the given context, attention will be drawn here only to a few major areas, with the implication that what is said on these could serve as guidelines for an analysis of other areas. The areas to be highlighted are business, population movements, energy, power politics, and security.

In the field of business, as in various other fields too, the general German perception of India is a hindrance to considering scenarios in which this country is not only an interesting market, but also an economic rival to be taken seriously. Public debates on outsourcing and other transfers of jobs, on competing for the same markets, and of not only German expansion into India, but also Indian expansion into Germany, are few and far between; one has the impression that the status quo is unconsciously taken to be more or less what we will see in the future too. This may be so, but it need not be. And if it not be so, if India at some point begins to resemble China in the economic sphere, then there is a quite realistic chance of Germany being caught on the wrong foot. For a German economy heavily dependent on exports, a dispassionate analysis of possible future developments is thus clearly of importance.

By now, it does have the appearance that the basic economic policies of the new government in India will not be substantially different from those of its predecessor as regards measures pertaining to the business environment. This is hardly surprising given the fact that the predecessor government itself was to a large extent following in the footsteps of predecessors with political affiliations similar to those of the present government, and that the present Prime Minister was instrumental in formulating the relevant policies. Of course, we now also have the influence of the far left on this government to deal with, but given the present policies formulated, even if not necessarily implemented properly, by the governments of both West Bengal and Kerala, this does not seem to be a factor which could lead to major policy shifts.

There might, however, be differences in some aspects. This becomes clear when one refers to the Indian Prime Minister's address to the nation of June 24, 2004. Judging

by statements contained in this, we could see a prioritisation of rural India, with a corresponding diversion of resources away from the metropolises, more or less on the lines of what has been going on in West Bengal for many years. This could definitely have an impact on the investment climate and funding as regards the visible and shortterm aspects of investment and business. But if the prioritisation should actually lead to positive infrastructural, educational and other changes in what still remains the major part of India, then the longterm effects would obviously be very positive for the economic setup as a whole. It would open up new markets for Germany too, and thus benefit the German economy. On the other hand, the power of India to rival Germany would also grow.

The second policy shift could be more emphasis on domestic control. This is not the same as the state-dominated plan economy once advocated by both the Congress regimes and the Communists and Socialists. One should rather see it as an emphasis on measures designed to see control in Indian hands, but within a global framework, more akin to what can be observed in countries like the USA or France. This requires a comprehensive policy of minute and interlocking measures which are not clearly visible and not easily proved to be discriminating outsiders, even when it is obvious that they do. India has not been particularly good at formulating and implementing such sophisticated policies so far, but neither, for that matter, has Germany, a good example of German failures in this regard being the steadily increasing French dominance over supposedly European enterprises like Airbus. A successful implementation of similar policies in India would allow the country to have its cake, in the form of foreign investment, and eat it too, in the form of domestic dominance. It could lead to an "India Incorporated" with major international clout, and would obviously have an impact on German interests.

Whether the actual Indian setup can indeed lead to such a state of affairs, and whether the strengths of Indian business activities might not, rather, lie in other spheres, is another matter. But we are here concerned with examining possible consequences of policy shifts, and not with analysing other longterm processes or factors.

Let us now discuss the subject of population movements. Irrespective of whether or not India overtakes China as the most populous country on earth by the middle of this century, it stands to reason that an increase in the mobility of between one fifth and one sixth of the total global population is sure to have a major global impact. Since it does not seem that the new Indian government is interested in curbing this mobility, the factors influencing this are, inasmuch as they are due to government action, not direct, but indirect. Whether one chooses to emigrate, whether one chooses to look for employment or education abroad and whether one sees this as a permanent or temporary measure, or whether one visits foreign countries on business or as a tourist, are decisions influenced by various parameters which in some

way or the other can depend on government policies and actions in various spheres such as economy, infrastructure, education, and so on.

Germany, as is evident by now, has a vital interest in an influx of motivated, skilled and qualified foreigners, both in the economic and in the educational spheres. It can even benefit from an unskilled, but industrious influx contributing to its economy. This influx can be on a temporary basis and not necessarily lead to permanent immigration. It is no secret that India could easily supply Germany with human material meeting these requirements. However, for such people Germany remains mostly an unattractive destination.

There are obviously various measures which could be considered if one wishes to change this situation. We shall here focus on the field of education, primarily because the effects of incorporating foreigners into one's own system of education and mode of thinking have extremely important longterm effects, not only, but also as regards perceptions, sympathies and networking. A change in the status quo could be effected if the higher educational system in India changed its anglophile orientation, which remains in place irrespective of the actual language of instruction, but that is not going to happen any time soon. Even the hopes voiced by several German public figures, that Germany might, at least in part, supplant the USA as a destination for foreign students, is unlikely to be realised. Firstly, such a shift would only divert the main stream to other Anglo-Saxon countries. Secondly, the actual influx of Indian students to the USA has been bucking the trend; whereas restrictions have led to a sharp decline in the case of most countries of origin, the number of students of Indian origin has steadily gone on increasing and has, in fact, surpassed the number of those of Chinese origin to take the top place among all foreign students. The growing clout of US citizens of Indian origin, and the strengthening of ties between the USA and India, are factors aiding this development. Germany could only profit if there were a reversal in these spheres, but this is highly improbable.

One of the areas in which direct competition between India and Germany is obvious is energy. Even though the sources from which India and Germany procure oil and gas are to a large extent different, in the interlocked global oil and gas economy actions in one sector are sure to have repercussions in others. Should the Indian and Chinese economies continue to grow at present rates, then very soon the Western industrialised countries are going to feel the effects of this competition, and it is not probable that this is going to change irrespective of who is at the helm of affairs in India. On the other hand, a policy boosting the use of renewable fuel sources such as wind or solar energy in India would also be a boost for German business. Since energy has been declared one of the priorities of the new Government, there could be a major chance for German companies here, since these are among the leaders in these fields globally.

However, one should also not forget that India has traditionally advocated a major role for nuclear energy, and there seems no reason to presume that this Government

will be different in this regard; in fact, it could even accelerate the pace. As it is, India is already pressing ahead with developing new generations of fast breeding reactors, a technology that in the West is not pursued any more, mostly for political reasons. The stance of the present German Government on nuclear energy, as on several other environmental issues including pollution, is basically at loggerheads with Indian policy, as it is with that of the policies of most major states, and not only the USA. It is possible that this could develop into a subject of friction. But then again, things might change in Germany too.

An area in which friction is very well possible is, however, that of power politics. Both Germany and India speak publicly against a unipolar world dominated by the USA, but what they actually mean by that are very different things. The German stance is that of subordination to supranational bodies and legal frameworks, and, at least at present, of working against US ambitions without being able to offer a credible power alternative, either alone or within the framework of the European Union. The Indian stance, by contrast, is that basically also shared by Russia, China and, increasingly, Japan, namely the will to assert international presence as a state not subservient to any other body, though willing to cooperate with these as and when interests dictate this; this is demonstrated very well by India's policy regarding nuclear armaments.

Whereas the German, and much of the so-called old EU, stance is still to a large part dictated by Cold War structures, that of the other mentioned states reflects a post-Cold War attitude that, in principle, reverts to older power structures, in which large powers worked together or against each other according to their interests. Basically, this is not very different from the US stance, though the means used and the consequences drawn from this view are not necessarily the same. In this game, the EU and its individual members with international clout, or thinking they have such clout, are the odd ones out, as evinced, for instance, also in the case of the International Criminal Court, which Europeans like to portray as reflecting the will of the international majority, when in fact it is nothing of the sort.

The post-Cold War world is characterised by a free for all which has replaced the power blocks of the Cold War era, resulting in enhanced importance for individual big players. Coupled with a geographical shift in the defining centres of world affairs away from Europe towards Asia, this is serving to steadily marginalise Europe on the international stage. The US stance and policies clearly reflect this, but it is also becoming evident in the actions and policies of other countries. In this context the Indian Prime Minister's address to the nation of June 24 is most interesting. In giving details on India's future policies and relations with individual groups of countries, it lists, in this order, India's neighbours, China, the USA, Russia, South-east and West Asia, Latin America, Africa, Central Asia, and lastly the EU, which not only in this position, but also in what is said on it, even creates the impression of

having been included as an afterthought, though of course this is a purely subjective evaluation.

In any case, and irrespective of whether this analysis regarding the relative weight of the EU be correct or not, it is highly improbable that much is going to change in the aims and policies of the Indian Government on the international stage, though it is very possible that there might be a change in tone, since the previous Government had a much heavier complement of important individuals whose outlook was decidedly primarily domestic.

Given that German public opinion, and probably also much of its political establishment, still has great difficulties in accepting India as a power having not only equal, but by now maybe even more weight on the international stage than Germany or even the EU, and given the fact that basically European patterns of looking at power structures are taken to be the international norm, it is possible to foresee problems in this regard, brought about by the very fact that the Indian stance might not change appreciably. A crisis might come when the full implications of India's bid to secure a permanent seat on the UN Security Council, or of making Hindi be accepted as an official language of the UN, ultimately sink in.

Obviously, statements such as these will have to be substantiated in some way. Unfortunately, a detailed discussion is not possible here, so we shall confine ourselves to three examples, which also very conveniently lead to the last of the five areas mentioned before, namely security. The first example we shall highlight is that of language and terminology. The more languages you have coming from different cultural spheres, with different terminologies and concepts, but nevertheless on an equal footing, the greater are the potential areas of conflict with regard to legal and similar affairs.

At present, even though there are six official languages in the UN, two of them being non-European, basically there is a dominance of English and French, so much so that ever so often demands for a true parity between the official languages are raised. What one usually has is translation of concepts formulated in the two languages mentioned into other languages, which means that these concepts follow the parameters set by English or French. A scenario in which key concepts are introduced from quite another cultural sphere, in another linguistic medium, and as such dominate the discussion, is still unthinkable. Should yet another non-European language gain a status permitting this, then it could serve to undermine the status quo, in which concepts regarded as internationally valid are basically European.

This is, however, a matter which, even though it has wide-ranging implications, is at this stage of greater interest only to those professionally dealing with languages and their usage. Let us thus shift to the second example, namely the Afghanistan conflict. Anyone who has the least idea of the recent history of Southern Asia knows that events in Afghanistan are directly linked with events in South Asia, with the longstanding Afghanistan-Pakistan and India-Pakistan conflicts, with cooperative

relations between India and Afghanistan, with conflicts between various schools of South Asian Muslim thought, and so on. And yet the German view, still very much eurocentric in nature, is for the most part oblivious of this, in this regard also reflecting the relative unimportance accorded South Asia in the German world view. The Afghanistan conflict is widely regarded as a prolongation of Western Asian conflicts, with corresponding policies formed based on this assessment. That the US assessment, too, is mostly similar, only serves to exacerbate the problem.

Since German troops are stationed in Afghanistan, while at the same time events there directly impinge upon India's security interests, it is not farfetched to envision scenarios in which conflicting assessments and resultant policies could see India and Germany in direct conflict with each other, and it is obvious that in an international affair such as this, in which the UN Security Council plays an important role, the composition of this body, especially as regards veto powers and other special privileges, is of great importance.

The third example is the assessment and response to external security threats, particularly those from terrorism. In this, India, like Russia and the USA, has first hand experience, having even faced massive crisis situations striking at the very heart of the government, whereas Germany has no such experience. Even without going into details regarding all that this implies, it should be evident that very different world views and consequent modes of action must result from such differing situations. At the same time that Germany is in the process of discarding the concept of national security for a supranational framework, while also falling behind in modernisation and effectively downgrading its armed forces, India is not only committed to strengthening and modernising its forces, as once again very forcibly reiterated by the Prime Minister in his address of June 24, but is also in the process of creating nuclear units, with tactical nuclear weaponry, in all branches of the armed forces, something that is totally unthinkable in current German ideology and policy.

From the German point of view, the fact that India not only forcibly emphasises its right to be a nuclear power, but also to actively pursue this option, cannot but in some way or the other have repercussions on its policies and actions as an influential member of a key international body. Since leading German newspapers have several times raised this very point, one may, understandably, be sceptical of official proclamations of mutual furtherance of German and Indian ambitions with regard to the Security Council. Security and politics also pertain to other issues besides those mentioned. However, we shall have to content ourselves for now by simply pointing out some major areas in which the perceptions of India and Germany might diverge. One of these is India's claim to a security sphere which impinges directly upon that of NATO. Also, it places some of the major energy sources on which Europe depends directly under the Indian security umbrella. So far, most probably because, as already pointed out, India is not taken that seriously as a military power, this is

something which is not the subject of discussion in Germany. Yet there is clearly a great potential for major disagreement, and even conflict, here.

Moreover, India is actively seeking closer ties not only with both Turkey and Israel, but also with the USA, in doing which it finds itself on a side of the Palestine conflict which is opposed to that of most Western European countries. Not that India is actively taking sides in this conflict, but the very fact of its seeking closer relations with some of those involved makes it a party in a conflict on Europe's very doorstep, a conflict in which Germany feels heavily involved.

Thus, even though in the election manifesto and right at the beginning of the formation of the present government there was some rhetoric of paying more attention to the Palestinian cause, one doubts whether there will actually be a major shift in policy; the general security situation, as well as, in spite of all talks, the still ongoing conflict with Pakistan, create a situation in which India's own security needs dictate with whom it is worthwhile seeking special ties, and with whom not. Linked as this whole complex is with the issue of global terrorism from Islamic extremist groups, and of the negative mutual stereotypical perceptions Indians and Arabs seem to have of each other, it does not seem farfetched to consider scenarios in which there could be major disagreements.

For all the spheres considered in this overview, no major imminent shifts in Indian policy seem to be on the horizon. There will certainly be changes, especially in educational, cultural, and regional politics, and various other spheres, but these are all not really relevant for the question of possible effects on Germany. But the very fact that, at least in this analysis, major policy shifts are not to be expected, could lead to Germany being affected. Looked at this way, the elections do have an effect, but probably the same effect as another outcome would have had. In this, there is a strong parallel to the probable impact of the forthcoming US elections on Germany, for, judging by the track record of previous Governments, it is, contrary to what seems to be a common perception in Germany, most probable that nothing much will change regardless of who wins these. Since the same cannot be said with regard to future German elections, there does seem to be a major difference here, a reflection of different political fundamentals which both India and Germany should be aware of in their interactions.