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'Indians in Germany' The imagination of a community

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Puzzled by 'Indians in Germany'

The internet portal http://www.theinder.net calls itself the *"Indian Online Community"*[1]. In the interviews, which I conducted for my research project about this internet portal[2], I was told much about the 'Indians in Germany' and how they form or should form a community. One of the founders of *theinder.net* told me in the interview that the main target group was the 'Indian community' in 'Germany' and when I asked what he means by that he specified: *"the Indians living in Germany and their children and grandchildren"*[3]. This is the most common definition I have come across, which is shared also by many 'Indian' associations and journals in 'Germany', by the 'Indian' government and embassy as well as by many international researchers on the 'Indian diaspora' (for example Brij Lal 2006). Together they establish 'Indians in Germany' not only as a category, but as a community, which belongs together and is linked to 'India'. It is a category, which influences individual self-definitions and interactions, which is used and mobilised for political purposes and which is the basis for research.

I am one of the many 'Indians of the second generation' in 'Germany', i.e. I was socialised in 'Germany' and am marked as an 'Indian' there, who at some stage started to consider herself as part of a bigger group of 'Indians' and wanted to know more about that. So in 1997 I started to do research on 'Indians in Germany', convinced that I would thus fill a gap in the international research on the 'Indian diaspora' (eg. R.K. Jain 1993, Roger Ballard 1994 and Peter van der Veer 1995). People understood what I was doing, willingly provided me with material and interviews, were interested in my results. There was a huge international literature on the topic on which I could found my analysis. I started to produce knowledge about 'Indians in Germany' (resulting for example in Christiane Brosius and Goel 2006 or Goel 2006b).

But quite soon I encountered the first major obstacle: Who is an 'Indian'? What seemed so easy on the outset, got increasingly difficult to define. What defines an 'Indian'? Citizenship, birth place, ancestors, 'culture', physiognomy, …? None of these – also in combinations - seemed convincing. Examples show the ambiguity of 'Indianness'. I myself was born with an 'Indian' citizenship, I have an 'Indian' name and my father was born and socialised in 'India'. This could qualify me as 'Indian', but my mother is marked as a 'German', I have been born and brought up in 'Germany', I know little about 'India'. Does this make me less 'Indian'? Can I still be 'Indian'? Am I 'German' as well? Is it possible to be 'Indian' and 'German' at the same time? And the multitude of belongingnesses is not restricted to two. A friend of my parents was born and socialised in 'Kenya', he

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had the 'British' citizenship, an 'Indian' name and relatives, married a woman marked as 'German' and settled down in 'Germany'. Are his children 'Indians'? Is it legitimate for a young 'German', who was adopted from 'Sri Lanka', to claim to be an 'Indian' (as he did in the interview with me)? How can we deal with the self-description as 'Indian' of young men in 'Germany', who were born in 'Afghanistan' and are Hindus? Who decides which claims are accepted and which are not? Who can legitimately define 'Indianness'? What are the unambiguous markers?

The essentialist notion of being 'Indian' by birth and this being unambiguous is continually contradicted by the lifes of individuals. This is captured by the constructivist theories of social identities, among others Richard Jenkins' (1997) concept of 'transactional ethnicity' as well as Frederik Barth's (1969) and Anthony Cohen's (1985) theorisations of 'ethnic' groups. 'Ethnic' identity according to them is not something natural but the outcome of social interactions. An 'Indian' identity in 'Germany' is developed through individuals being categorised as 'Indians' by others and this in a transactional process entering their self-definitions. Thus also persons, who for example were born in 'Germany' or have the German citizenship can become 'Indians', because they are ascribed 'Indian' ancestors (independent of whether they really have them or not).

Referring to Benedict Anderson's (1991) notion of the imagined community helps to further understand the development of an 'Indian community' in 'Germany'. Like 'ethnicity' also community is not something 'naturally' given. It develops through social interactions, interpellations and joint imagination. Thus an 'Indian community' can be imagined in 'Germany' without the individual 'Indians' knowing each other, being individually emotionally attached or acting collectively.

But while the constructivist theoretical approaches help in deconstructing essentialist notions of social identities, they can not answer all the questions which arose in the course of my research. Why do the transactional processes of constructing social identities lead to the development of an 'Indian' identity and not for example to that of a 'foreigner' or a class identity? What is a community beyond the joint imagination? What consequences has the imagination of communities? Which role do categories like 'Indians' and 'Indian community' play in 'German' society? How are power structures involved and what about racism? To find approaches to these questions I turned to theories of racism, in particular the works of Paul Mecheril (2003 and 2004). In this framework transactional processes, which create 'ethnic' identities, are understood as part of the racist structuring of the society, which constructs the other in order to secure the hegemonial power of the 'white'[4] people. 'Ethnic' identities are thus not only a social construction, but they are an arbitrary one. The markers chosen are not given by 'nature', but are rather motivated by the interests pursued by the categorisation. Thus the category of 'black' is developed in order to secure the power of those who define themselves as 'white'. The newly developing *Critical Whiteness Studies* in 'Germany', in particular Maureen Maisha Eggers et al (2005), analyse these structures and focus on the 'white' privileges thus secured.

Thus not only the construction of social identities is shown, but they are also deconstructed at the same time. Social identities exist because they are the outcome of social interactions, but they do not exist outside of these interactions. 'Indians in Germany' is not a meaningful category on its own, but it has real effects on people as soon as it is socially constructed. One of the consequences of these theoretical deliberations is that I am marking 'ethnic' constructions in my writing with inverted commas, in order to illustrate that they are ambiguous and not naturally given. Neither 'Indian' nor 'Germany' are terms which are self-evident, even though most people believe they are. The 'Afghan Hindu' has a different image of 'India' than the migrant from Delhi. The 'East Germans' are constantly reminded that 'West Germans' say 'Germany' and only think of 'West Germany'.

Communities just like social identities are constructed for certain purposes. They do not exist outside of these constructions. Rogers Brubaker's (2004 a and b as well as 2005) criticism of groupism

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[4] 'White' marks the social position of hegemonial power in a society structured by racism. Generally this position is unmarked and considered to be the norm. Naming the position as 'white' challenges this implicit norm. Compare the *Critical Whiteness Studies,* in Germany in particular Eggers et al (2005).

and his argument that 'ethnicity' exists without 'ethnic groups' take account of this. His analysis will be further illustrated below.

Before, however, turning to the imagination of an 'Indian community' and its consequences, an inherent dilemma needs to be mentioned. Having deconstructed the idea of 'Indians in Germany' I can hardly write about them anymore under this heading. Doing so would reproduce the underlying essentialist and racist notions, would fix and stabilise the idea of 'Indians in Germany', thus obscuring it's construction and arbitrariness. I cannot provide a history of migration or statistics on 'Indians in Germany' without in the process of this constructing and stabilising this category and its underlying assumptions. Accordingly, in this article I will not provide any such information as the aim of this article is to shift the focus away from discussing 'Indians in Germany' towards analysing how and why this category has been developed and what its effects are. The article thus proposes a shift from assuming an (imagined) community towards the investigation of the processes and consequences of as well as the interests in the imagination of a community.[5]

Imagining an 'Indian community' and its consequences

When I asked my interviewees what they meant by the term community, they often had difficulties in answering. On the one hand it was so natural to them, that a community existed, that they did not really understand why I was asking for an explanation. On the other hand it was difficult for them to explain to me what community meant beyond the fact that it encompassed all the 'Indians' living in 'Germany'. This lack of definition is common to most of the public discourses and much research. The term is in many cases applied without further defining it, it is taken for granted. When the meaning is discussed, for example in internet studies concerning virtual communities (see Nicola Döring 2003, 492-494), there is much disagreement about what constitutes a community. Most scholars go back to Ferdinand Tönnies' (1887) distinction between *Gemeinschaft* (community) and *Gesellschaft* (society), where the former is characterised as more 'natural' and emotionally closer than the latter, which is considered as more formalised. Döring (2003, 493) argues that community is linked to basic human needs of belongingness and cohesion. She accordingly uses the term as describing a group of people, who are linked though a particular socio-emotional relationship. From the literature and my own field observations it seems that the notion of community mostly is defined through a collective imagination (referring to Anderson's 1991 concept), a belief in shared communalities, a norm of belonging and not belonging, a definition of borders to others (compare Barth 1969 and Cohen 1985) as well as the idea of a collective identity and potential for collective practice (compare William Safran's 1991 definition of 'diaspora'). For 'Indians in Germany' this incorporates the assumption of a shared origin in 'India', the conviction to be different from others and seen as the basis for collective action.

I follow Brubaker's criticism of this notion of community. In particular he (2004a, 50-51) argues against what he calls groupism, which he defines as *"the tendency to treat ethnic groups, nations, and races as substantial entities to which interests and agency can be attributed."* In the course of this identities are reified *"as if they were internally homogenous, externally bounded groups, even unitary collective actors with common purposes."* Brubaker thus opposes *"the tendency to represent the social and cultural world as a multichrome mosaic of monochrome ethnic, racial, or cultural blocs."* The partition of the social world into bounded groups is considered by him (2004a, 52) as part of what he calls the 'ethnic commonsense', which he argues tends to essentialise and naturalise social identities and should thus rather be analysed than taken for granted. Brubaker (2004b, 53-54) argues that *"Ethnicity, race, and nation should be conceptualized not as substances or things or entities or organisms or collective individuals ... but rather in relational, processual, dynamic, eventful and disaggregated terms."* Rather than focussing on identities Brubaker argues to look at practices and processes, in which these are made.

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[5] This article is founded on a presentation I gave at the Asia Centre of the University of New England in Armidale, Australia in November 2006 and the comments to it by my colleagues. I am grateful to the Asia Centre for inviting me as a visiting scholar to UNE and thus making not only this article possible.

Groupism in Burubaker's (2004a, 60-61) view has several problematic implications. It risks overethnicised and groupist interpretations, which obscure the interests and dynamics of individuals involved. It assumes groups where there might not be any. It allocates the power of definition to those who claim that there is a group. It takes the attention away from the development of a group and obscures intragroup mechanisms. He thus argues to rather analyse the claims and the motivation of those who claim groups. In the case of 'diaspora' he (2005, 12) suggests: *"To overcome this problem of groupism ... we should think of diaspora not in substantialist terms as a bounded entity, but rather as a stance, a claim. We should think of diaspora in the first instance as a category of practice, and only then ask whether, and how, it can fruitfully be used as a category of analysis."* I follow Brubaker's criticism of imagining bounded communities and share his suggestion that one needs to focus on how this imagination is created, who is behind it and which purposes it fulfils.

Considering the 'Indians in Germany' the use of the term community evokes several concerns in me. Firstly, it focuses on a common 'origin' called 'India'. It thus suggest that an 'origin' is decisive in forming identity and that one needs to link oneself back to this 'origin'. It suggests that there is one 'natural' origin, which is unambigous and in this case is unambigously 'India' (for example in Lal 2006). This is assumed even if the ascribed 'origin' has been left long ago or if one can trace back a history of migration to many places between the so-called 'origin' and the current place of residence as is for example the case of the 'twice migrants', who migrated within the 'British empire' (see Ballard 1994). By assuming that the 'origin' of the ancestors is important, 'ethnic' identity is essentialised and made part of the 'nature' of individuals. Such a notion makes out of one of my interviewees, who was born in 'Nigeria', brought up in 'Germany', whose mother is 'German' and whose father's family migrated to 'Pakistan' at partition a 'Pakistani', ignoring all other socialisations and points of references she has as well her own self-positioning (compare Avtar Brah 1996). Secondly, the notion of community, as Brubaker among others has argued, tends to homogenise all those encompassed by the category. It assumes a commonness and common interests. This ignores not only that 'Indians in Germany' come from different parts of 'India', speak different languages, have different religions, follow different 'traditions' and belong to diverse 'castes', but also that their legal, economic and social statuses in 'Germany' differ, that they differ in gender, their motivation for migration and political positioning. It ignores differences between urban middle class Hindu male students, who came individually in the 1950s, female Christian nurses from rural Kerala, who were recruited in the 1960s, and male Sikh asylum seekers of the 1980s, who stayed legally, economically and socially marginalised (compare Goel 2006b). The notion of community assumes that being 'Indian' encompasses and nullifies all other differences. Doing so it negates the interdependencies of racism, heteronormativity and class differences (compare Jaya Sharma and Dipika Nath 2005). As the main speakers of the 'Indian community' are in general heterosexual able bodied men with a secure status, their claim for community tends to ignore the concerns of women, queers, people with bodily challenges and those in precarious legal, economic and social positions. 'Indianness' is taken as the only important aspect for mobilisation. The other issues are in many cases not only ignored but looked down on. For example, many 'Indians in Germany' despise asylum seekers and try to detach themselves as much as possible from these legally, socially and economically marginalised people. Lines of differences are thus further strengthened. Thirdly, the focus on the 'Indian community' reproduces the racist logic of establishing racialised persons as the others (compare Mecheril 2003 and Eggers et al 2005). By referring rather to the 'origin' than the place of residence of a person, by assuming a commonness among all 'Indians' the logic of 'Indians' being others and not belonging to 'Germany' is supported. By accepting that 'Indians' are different, the constructions of racialised identities and the mechanisms of exclusion are ignored. This makes it even harder to overcome the latter.

My own writing on 'Indians in Germany' has the same effect. By conforming to the idea that there is such a group as the 'Indians in Germany' and that they need to be dealt with as a special group, I support the idea. Those who are looking for information on the other, find it in my writing and thus are encouraged in thinking in these categories. My writing thus becomes part of 'German' exclusionary and 'Indian' nationalistic discourses. I have experienced this in being quoted by

'German' immigration authorities arguing for the refusal of all Sikh asylum applications (Werner Nadwornicek 2003) and in my contribution (Goel 2006b) to Lal (2006) being edited without my consent to be more patriotic and less critical. Even if I do not believe in the existence of an 'Indian community' I become through my writing and the reactions this evokes in my readers part of imagining an 'Indian community'.

Reasons for imagining an 'Indian community'

The consequence of this dilemma, however, cannot be not to write anymore. If so many people are interested in 'Indians in Germany' and imagine an 'Indian community' there must be reasons for doing so and these should be analysed. Doing so it has to be taken account of the fact that there will be many reasons by different agents. In particular the persons, who consider themselves as part of the (imagined) community, will have different reasons for doing so than those who use the claim for accessing resources and from those who construct the other in order to secure their own hegemonial position. In the following I will first discuss some potential reasons of those, who identify themselves as part of the 'Indian community' in 'Germany', and will then briefly turn to the others.

When I started to do research on 'Indians in Germany' I had the idea that I was researching about a category to which I myself belong. I felt a need to know more about it, because it seemed to be part of me and I was somehow part of it. Researching about it meant dealing with myself, my family and in particular my ascribed 'roots'. 'Indians of the second generation' are regularly ascribed as 'Indians'. On the basis of social and physiognomic markers, such as parents, names, place of birth or colour of hair, it is declared that they cannot be 'Germans', have their 'origin' somewhere else and are really 'Indians'. This ascription occurs both on the side of the 'white German' public as well as through 'Indian' relatives. Mecheril (2003) considers this an experience of double othering in 'Germany'. As the 'Indians of the second generation' are socialised in 'Germany' he categorises them as 'Germans'. They are 'Germans' because they have lived, live and will live in 'Germany'. But they are not accepted as 'Germans' and thus become what Mecheril terms 'Other Germans'. He argues that 'Other Germans' belong at the same time to several (seemingly respectively exclusive) contexts, which are framed in the notions of 'nation', 'ethnicity' and 'culture'. But as the nation state and the racist logic are build on the assumption that there exist bounded and distinct communities and that any person can belong to only one context, this multiple belongingness cannot be accepted. In the logic of univocal belongingness the multiple is necessarily monstrous as it unites the ununitable. 'Other Germans' experiencing multiple belongingness are thus in a precarious situation. If they insist on it, they will face continual refusal and othering. If they accept, that they can belong only to one context, they have to negate their other belongingnesses. To feel comfortable within the logic of univocal belongingness, a logic in which also the 'Other Germans' were socialised, it is necessary to adopt a belongingness, which is not permanently refused. 'Indians of the second generation' in 'Germany' experience on a daily basis that they are not considered as unquestioned 'Germans' (compare Mecheril 2003 and Mareile Paske 2006). As Santina Battaglia (1995) has shown seemingly innocent questions about the ascribed 'origin' play a major part in this daily othering. If thus unquestioned belongingness to 'Germany' is not attainable, it makes sense to turn to 'India' for belongingness. The latter is ascribed in 'Germany' anyway and will be less contested there than that to 'Germany'. The everyday interactions in 'India' itself, which would establish otherness also there, are hardly encountered by those resident in 'Germany' and thus do not develop the same force as the ones in 'Germany'. Imagining oneself as part of the 'Indian community' thus offers a positive point of identification which will not be easily challenged in 'Germany'. It is thus a sensible strategy to pursue.

The experiences of othering and exclusion in 'Germany' are one of the few things all those marked as 'Indians' in 'Germany' share. While their links to 'India' are manifold, all of them are ascribed 'India' as their 'origin' and are told ex- or more often implicitly that they belong to 'India' rather than to 'Germany'. This ascription happens through everyday interactions, public discourses and formal regulations (compare Mecheril 2003, Goel 2006a and Paske 2006). As most 'Indians in Germany' have a relatively privileged legal, economic and social status this othering in most cases does not endanger their existence in 'Germany'. They in general do not have to fear deportation,

hardly face violent racist attacks and have enough economic and social resources to create safe spaces for themselves. Accordingly, many can adopt the strategy of negating experiences of exclusion (compare Rava in Mecheril 2003 and Binod in Paske 2006), attempt assimilation as far as possible and refer back to being 'Indian' as an uncontested identity. In this context imagining an 'Indian community' and representing it is often also a deliberate attempt to distinguish oneself from other 'ethnic minority communities', which are less privileged and even more othered and excluded. In the interviews this was done in particular with respect to those marked as 'Turks', who by several interviewees were described as less well 'integrated' and more 'problematic' migrants than the 'Indians'. Similarly, differences towards 'Tamils' and 'Afghans' were emphasised and in some cases also to 'Punjabis', who are by many believed to be less 'integrated'.

Another thing common to all those marked as 'Indians in Germany' is that an experience of migration is part of their memory, either directly as they themselves migrated or indirectly because they were told about it as part of the family history. Part of migration is leaving the familiar and living with the unfamiliar. Even if in the process of settling down the unfamiliar becomes increasingly familiar and the once familiar grows increasingly unfamiliar, there remains for many the longing for the once familiar. Migration also necessarily goes along with establishing transnational connections. Even if there is no actual transnational interaction, the knowledge of being linked to other places than the one where one is living at the moment is there (compare Mecheril 2004). These experiences are common to all migrants and those who consider themselves descendants of migrants, even though the individual forms of the experiences will differ. Some regularly travel to 'India', have close links to relatives there, cultivate an 'Indian' language, 'customs' and/or religion at home. Others do hardly any of this, but still experience an (ascribed) link.

The 'Indians in Germany', however, are in their everyday lifes surrounded mainly by 'white Germans', who do not consider themselves as migrants or the descendants of such. Earlier migration histories of their ancestors have been forgotten, the 'white German' environment is the most familiar, transnational connections are not part of their self-definition. The migrants and those who consider themselves descendants of them can thus not safely refer to the majority of 'white Germans' for an emphatic understanding of their experiences of migration. These can be much better understood by those who share them. One of my interviewees described this as there being among 'Indians in Germany' a *"familiarity without the need of explanation"*. Imagining oneself as part of an 'Indian community' gives one a space of imagined familiarity and shared experiences. It also constitutes a space where these experiences can be negotiated and conserved as part of the own identity. Considering oneself as an 'Indian in Germany', who belongs to a community, enables a positive identification which takes account of these own experiences.

These are thus several reasons why the idea of an 'Indian community' is readily accepted by many individuals, who are considered to be part of it (although as Paske 2006 illustrates there are also other ways of dealing with the experiences of othering and exclusion). To establish the notion of an 'Indian community' it, however, also needs discourses, institutions and people who support it actively. Among the latter are those, who Brubaker (2004a and b) calls 'ethnic entrepreneurs'. They are those who claim a community in order to attain access to social, political and economic resources by it. The resources aimed for by them are as diverse as the 'Indians in Germany'. Among the goals of mobilisation can be the struggle for legal rights in 'Germany' and 'India', as for example dual citizenship, anti-discrimination legislation or property rights. The aims can also be the inclusion in institutional bodies, such as NRI (Non-Resident Indians) meetings in 'India' or 'intercultural' consultations in 'Germany'. They can be an attempt to get a voice in public discourses, for example to be recognised by the media, get a publication funded or secure an electorate. The resources pursued can also be more individualistic as in the case of aiming for increcased private economic, social or political status. Nationalist and in particular Hindu-nationalist organisations in 'India' also attempt to mobilise 'Indian communities' abroad to increase their political impact and attain financial resources. In the logic of univocal belongingness and racism there are manifold reasons for claiming and mobilising an 'ethnic community' as many resources are tied to being part of a 'community' (compare Heft and Goel 2006, 5 as well as Brubaker 2004b and 2005).

Discussing thus the reasons why from the perspectives of those categorised as 'Indians in Germany' it makes sense to imagine such a community, it needs to be remembered that the 'white Germans' are part of this imagination as well. They are the ones who participate in the privileges and hegemonial power of the racist structuring of the society (compare Eggers et al 2005). In order to keep their privileged hegemonial position they need the differentiation between 'us' and the 'other'. In order to secure their 'white' status the position of the 'ethnic minority communities' has to be perpetuated. The 'white Germans' thus not only ascribe 'Other Germans' the status of 'Indians' they also profit structurally from this imagination even if they individually may not perceive this link or intend it.

For example, the continued ascription of migrated nurses (compare Goel forthcoming) as 'Indians' keeps them on the margin of the 'German' society and labour market. The 'Indian' nurses form a flexible resource to regulate the former, acting as a puffer for the changes in the demand for labour. In times when there is a shortage of health workers, they are recruited. When there are too many 'white German' nurses than the 'Indians' are blamed for this and if legally possible, their work permit is not extended. The 'Indian' nurses are thus used to secure and stabilise the hegemonial position of the 'white' nurses, patients and health system. In order for this to be successful they need to stay the others.

Consequences for research

Even if there is no 'Indian community' in 'Germany', because those categorised as being part of it are far too diverse, have too little in common for close socio-emotional relationships and do not engage in collective actions, it makes sense to imagine the existence of a community. It provides emotional, social, economic and political resources or at least the idea of them to many. It accordingly also makes sense for research to deal with (imagined) communities. But rather than assume the existence of them and analyse their set up, actions, etc., the processes of their imagination, their functions and consequences should be in the focus of attention. Rather than focussing in essentialist tradition on the 'origin' of the othered it should be analysed how the 'origin' gains its importance in public discourses, institutions and social practices. It needs to be understood why somebody is defined as 'Indian', is linked to 'India' and accepts this ascription. The underlying mechanisms of exclusion and othering, which secure the 'white' hegemonial power, need to be analysed. The place of residence 'Germany' and its functionings consequently gain in importance when dealing with the 'other' (compare Said 1978), the so-called 'Indians'.

In my own research I have taken this step from focussing on the 'nature' of 'Indians in Germany' towards the experiences of those marked as 'Indians in Germany' and the mechanisms behind these. In order to access resources I, however, still also refer to more essentialist notions. If I do not, I have more difficulties in accessing funding, finding a department or institution to which my research fits and I am less comprehensible to the public. The logic of dividing the world into bounded communities remains very powerful, also in the framing of research.

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