

Interview mit Volker Lennart Plän

India in times of Covid-19

The Covid-19 pandemic has hit India hard and has highlighted many challenges the country is facing, most notably the issue of labor migration and existing social inequalities. While social inequality remains the major challenge, Indian society can also build on decades of experience with tolerance and solidarity and a great social dynamism that will help the country to cope with the current challenges.

Schlagwörter:

Corona - India - Covid-19 - pandemic - challenges - Indian society - migration - migrant workers - social cohesion - unity in diversity - social disparities - informal sector

India in times of Covid-19

|| Interview with Volker Lennart Plän



Quelle: HSS

Volker Plän has been the Hanns-Seidel Foundation's representative in India for nearly four years and is a close observer of the sociological and ecological aspects of development in India. He has a background in International Development Studies, where he holds a master's degree from the Phillips University in Marburg. He has gained experience as a consultant for the German NGO Welthungerhilfe, focusing on South Asia. Before assuming the position as the foundation's representative in India, he worked at Hanns-Seidel's headquarters as a project coordinator with responsibility for South Asia.

HSS: *Before entering the discussion on the current challenges for Indian society, could I ask you to give a brief introduction to how Indian society is structured? Being based in Europe, I would quite like to understand what life looks like in India and*

how you would describe the differences within Indian society.

Plän: Giving an overview of the entire social system in India is quite a challenge, since India is a huge country – it is nine times the size of Germany. It has twenty-eight states, eight union territories, and hosts more than 200 languages, various ethnicities and religions. So you can imagine the population structure just among these groups is fairly complex.

Looking at the economic structure: There has been a tremendous upsurge in development since the 1990s. India's transition has happened in leaps and bounds. On the other hand, there are people that live like they have been living for more than one hundred years in rural areas of India. At the same time, you have urban conglomerates, huge cities in which people live not just in the 21st century, but with infrastructure and information technology around them that puts to shame what we see in Germany. So we have different lifestyles and different aspirations within the larger Indian society – with tremendous differences ranging from varied cultural, socio-economic groups in the country.

HSS: *Given this structural complexity you describe, what would you say – are social and cultural structures or differences in India the major challenges for society? And also, what does that mean in terms of social cohesion?*

Plän: With these disparities, of course, challenges are natural. There are layers of dormant or subliminal conflict. As a foreigner living in India now for four years, I perceive

an impressive amount of harmony among these different groups that I just described. Yes, there are also tensions, especially religious tensions. And from my observation, I would say they come and go. But regardless of disparities that exist between these groups – and of course, they do pose challenges for governments mostly – there are also differences within these communities, mostly social ones. The Indian culture is quite hierarchical. You can see this best reflected in the notorious caste system. According to the Constitution of India, it is forbidden to discriminate anyone based on their caste or any other social aspect. But discrimination still exists in everyday life. And the most prominent aspect of casteism is segregation: you can observe it in several public spheres, e.g. on the work front, and it has helped cementing social differences and conserving them over time. There are some benefactors of this caste system, and this is one of the reasons, why these social disparities are still prevalent today. Now, of course, the governing bodies and legislature have put in place schemes and supporting laws in order to stop discrimination of minorities, tribes, members of lower castes. But protecting these minorities is impossible without acknowledging their existence. This, in turn, makes social differences all the more visible. At the same time, within social groups, social cohesion is very strong. For example in families. In general, inequality has always existed in India, and it remains a major challenge, both economically and socially.

HSS: *And how has this inequality or the disparities you have described played out during the current pandemic? Has it affected specific groups of society more than others, for example, in urban or rural areas? And you mentioned the caste system – have people from the different layers of society experienced the pandemic differently?*

Plän: Yes, they were definitely affected in different ways. Generally, I would say that the pandemic has brought to the fore differences that had already existed before the pandemic, and it amplified them or made them more visible. Whoever was at a disadvantage before

the pandemic broke out, is even more so now. Just imagine the lockdown, which, by the way, was announced just 12 or 13 hours before it was carried out – it meant also closing state borders. There are daily-wage labourers who cross state borders every morning to go to work. But the state borders were closed. That means loss of earnings for those workers from one day to the next. Working from home is not possible for those people. Only for those who have an office job with social security, that have internet connection and a nice flat. But the vast majority of Indians live in very simple conditions, and labourers that are dependent on daily wages do not have a proper home in which they could isolate themselves. They live with their family and extended family, maybe in tents, in construction sites. They do not even have a fan in their accommodation, sometimes they live in mass accommodations, which they had to leave for hygienic reasons. From one day to another, their daily income was gone. Having to leave their accommodation or workplace without jobs, they were forced to migrate back to the rural areas of their relatives. You see: the family is always there for you in dire times. But they were hundreds of kilometres away and all train and bus connections were cut. We are talking about a substantial part of the population here: in India, more than 80 percent are engaged in the informal sector without any social security, which means if suddenly the construction site is shut down or the factory that you are working in is closed, there is no more income and no way for you to feed your family.

These disparities, these strong differences, they exist right next to each other. In fact, they depend on each other. Especially the economically better off employ the poorer ones. That is why you can see slums growing right next to posh, affluent areas in India's cities. The responsibility of the those employers would be to continue paying their house staff even during the lockdown. So you can have a big mansion where just a few people live very wealthy lives, and right next to it is a slum where people were forced to leave these accommodations.

HSS: *In many European countries there has been talk of a stronger sense of solidarity. And you have just described the very crass differences, the obvious contrast between poverty and wealth. What is your perception in India? Do you think there's more or less solidarity in the context of the pandemic now?*

Plän: This is a very good question, but it is a tricky one. There might be different views on that. My personal perception was that solidarity in a country like India that has strong social cohesion has always been strong, but has not resulted in additional new solidarity now. So generally, I think it is strong where it has always been so. We have more than two hundred thousand non-governmental organisations in India that do charitable work. There are lots of religious charitable institutions. There are the Christian churches; there are the Hindu temples, the Sikh Gurudwaras. And they took it upon themselves to help the population in poorer areas, to create awareness about the pandemic and to support with protection measures. And then, of course, there's a saying in India, that it will always work out in the end; which it does.

HSS: *What about migrant workers? I think the pictures of India we've all seen on TV over the past few months have been the tracks of migrant workers, some making their way to their hometowns or villages over hundreds of kilometres. What does migration mean for Indian society? And what effect did the pandemic have?*

Plän: When the lockdown was imposed, the migrants had to return to their families because, as I said, the families are the ones from whom they could expect immediate support. But these families were partly several hundred kilometres away. And as I mentioned, the state borders were closed, there was no more transportation between those states. So left without a job, without any income, without food for a longer period of time, many migrants had no choice but to start walking home on foot. Thus they caused one of the greatest mass migrations in India since the independence in 1947. They faced hardships during their travel because it was peak sum-

mer time, there were no jobs waiting for them in the villages – and rural India did not welcome them as they were afraid the labourers might carry the virus. These are the images that went around the world. Now, migration in general in India is nothing new because this has always existed, especially seasonal migration. And of course, with the economic upswing, seasonal migration has been mostly from rural to urban areas. When the harvest season was over, people would migrate to the cities for labour and cheap labour also helped India's economy prosper.

But migrants have always been at a disadvantage. No matter where, no matter in which country, they are always at the mercy of their destination. They enter a new system, a new culture. In India, you have a lot of support from local and from state governments when it comes to food and social support. There are various schemes in place that provide subsidized schooling, subsidized food. But you are entitled to these schemes only in the place you are registered. So when you migrate to the new destination, you lose all these benefits. And there was a very important decision by the union government in mid-May: they announced that there will be a “One nation, One ration-card”, which means that ration cards that entitle you to subsidized food would be valid also in other states. Since India is that big, the program will not start before March 2021 – but without the pandemic, it may have come much later or never.

Amongst those migrant labourers, many have now returned to the cities, as there was no more work in the villages. They were surely missed while they were gone. I ask myself if there will be a new level of appreciation for the work they have done. Only now many have realized what a tremendous support these hundreds of millions – official numbers are something between 100 and 150 million – have contributed to the Indian economy. But I believe we should not expect a tremendous social change because of this pandemic. The established structures have grown over thousands of years. And almost all of the returning workforce has found itself back in their old work and environment.

HSS: So since migration seems to be of major importance to the Indian economy, as you have just described, how does the government generally handle the issue of migration in times when there's no pandemic going on?

Plän: Over time there was a big change in the attitude of the government, regardless of who was in power. Originally, there was – when you go back various decades – emigration from India to Africa, to Southeast Asia, and, of course, to Great Britain. Of late, there is more work-related emigration to the Middle East and a considerable migration for higher studies, mostly to the Anglo-Saxon countries. Today, Indians form the second-largest group of foreign students around the world. Even in Germany, the numbers are rising. They are already the third-largest group of foreign students here. Originally, the emigrants were seen as traitors leaving their fatherland. Over time, the government realized that the emigrants did quite well abroad and – because of their strong social cohesion – would support their relatives back in India financially. The money they are sending back from their salaries to their families back in India contributes to three percent of India's total GDP. Twelve percent of all global inward remittances come to India. This has played a very strong role in supporting international migration. Today, there are even social benefits for those that emigrate.

Immigration, though, is a fairly new phenomenon: Due to the economic growth, there is immigration to India for work, mostly from Bangladesh, Nepal and Afghanistan. There are also refugees, earlier from Tibet, now Rohingya from Myanmar and (again) Bangladesh. This is relatively new for India and its society. There is a lack of legislature with regards to immigration. And it can be a topic of friction. Generally, you could say wherever there is migration, there is tension. Domestic migration can result in turf wars of worker unions or resentments against outsiders because of the fear of job loss. There is the underlying cultural conflict between North and South India. But overall, it is relatively easy for a foreigner like me to integrate into the urban Indian society.

HSS: Continuing on the issue of migration, it seems to be quite representative for a vast number of differences that exist in Indian society. But what about other divisions and how does the Indian government address them? Do you think domestic politics support cohesion or does it actually stoke more division?

Plän: The general goal of any government, be it the union government, state governments or local governments, is to govern these existing divisions as effectively as possible. And we have seen in our work that local governments in India – municipal councils, for example – excel at this task. The underlying supposition of any government in India has been that a nation as vast and diverse as itself can pride itself in *unity in diversity*. However, this view has been challenged multiple times, regardless of the government. In the more recent context, the current government introduced a Citizenship Amendment Act and a national register of citizens. This has challenged this underlying supposition as these acts question the idea of full equality among religion and ethnicity. What we have seen recently is an emerging tolerance towards intolerance. And India is a very tolerant country. Religion having played a decisive role in Indian politics is something we have been seeing only since 20 years or so. Currently, the BJP¹ is in power since 2014. And they still enjoy an enormous backing among the voters. Their Hindu-nationalist approach brought them into the central and various state governments. It does not necessarily cater to the views of the 80% Hindu population – but surely to the powerful extremist core, is rather tolerated by the majority. Creating division might help in short-term political gains. But I do not think that a major societal rift is in the BJP's interest. The other side of the coin is that the government seems often only half-heartedly outspoken against anti-minority or casteist crimes. Their strong appearance and political success consolidates their approach.

HSS: So looking towards the future, we have heard how diverse India and its society are and how it prides itself in unity in diversity.

As in many countries, the pandemic has tested the social fabric even more and the political challenge to govern such diversity feels obvious. But its diversity may also be a strength that India can use to recover from the pandemic. And how do you think India will recover from this crisis?

Plän: Oh, definitely. I think that diversity is one of India's greatest strengths, or maybe we should say India's society. It has a predominantly young population that has been more educated than ever; this is a good way to channel this new sense of tolerance. India, of course, wants to be recognised as a global power. At the same time, Indians want to move away from their colonial hangover and aspire to have a more individually drafted identity. So the Indians, especially the younger generation, have high aspirations, but simultaneously look at China as an economic role model. They are looking to the West for education and cultural ideals and – of course – for life-standards. So India is pursuing a healthy debate and any society has grown from such debates. The Indian tolerance has helped them overcome all sorts of social challenges in the past.

Sadly, the discourse has become skewed. Today, criticism of government politics is often interpreted as being anti-national. And national voices of concern against the curtailments of constitutional rights in Kashmir in 2019 and 2020 were surprisingly weak. I hope that the political discourse can continue and critical voices will not be stifled. Else, if neglecting or actively disadvantaging minorities, and other opinions will not be heard anymore, India would lose its great advantage of peaceful pluralism.

HSS: *The pandemic has set India back economically, but how has its recent economic development changed society in India? You just mentioned some of the young generation's aspirations, but more in general, what are people's aspirations today, looking towards the future?*

Plän: The views of the generations change rapidly, just like India's economy and society have changed rapidly in the past decades. And

this is quite fascinating. I think some views and some attitudes will always remain: a very high degree of tolerance and harmony. There is even a kind of enthusiasm for traditionalism among the younger Indians.² At the same time, some aspirations are new and changing: high life standards, global recognition, digitization. Indians still turns outward for ideals, while the government invests heavily into domestic innovation and production or campaigns for the same. Besides the economic, there is also the human development which still poses a major challenge.

The sheer size and an enormous administrative body (a burden from the British rule) along with an overburdened judicial system might seem to slow the Indian dynamism a bit. But the ideas of young minds are abundant; the number of start-ups is impressive.

All in all, the vibrant dynamism within the Indian society, openness, flexibility and being able to adapt to change have been the biggest strengths here - all very good prerequisites for positive change.

|| This interview was conducted by Anja Richter, Country Director UK and published as a podcast of the Hanns Seidel Foundation in the series "Global Perspectives". Listen to it at: <https://www.hss.de/mediathek/#c44249>

ANMERKUNGEN

- 1 Bharatiya Janata Party
- 2 Programme for Comparative Democracy, URL <https://www.lokniti.org/otherstudies/lokniti-csds-konrad-adenauer-stiftung-attitudes-anxieties-and-aspirati-22> [25.1.2021]