

The virtual second generation: negotiating ethnicity on the internet

The internet of the new global media, linking people transnationally, providing a public for the marginalised, fostering democracy – versus the internet of virtual unreality, detached from the real world, space for escape, leading to social isolation. From these extremes, research has moved to ethnographic analyses of what actually happens online. Here I analyse how, why and with what consequences second generation Indians in Germany do this.

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About 45,000 Indian citizens live in Germany. They are relatively few compared to other ethnic minorities such as the Turks, fewer also than Tamils from Sri Lanka or refugees from Afghanistan. Indian migration to Germany started in the 1950s and 60s with individual young men coming as students, interns and professionals. In the late 1960s they were joined by young nurses from Kerala. From the 1970s, entry to Germany became increasingly restricted and Indians came either as asylum seekers or illegal workers. The latest phase of Indian migrants, from 2000 onwards, is comprised mostly of IT specialists.

The early migrants from the 1950s and 60s started to found families in the 70s. Many of the nurses from Kerala married men from their own places of origin and thus a Malayali community developed in Germany. The Punjabis, who came from the 1970s on, have their *Gurdwaras* and places to meet, but many live in legally insecure situations without families. Bengalis meet regularly to celebrate *Durga Puja*; IT specialists have their internet meeting places. But in general, Indian Germans live dispersed in the country and have little everyday contact with others of the same ethnic background. From the middle of the 1990s, members of the second generation began to search for and create their own spaces, organising parties and experimenting with the internet.

In the summer of 2000, Germany began discussing chancellor Schröder's plan to give 'Green Cards' to foreign IT specialists. The opposition began a campaign against this, which soon became known as the *Kinder statt Inder* campaign ('children instead of Indians'). Many second generation Indians followed the campaign closely – for the

first time, their ancestral country of origin had become the centre of xenophobic debate.

Three young Indian Germans began exchanging emails and cartoons on the topic. The idea of an *indernet* (network of Indians) developed, which led to the website *theinder.net*. Wanting to interlink with websites of other 'Indians' in Germany, they began contacting others of the second generation. The website grew: new technical features like chat and a guestbook were included, new content was put online, the editorial team expanded and traditional print media began reporting on the project. During the India boom in Germany the interest of Germans in the website increased and today thousands of users click on *theinder.net* every month.

The research project *The virtual second generation* analyses and focuses on questions of ethnicity, community and online-offline interaction. I interviewed the editors, users and non-users of *theinder.net* as well as other founders of 'Indian' projects in Germany to gain insight into the relevance of this internet portal.

Marginalised groups online

The internet seems to be the right tool at the right time for second generation Indian Germans. Since the second half of the 1990s, the second generation no longer wanting to follow their parents, but wanting to do something on their own, has been growing. Own spaces are sought and created; *the internet* appeals especially to young males. *theinder.net* develops just when there is a general search for own spaces and the majority of the second generation has internet access.

The internet is a particularly suitable media for marginalised groups, requiring only access to computers with inter-

net connections and basic computing skills. It works almost independently of offline hierarchies and dominant discourses, and can link dispersed members of marginalized groups. For some, like homosexuals, the anonymity of the internet is an important factor; for others, like ethnic minorities, it is the possibility for fast and cheap transnational communication. For dispersed Indians in Germany it seems to be the only space where many can meet regularly.

Marginalised groups can use the internet to create their own spaces on their own terms – spaces where they can meet others like themselves, where they can discuss and negotiate their 'witness'. They define and negotiate the rules, discourses and contents among themselves, and thus also their representation to a larger public. Theoretically, the public for a virtual space is the whole world. In practice, the public is more restricted; as with the mass of information online, it needs good links and advertising to make the space known to a wider public.

These are also the self-defined aims of *theinder.net*: communication and information. The editors want to provide a space where the 'community' can interact and where those interested in India can get information. The form and content are shaped by them, not by their parents or host society. This independence is important for the editors and users. Most of them stress the importance of meeting others like themselves; as there are so few Indians in Germany, this is something that hardly happens offline. *theinder.net* is thus one of the few spaces which is their own, where they do not have to explain themselves, where they can just 'be'.

At first glance *theinder.net* appears to be a transnational website. It offers not just a German, but also an English and a

Hindi version. There are special offers for IT Indians coming to Germany. The mixture of English and German in the name *theinder.net* makes Germans think it is also designed for an English-speaking audience. On a closer look, however, *theinder.net* is very German, or rather, German-speaking. The English version has little content, the Hindi almost none. The language used in the interactive elements is German. Sometimes Indian languages – or in some cases Swiss German – are used, but never for long, as one or another user will complain that she does not understand. *theinder.net* is a transnational local website, a German-speaking portal for 'Indians' and images of India in the German-speaking world.

This localisation is not only evident in the language, but in content. *theinder.net* is not a detached virtual space, but closely linked to the physical space of Germany, the reason for its relevance. A major feature of the portal is the announcement of events, especially parties, and later the reporting on them, with pictures. The virtual space makes it possible for the dispersed second generation to get information on what happens offline and thus makes meetings in physical space possible. Furthermore, the interactive elements are used to get to know other second generation members, to flirt and to eventually meet offline.

A virtual community?

To talk of an online community nonetheless does not seem adequate. Although there is a feeling of community for many individuals, community is hardly established. Each part of the internet portal has its own life, and its users do not meet as *theinder.net* community offline. Shared boundaries and symbols are lacking; *theinder.net* caters to the longing for community without being one – it provides a space to meet

and network, from where further activities can take place, which might create communities.

In contrast to the ethnic societies of the parents, *theinder.net* is pan-Indian. Regional conflicts, especially between South and North Indians, occasionally occur in the interactive areas. But as long as the common language is German, there is a sense of Indianness bridging language, regional and religious differences. Many of the second generation consider it a special success to overcome the regional divisions lived by their parents and in India itself.

But *theinder.net* is not only inclusive; it also marginalizes. Although some Muslims and Pakistanis use the portal and some are even on the editorial team, the dominant Indian patriotism fostered on *theinder.net* develops around Hinduness and Hindi. Hindu nationalistic rhetoric appears in many places; most do not notice and mind, but others are put off. Similarly, homosexuals have the impression that *theinder.net* is homophobic. In both cases, this is due less to particular articles that are clearly marginalizing – the editorial team prevents this – but rather, through the atmosphere created in the interactive discussions, the selection of articles and images. Exclusion occurs by what is missing rather than what is there. ◀

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