

## Report on The Conference for the Future of Indian Democracy (CFID)

Day 1 – Friday 28 June 2024



The conference commenced on Friday, 28 June, with a meeting of all the speakers in which Prof. Mukherji introduced the political science department followed by an introduction of all the panelists themselves.

The first session was chaired by Professor Aurel Croissant, former Dean of the Faculty of Economics and Social Sciences at Heidelberg University. The topic of this session was "The Future of India's Democracy."



The session began with a presentation by Mr. Mani Shankar Aiyar, a former Member of Parliament and Cabinet Minister from the Indian National Congress (INC). He discussed the future of India's democracy. He reminded the audience that the attacks on Indian democracy had not ended after the election result which saw the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) in government again. But the BJP was losing ground to the opposition parties. Challenges such as the North/South Divide, the influence of the Hindu Nationalist parent organization RSS and a planned Uniform Civil Code would play a large role in the next legislative period.





Following this presentation, Dr. Harsh Mander, Chair of the Centre for Equity Studies in New Delhi, Bosch Fellow, and Nobel Peace Prize Nominee, delivered a talk titled "Where did India go wrong?" He emphasized that the problem was not about authoritarian leaders like Modi and Trump but rather that the problem lies with "us" the electorate or the citizens. Mander went on to especially display the situation of Indian Muslims and that it would need leaders such as Mohandas Gandhi to speak out when violence and hate against Muslims would spread. According to the Chair of the Centre for Equity Studies the Indian state under Modi has normalized the hate and violence towards Muslims who live in an "environment of fear". In the discussion that followed, questions were raised on how much the RSS was influencing Indian politics. A scholar from Nürnberg (Kushboo Jain) also mentioned that upper caste Hindu Nationalist forces in Germany were also gaining ground by forcing her to change her curriculum and proclaiming that they would represent all Indians with cultural events that appealed to upper caste Hindus.



After a short tea/coffee break the second session took place from 3:30 to 5:00 PM. Chaired by Dr. Theo Rathgeber from the Adivasi Coalition in Germany, this session dwelt with "Media, Diaspora, and the State." Ms. Seema Chishti, Editor of TheWire.in, opened the session with an analysis of the state of the Indian media. She highlighted that the free press in India was increasingly under attack which is clearly visible in the rankings of journalist without borders in which India has slipped 21 seats to place 161 since Modi has come to power. Next, human rights lawyer Mr. Aman Wadud discussed the citizenship issue in Assam. He gave the example of a client of his who had been serving the Assamese border control force for thirty years and was suddenly considered a foreigner in his own country, despite submitting 26 documents to prove his Indian citizenship. The final presentation of this session, delivered by Mr. Rasheed Ahmed, Executive Director of the Indian American Muslim Council. It addressed question of Hindu nationalism and the diaspora. He clearly emphasized that the ideological idea threatening Muslims in India came from the RSS. According to him this would be the main organization that would need to be focused on when fighting ethno-nationalism in India. The session concluded with a discussion in which Prof. Jaffrelot pointed out that the BJP was not content on how the National Register



of Citizens (NRC) had played out in Assam. It would prepare for a new one which might consider especially Muslims as foreigners. After being asked what would give her hope for the Indian Media, Chishti answered that it was especially the independent small media that was performing a valuable task. Inspired by the discussion, talks were carried on by participants and speakers of the conference in the second Tea/Coffee break of the day.



The evening continued with a film screening by Mr. Lalit Vachani from the Centre for Modern Indian Studies at the University of Göttingen. He presented the film "A Day in Muzaffarnagar" (23 minutes, India, 2024). It showed the reality of the Muzaffarnagar riots in 2019 where Indian Muslims peacefully protesting against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) were attacked by Hindu Nationalist mobs. The film was partially filmed with an iPhone 8. The film maker followed Dr. Harsh Mander and his Karwan-e-Mohabbat fact finding team through the demolished houses of Muslim citizens.

The first day's program concluded with a group dinner at Alte Gundtei restaurant, located at Zwingerstraße 15A, Heidelberg, to which the participants departed at 8:00 PM.

## Day 2 – Saturday, 29 June 2024

On Saturday, June 29, 2024, the conference resumed at 9:00 AM with the first session. This session, chaired by Dr. Dieter Reinhardt from the South Asia Institute of Heidelberg University, it focused on "Minorities and the Future of Indian Politics." Professor Christophe Jaffrelot, Senior Research Fellow at CERI-CNRS and Professor at Kings College London, began the session with a presentation on the condition of Indian Muslims. Presenting several statistics, he described how Muslims were underrepresented within the Indian state apparatus and how this situation was getting worse. Following him, Professor Yasmin Saikia from Arizona State University, USA, discussed "Recolonialization: Reading the Hindu-Muslim Experience in Contemporary Assam." She presented a fascinating historical account of how Hindutva elements were absent in the pre-colonial Assamese identity. Mr. Yogendra Yadav, Founder of National Election Studies and Convenor of Swaraj Abhiyan, joined online to speak about the Indian General Elections of 2024 and their implications for the future of Indian democracy. He had been one of the few people who had prophesied that the BJP will not win a simple majority in the 2024 General Elections. Mr. Yadav pointed out that this election result could be seen as a "moral, political and personal defeat" for the BJP and PM Narendra Modi. The session concluded with a discussion that lasted until 10:30 AM, followed by a tea/coffee break.



The second session began at 11:00 AM. It was chaired by Professor Christophe Jaffrelot. It focused on "Religion, Civil Society, and Social Democracy." Professor John Harriss, Founding Dean of the School of International Studies at Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, opened with a presentation on caste in elections and the future of Indian democracy. This was followed by a talk from Professor Irfan Ahmed of Ibn Haldun University, Istanbul, on "On Democracy to Come: A Counter Thesis on Hindu-Muslim Relations." Professor Rahul Mukherji from Heidelberg University concluded the session with a presentation on "Competitive Authoritarianism and India's Civil Society." Through his research he could clearly show that civil society organizations were under attack as many non-governmental organizations had lost their foreign contribution licenses leading to drastic reduction in funding. This session was followed by a lunch break till 1:30 PM.





The third session began under the chairmanship of Dr. Harsh Mander and focused on "Institutional Decay." Mr. Prashant Bhushan, the leading public interest lawyer in India, opened with a talk on the erosion of the independence of the judiciary and the Election Commission in India, along with the necessary reforms. Ms. Anjali Bharadwaj from the Satark Nagarik Sangathan (Concerned Citizens Association) in New Delhi then discussed the scandal regarding electoral bonds. She argued how electoral bonds had benefitted the BJP the most, how it had increased corruption and why the Supreme Court had seen the scheme as unconstitutional. Dr. M. Mohsin Alam Bhatt from Queen Mary University (London) concluded the session with a presentation on "The Law and Politics of Eroding the Election Commission of India." His presentation provided proof for the claim that the Election Commission was biased in favour of the ruling party during the 2024 General Elections. The session ended with a discussion, followed by a coffee break.





The fourth and final session took place from 3:30 to 5:00 PM under the chairmanship of Dr. Carola Hausotter from the Protestant Academy Bad Boll. This session was dedicated to "Reflections on Germany and India." The panel discussion featured Dr. Thorsten Rudolph (Member of the Bundestag, SPD), Mr. Mani Shankar Aiyar, Professor Rahul Mukherji from Heidelberg University, and Dr. Christian Wagner (Senior Fellow at the Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, Berlin), who participated online. During the discussion Dr. Rudolph made clear that India and Germany's partnership was mostly based on interests and not on values. This was heavily criticized by Mr. Aiyar who urged that India should learn from Germany's historic mistakes. Prof. Mukherji emphasized that Germany should be careful when investing in Green energy in India as this would often help crony capitalists such as Adani and Ambani the most. Dr. Wagner explained that Germany was searching for a substitute to China and that it was a consensus within the German government and companies that a closer relationship to India was essential. The speakers were united in their call for closer cooperation between the two countries - also on the academic level.



The conference concluded with a lecture and discussion chaired by Mr. Mani Shankar Aiyar. Professor Rajeev Bhargava from the Centre for Studies in Developing Societies delivered a talk on whether there is an ancient Indian tradition of democracy. He discovered various democratic traditions in Indian history but also presented their imperfectness. The conference closed with final remarks and a vote of thanks by Dr. Seyed Hossain Zarhani from the South Asia Institute of Heidelberg University at 6:00 PM. Following the conference the participants and speakers either decided to go for a walk on the Philosophenweg or to watch the Football match between Germany and Denmark in the UEFA Euro 2024.





Mathias O'Mahony and Rahul Mukherji

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The videos of the conference have been uploaded to the Youtube channel of the Department of Political Science of the SAI and are available at:

[https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLryoeOqMBEnELzWkbQ3\\_COezAeEFm\\_d7So](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLryoeOqMBEnELzWkbQ3_COezAeEFm_d7So)