

Fatima and *theinder.net* - A Refuge in Virtual Space

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Survival Training on the Internet

"I also went through phases, when I was almost depressive, because I thought: 'Oh no, where do I belong?' A conflict of identity, when one does not know, where ... what am I? You look into the mirror and you see somebody with black hair. You go outside, talk to people and when you listen to yourself, you think: 'Yes, naturally. For myself I am German.' When I listen to myself thus, but as soon as, I don't know ... there are small things said by others, by friends, small remarks like 'How is it done at your place?' Then it is again: 'Oh no, I am different after all.' And then I found other people with this conflict of identity on pak24 and theinder.net. There one can talk with each other, exchange experiences. A bit of survival training: how does one deal with this?"

The 19 year old Fatima¹ is a regular user of the two internet portals www.theinder.net and www.pak24.de. In her postings, she appears anything but a person suffering from a conflict of identities. On *theinder.net*, her virtual self presents a witty, cheerful and self-confident young woman. She jokes and playfully quarrels with the others, writes senseless postings like them, discusses music, is part of the group. From the forum discussions further contacts develop. First she exchanges private messages, then emails, once some degree of familiarity is gained also phone numbers. In some cases, Fatima meets her virtual friends offline. But *theinder.net* is not only a space for chilling, small talking and getting to know people. Fatima also engages in serious discussions, in particular on Islam. Then she directly asks for the others' prejudices, gives information, engages herself in long debates. In one of the obligatory headscarf discussions, she says she wears one. Since then I am ever trying to remember whether she wore one, when we met for the interview. I do not think so. I remember a self-confident, very pleasant interview partner. At the beginning, she appeared a bit different from what I had imagined her to be. I cannot really say what I had expected, but somehow she looked different. Nonetheless, we did recognise each other immediately when we met at the station. There was a familiarity which is lacking when I meet interview partners not brought up with South Asian parent(s). They normally expect somebody looking much more "Indian" than I do. Fatima was not irritated by my fairness, she knows about the shades of "Indianness".

Fatima is Pakistani, somehow. One of her grandfathers was born in Africa, the other is from Afghanistan, both the grandmothers come from what is today called India. Her father's home is in Pakistan's Punjab, her mother was born in Kashmir. They met in England, where the mother was living. The father was then already in Germany. Fatima was brought up there with

¹ The quotes are taken from an interview I conducted in summer 2004 as part of the research project "The virtual second generation" about the internet portal *theinder.net*. I interviewed Fatima, who in reality has a different name, in German and translated the quotes myself. I would like to thank Navina Khatib, Mareile Paske and Thomas Steller for transcribing the interviews and the Volkswagen Stiftung for funding the project.

a British citizenship. She basically acts and behaves like German youths her age do. But she looks different and she is a believing Muslim. She tells me: “It is like this, I can not really define myself. In the end I say Pakistani, because it is the easiest, just Pakistani.” But it does not seem like just Pakistani. She is not only a regular user of the “Pakistani” internet portal *pak24*, but also of the “Indian” *theinder.net*. On both she feels secure, she experiences a feeling of belonging, even though on *theinder.net* she is faced with massive prejudices against Muslims. This does not seem to bother her too much. On the contrary, she is asking for their articulation in order to tackle them. Fatima does not enter *theinder.net* just as a Pakistani, she also feels Indian: “If somebody asks me whether I am Indian, I always say yes.” She is Indian, because her family is from there, because she blames the British for dividing India. Fatima also says so because in her experience most “Germans” think she is Indian anyway. This is only one of the categorisations she is faced with: “To be honest, when I am in Germany, I am for the Germans always only ‘Desi’.² And it does not matter to them whether I am Indian or Pakistani, I am just Asian. And among the Pakistanis I am the German...”

Other Germans

If one believes in the culture conflict theories, which form the underlying common knowledge in German public debate and according to which, anybody with multiple identities must feel lost, must be torn between the different cultures, then Fatima with her multicultural background and present must experience a conflict of identities – and she says so herself. But talking about her different identities there does not seem to be a conflict. For herself, she can combine being “German”, “British”, “Indian” and “Pakistani” in one person. The conflict develops not within her but is brought to her by others. The “Germans” do not consider her one of them, for them she is Asian. The “Pakistani” also make her the other, calling her a “German”, because she does not conform sufficiently to the traditional view of a “Pakistani” woman in Germany.

Fatima is thus a perfect example for Mecheril’s concept of “Andere Deutsche”,³ which is best translated as “Other Germans”. He defines them as people, who have been socialised mainly in Germany and have made the experience that they are considered to deviate from the fictional ideal type of the “standard German”. This deviation is seen to have its roots in ancestors who came from somewhere else. It is seen to manifest itself in social or physiognomic attributes. In this definition, Mecheril carefully avoids essentialising any actual difference of the “Andere Deutsche”. It does not matter whether they are different and whether they consider themselves different. What matters is that they experience that others see them as different, as not being “German”. It is a matter of racism, of the “German” believing in a homogenous country of “Germans”. Fatima experiences this when she goes outside, when she talks to people. For them she is not a “German”, for them she is a Desi. When she experiences this, she gets into a conflict of identities, then she does not know where she belongs.

On *theinder.net* and on *pak24* she meets others like herself, others with this conflict of identities, others who feel they belong to Germany and South Asia and experience that this double belonging is not easily accepted. Here she can exchange experiences, here she can pursue a “survival training”. She can do this without voicing her feelings directly. By the way the discussions proceed, by the references and jokes made, by casual remarks of the others she

² Desi refers to Desh the country and is used to describe people having their roots in South Asia. The term is commonly used in Great Britain and the USA. It is slowly beginning to be used in Germany as well.

³ Paul Mecheril, “Rassismuserfahrungen von Anderen Deutschen - eine Einzelfallbetrachtung”, in Mecheril, Paul and Thomas Teo (eds.), *Psychologie und Rassismus* (Hamburg 1997), pp.175-201.

can notice that the others have made similar experiences. The small remarks by her offline friends, which irritate her, which show her that she does not belong are hardly found on *theinder.net*. If somebody makes one, he or she will be the other, will through the immediate reactions experience being different him- or herself, will be the one irritated.

The majority of the users are “Andere Deutsche” like Fatima. *theinder.net* is their own space, one of the few where they are not the other, where their differences are standard. Fatima belongs to the others although in the strict sense she has no connection to the Indian Republic, which is the country *theinder.net* links itself to. It does so not only with its name, but also through the use of the flag and by focussing its reporting on it. But since Fatima and the other users are far closer to Germany and the “othering” as an “Indian” here than they are to the conflicts on the Indian subcontinent, their sense of “India” encompasses more than the republic. There are, however, also some tendencies on *theinder.net*, especially in the interactive forum, to pursue an Indian patriotism based on Hindu-ness. Some users and the designer have a closeness to Hindu-nationalist thought. But these are not shared by the majority and they are not dominant enough for Fatima to lose her feeling of belonging. She seems to consider the voiced anti-Muslim sentiments as a sign of ignorance about Islam, and thus counters them with information.

Researching *theinder.net*

The interview with Fatima is one of about 60 I have conducted with users and non-users of *theinder.net*, with its editorial team and the webmasters of other internet portals, with party organisers, journalists and academics. Fatima is not representative for the others, as little as anyone, but in her uniqueness the interview highlights important aspects about the significance of the internet portal *theinder.net*. I first got to know of it at a seminar in November 2000. The three young, male founders had come there to meet other Indians of the second generation⁴ and to advertise their new internet portal, which they had founded that summer. After the seminar I started observing *theinder.net* and was amazed at how dynamic it was. Being interested in identity constructions among second generation Indians in Germany, I decided to analyse this specific virtual space focusing on the negotiation of ethnicity through it.

My research interest was triggered by my own categorisations of second generation Indians and the unwillingness of the objects of my categorisations to conform to these. Like Mecheril, I define “German” as those who are based in Germany, plan their lives and have been socialised here. For me it does not depend on citizenship, on parent’s origins or their culture, whether one is German or not. Although I was not born with a German passport and my father is from India, I have always considered myself German. But many others of similar background do not. I wanted to understand this and started researching.⁵ *theinder.net* was

⁴ Based on observations of the users of the *theinder.net*, guests at parties, participants at seminars, etc. my definition of second generation Indians includes all those who have at least one South Asian parent, did not form the decision to migrate to Germany themselves and have been mainly socialised there. This includes on top of the children from Indian migrants those from binational parents as well as adopted Indians, who were brought up in German families, and some of non-Indian South Asian origin. I choose this broad definition because I have met people from all these categories who define themselves as second generation Indians or experience a sense of belonging at spaces of the second generation. Even though my definition is based on self-identification of individuals it does not describe an identity but rather a category to name a group of people who have certain common characteristics. Not all who share these, identify themselves as belonging to this category, and those within are anything but homogenous.

⁵ Among other things I wrote my M.A. dissertation on the question of identity and citizenship among second generation Indians in Germany. My diverse approaches to the topic can be found on www.urmila.de.

particularly interesting to me because its name, design, etc. assumed some “Indian” identity without referring to any “German” directly. I wanted to understand why people whom I categorise as “Germans” found such a platform and use it. At the same time, I have always been irritated by the commonly held notion of “zwischen den Stühlen sitzen”⁶ I have always had the impression that this is not the primary experience of second generation migrants. But since they have been told this so often, they start to believe in it and thus are unable to consider themselves, for example, as German and Indian at the same time.

During the last four years, through observation and interviews, as well as through political developments and my own development, there have been shifts within my research with respect to my interest and focus. However, I am still mainly interested in understanding the individual better, in uncovering his or her beliefs and ideas. My research questions at the same time have been always informed by the current political debates such as the conservative campaigns against dual citizenship in 1998 or about “Kinder statt Inder” in 2000.⁷ In the last year, it has in particular been the discussion on and condemnation of parallel societies.

theinder.net is a space almost exclusively for second generation Indians, its establishment could thus be considered as a form of segregation, of founding a parallel society. I want to analyse how this own space has developed, which functions it fulfils and question whether it – and other ethnically defined spaces – are in themselves a sign of segregation.

Some Information about *theinder.net*

For the birth of *theinder.net* two aspects were crucial. The one was that in the summer of 2000 many young men in Germany had basic knowledge in web design and wanted to experiment with the new medium internet. The other was the introduction of Green Cards for IT specialists and the conservative campaign “Kinder statt Inder”. For the first time, Indian migrants were in the centre of a political debate in Germany. The media were full of Indian IT specialists, their supposed superiority in technical skills and the potential threat their immigration could pose to Germany. Soon cartoons playing with the slogans “Kinder statt Inder” and “Indernet”⁸ as well as such merging the old stereotypes of India’s spirituality and poverty with the new ones of technical superiority were published.

The three founders of *theinder.net*, who were all in their early twenties, first exchanged these cartoons by email and wanted to include them on their individual homepages. Soon they decided to merge their websites and create their own *Indernet*. The subsequent success of *theinder.net* was made possible by a combination of many factors. The clever choice of the domain name had its share as had the lucky combination of necessary skills among the founders,⁹ the coincidence that just at this time a networking platform was needed and an offline network was established through the seminar in November 2000. A platform like *theinder.net* was needed as, by this time, the absolute number of second generation Indians in Germany had reached the critical mass needed for their own spaces; youth groups and

⁶ “Zwischen den Stühlen sitzen” literally translates as sitting between the chairs and is based on the culture conflict theories, according to which second generation migrants do not know where they belong.

⁷ In 1998 the coalition government formed by social democrats and Greens wanted to introduce the possibility of dual citizenship in Germany. The conservative party managed, with a very populist and xenophobic campaign, to prevent this. In 2000, it once again started a xenophobic campaign against the introduction of “Green Cards” for foreign IT specialists. This unsuccessful campaign was known as “Kinder statt Inder” (children instead of Indians) as the conservatives argued that one should rather invest in the education of children than allow immigration. The Indians became a synonym for the foreign IT specialists.

⁸ *Indernet* merges the German word for Indian *Inder* with internet.

⁹ One is a designer who has given *theinder.net* a professional design. Another had the necessary web programming and organisational skills. The third contributed ideas and marketing skills. Together they were able to use their networks to gain further editors and a technical administrator.

seminars had been established, their own party and music scene was starting to develop. The number of users and editors increased massively within the first months and after that steadily. Already in 2000, the first article in a print journal mentioned *theinder.net*. In the summer of 2002, the internet portal survived a major crisis, when the domain was closed for several months.

Today *theinder.net* is still a project working with purely voluntary editors, about twelve in total. The founders are still involved, but due to occupational pressures they are less active. Some editors who joined in 2000 are still active, others have left, new ones have come. Most are students or engaged in some other form of qualification. Most work and decisions are made by a small core group of people based around one of the founders. There are some women in the editorial team, but the core positions were held so far by men. The editors are very selective in giving me information about the internal organisation, especially about the finances. Thus I can only form assumptions about them. Clearly there are many advertisements on the page and in several interviews I was told that the editors asked my interview partner to click on these to finance *theinder.net*. Party organisers told me that they are asked to pay for special banners advertising their event. Offline events and the server are partly sponsored. The editors claim that the income is not sufficient to cover the costs of the internet portal. In contrast, many users and competitors assume that profit is being made.

The editorial team is responsible for the technical and organisational administration of the website as well as for the editorial content and occasional offline events. They also consider it their task to moderate the interactive elements of the website. In this function, they closed the guestbook in summer 2003 because the flaming there got out of control. Observing the forum I, however, get the impression that the editors hardly look into it and only very occasionally moderate by deleting a post. Independent of the editors, the most frequent posters¹⁰ have developed their own rules and take the position of moderators. They, however, have no official function and can only post, they have no rights to delete or change anything technically.

In contrast to the editorial team, the users seem to be gender balanced. The frequent posters are the smallest part of the users, most are lurkers reading posts or articles. The most read section of *theinder.net* seems to be the events calendar. This service could well be attracting most users¹¹ and has contributed significantly in making the internet portal generally known, also among non-users.

¹⁰ Since September 2002, one has to register in order to be able to post in the forum. In April 2005, almost 1300 nicks are registered, of these according to the technical administrator about half are unique users. About 100 nicks have posted more than 30 times since the introduction of the forum, 15 have more than 500 posts, 5 more than 2000 and one more than 4000. The top poster joined in September 2002 and has been active ever since. The others from the top 5 also have been active at least since 2003. All five are second generation Indians, two of them live in Switzerland, one in Austria and one studies in Great Britain. Most of the users of the forum seem to be South Asians of the second generation with German as the first language. There are regular users from Austria and Switzerland as well as some of Pakistani origin. Some regular users have no own biographical links to South Asia, but are interested in India or had relationships with Indian partners.

¹¹ The chief editor provided me with statistics on total visits until the end of 2003. I was not able to get hold of statistics on the usage of individual sections.

An Own Space

theinder.net calls itself an “Indian online community” which is made for “primarily 2nd generation Indians living in Germany.”¹² According to Fatima, the portal has managed to create a community “where like-minded people can meet, hang around, talk to each other, communicate and exchange experiences and ideas”. This feeling of community has been named by many of my interview partners. Again and again I am told that on *theinder.net* one can experience a familiarity which can hardly be found anywhere else. This Internet portal is something like a refuge in virtual space. But it would be wrong to consider it as an escape from “reality”. Whenever I asked whether using *theinder.net*, meeting other Indians of the second generation was not some form of segregation, I was immediately contradicted. Most of the interview partners emphasised that their everyday lives are basically “German”, that most of their friends and the whole environment are “German”. They hardly experience anything “Indian” in their everyday lives and the little there is, is mostly determined by their parents. The “Indian” space *theinder.net* is thus not a form of segregation for them, but the only place to give space to that part of their identity, which they consider “Indian”.

theinder.net is the space of second generation Indians. Here their topics are discussed, their interests are met, their language is spoken, their jokes are understood, their experiences are shared. It is also the space where they can experience their differences to other Indians of the second generation, the lacking similarity of interests and experiences, the limits of common ethnic origin. Those who experience this will, in most cases, not become regular users. Nonetheless *theinder.net* fulfils a function for them. It shows them that they do not need an ethnically defined space like this. The internet portal is thus not a closed parallel world, which is separated from the “German” environment. It rather provides, according to Miller and Slater, a space in which “one can become what one thinks one really is (even if one never was).”¹³ Miller and Slater call this expansive realisation through the internet. The new medium provides a space to develop parts of the own identity, one could not develop before in the same way. This, however, is not a purely virtual identity, it is influenced by experiences in the physical world and has impact on one’s actions there.

theinder.net has gained its importance for Fatima and the others, because it is a space free from “othering” and discrimination, at least from those forms experienced through the majority society. As Fatima puts it: “It is also a small refuge. A virtual refuge from everyday life.”

Migration History

Post-war migration of South Asians to Germany started early with individual young men from all South Asian countries coming to study or do a practical training. In the late 1960s, they were joined by groups of young female nurses from the South Indian state of Kerala, who were recruited by the Catholic Church to ease the labour shortage in the German health sector. From the 1970s onwards, German immigration rules were becoming more restrictive. Only the spouses of the resident Indians, few students and asylum seekers could enter legally. Since 2000, a new phase of immigration by IT specialists and their families has begun. Today, about 43,000 Indian citizens, 17,500 holders of a Person of Indian Origin card and many more people of Indian origin, with no legal document to register this, live in Germany. More information on www.urmila.de.

¹² The first statement can be found on the homepage of www.theinder.net, the second in the description of the project.

¹³ Daniel Miller and Don Slater (eds.), *The Internet – An Ethnographic Approach* (Oxford 2000).