

What the West Should Learn from India



What the West Should Learn from India

Insights from a German Diplomat

Walter J. Lindner

with

Heike Wolter

 juggernaut

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'Travelling makes one modest.
You see what a tiny place you
occupy in the world.'

GUSTAVE FLAUBERT



For Uli Kunze



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Foreword

Two years, over four decades apart, marked significant milestones in Walter J. Lindner's tryst with India: the subject of *What the West Should Learn from India: Insights from a German Diplomat* – a marvellous, remarkably written, and incisively argued account. It was in 1977 that Lindner first arrived in India, his 'dream country', as a globetrotting backpacker, stumbling on a land far removed from his romanticised conception. After all, contrary to what he had hoped, the defining refrains of Indian life were not the sublime notes of Pandit Ravi Shankar's sitar but the deafening din of streets bustling and brimming, overrun by all modes of transport known to humanity, from lumbering bullock carts to rocketing sports cars. Yet, despite tumbling, much to his horror, into the infinite chaos and clamour of India, dotted by travels in third class train compartments bursting at the seams and stays at seedy, slovenly hotels in Delhi's Paharganj, Lindner found himself swept off his feet. He was equally exasperated and exhilarated by the 'exploding kaleidoscope ... that is India!' Instead of taking the first flight back to Germany, he stayed on, in thrall (curiously) to India; and when he eventually left for home, he resolved to come back. This he duly did, returning in 2019 as Berlin's representative to New Delhi. In fact, he quite literally put the 'ambassador' in his ambassadorial duties: his

love of India manifest in his rescuing a rollicking red Hindustan Motors Ambassador from the clutches of disrepair and rehauling it into his official vehicle, which became, across the country, an icon of Indo-Germanic friendship.

Even as he demystifies Bharat for Deutschland in *What the West Should Learn from India*, Lindner performs a crucial duty. Urged by his Indian friends to chronicle his Indian rendezvous, for they 'were aware that an outside perspective often brings more insight than the constant stewing in one's own thoughts,' Lindner undertook this task with aplomb and masterful, much-required objectivity. So for all his adulation for India's ageless and dazzlingly diverse civilisation: a cornucopia of faiths and philosophies, immemorial innovatory impulse, and immense economic and geopolitical promise – not least as, in his view, the voice of the Global South, and a possible bridge between the 'Old West and the New South' – he does not hesitate, like many of us who love this country, to ask the tough questions about modern India, where 'many realities exist simultaneously and side-by-side.' Reflecting on the future of an India besieged by the Hindutva juggernaut, he wonders what lies in store for our pluralist, secular and liberal republic – the world's largest democracy which, if not sedulously guarded, could crumble into a 'sham democracy'. Behind the glam and glitz, sparkle and success, of our 'new India', which hails itself as a 'Vishwaguru', there lies a sobering, sorrowful reality, leaving much to be desired. Lindner, with the perceptive gaze of an unbiased foreigner who adores India, brings this reality to the fore, compelling us all to confront it before it truly is too late, before the politics of religious hatred and authoritarianism have snuffed out the flame of India's immeasurable promise.

All in all, *What the West Should Learn from India: Insights from a German Diplomat* is Lindner's moving paean to what he calls – and demands that the Western world embrace after some vital soul-searching – 'the diplomacy of listening'. This, as he writes, is a diplomacy of 'empathy, curiosity, interest,' and, above all, humility; and it can be conducted only by leaving the 'diplomatic enclaves and self-assured circles of excellence,' which allows the diplomat to 'look around, and explore the pulse and diversity of the host country.' In Walter J. Lindner's ultimate analysis, what the West needs to learn is that 'no one needs Western preaching', and if groundbreaking diplomacy, Western and Non-Western alike, is to have two cornerstones, they must be, now more than ever, 'empathy and genuine listening'. This brilliant book, therefore, can even serve as essential reading for aspiring diplomats, as also serving ones, the world over. For the casual reader, however, this is a delightful look at one foreigner's insights into an India that he knows and – despite all its maddening challenges – loves.

Shashi Tharoor, author and Member of Parliament,
Thiruvananthapuram



India? Why India in Particular?

The Voice of the Global South

India is in! Over the past few years and even now, the country is being courted like never before – as a strategic partner, a gigantic sales market, a reservoir of skilled workers and an IT hub. The Indian subcontinent is regarded as a hub of innovation and as an indispensable player in all important global issues, from environmental protection to supply chains and pharmaceutical production. India is also increasingly becoming the voice of the Global South. Due to the sheer size of the country, but also due its economic strength and innovative spirit, this voice is becoming increasingly audible in the concert of international politics and the global economy. The Indian minister of commerce and industry, Piyush Goyal, has confidently declared that in the upcoming years, India would be the third-largest economy in the world,¹ which means it would surpass Germany. Incidentally, he could soon be right.

However, Germany, in particular, is often struggling with this new giant in South Asia, with which it would like to establish a new partnership for economic and geopolitical reasons. Germany needs India. However, India continues to be a mystery to German politicians: Why does Prime Minister Narendra Modi so stubbornly refuse to condemn the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine? What does the rise of Hindu nationalism in the country mean? Could the 'largest democracy in the world' possibly be on its way to becoming a sham democracy?

As an ambassador, I was caught between the two fronts for many years – and not only in India. It is easy to understand why the German side is so unfamiliar with India – no other country in the world combines so many extremes. Here, many realities exist simultaneously and side-by-side. It is more than just a cliché that in India, several centuries and many different countries co-exist at the same time. This is the nation that sends rockets to the moon, designs steering wheels for driverless cars of the future and sends artificial intelligence (AI) engineers to the world's leading laboratories. But there is also the India that harvests crops in the countryside with ox carts and draws drinking water from wells located miles away. If you are looking for wealth and opulence, you will find both – in the Bollywood of the rich, in the Ferraris on the boulevards of Mumbai (previously Bombay), and also in the shopping centres of the growing middle class. However, a stark contrast exists: the India filled with poverty, where millions endure the harsh realities of homelessness and inadequate living conditions in crowded urban centres filled with overburdened infrastructure and densely populated slums.

Visitors from Germany often astonished me with how unwilling they were to leave the cocoon they had brought with themselves, and discover the foreign and the new. I won't

mention any names here – it is not so much a specific person I have in mind, rather the attitude that I have observed time and again. I am thinking, for instance, of a member of the German parliament whose committee work in the Bundestag (the national parliament of Germany) had brought him to Nairobi. As is usual in such cases, I (then the German ambassador to Kenya) picked the man up from the airport. During the drive to the embassy, it became clear that although the man had travelled to the other side of the world, his thoughts were stuck in his parliamentary office. He talked non-stop about votes, the difficulties with a party colleague and a funding gap he had just discovered in a project plan of his constituency. As soon as I talked about what was ‘out there’ – the city, its people and the culture – he unwillingly fell silent. What insights could he gain *here*, of all places? What could the Kenyans offer him that he didn’t already know? And what good would a visit to East Africa do him if he wanted to score points with his voters at home? This was a pity – and definitely not an isolated case. Such encounters are missed opportunities. The Global South is still not really on the radar of many German politicians.

And I’m not even talking about the lecturing finger, which is sometimes the unfavourable alternative to disinterest. Of course, we should talk about human rights and criticize social wrongs such as corruption, poverty, exclusion and violence. But often, the visiting politicians, political analysts or bureaucrats who interact with Indian counterparts do not realize that they are standing on a soil with a colonial past, the consequences of which still have an impact today.

As Europeans, and therefore as heirs to colonialism, it is neither sensitive nor justified to arrive in countries of the Global South and lecture the people on what they should do or not

do, or on how they should organize themselves. The first step is to build trust, and to understand the history and culture of the other. Self-assured know-it-alls will only encounter deaf ears in all countries of the Global South. Diplomacy that serves the people must leave the diplomatic enclaves and self-assured circles of excellence; it must look around, and explore the pulse and diversity of the host country. It is about empathy, curiosity and interest. It also involves a lot of humility.

I have decided to write about my dream country, India, which I first visited as a backpacker in the 1970s and continue to be fascinated by even today. After having been an ambassador in their country for over three years, my Indian friends urged me to write about my experiences – not only as a potentially helpful reading for the German public, but also because they were aware that an outside perspective often brings more insight than the constant stewing in one's own thoughts.

This book is mainly about India, but much of the same applies to Kenya, Somalia, South Africa and Venezuela – countries outside the Western cosmos – where I perpetually crossed the borders between different world perceptions. In these countries, I repeatedly experienced the value of the diplomacy of listening. I am convinced that the world will be a better place if we, in the West, become aware of the blind spots in our dealings with countries of the Global South. We need to realize that we can learn a lot from these countries – just as they can perhaps learn from us.

1977: Backpacking in India

How I had longed for the moment when I was finally in India – to see the place of origin of serene musicians like Pandit

Ravi Shankar, to relive Siddhartha's worldly wisdom and his conversations with the ferryman, to share in the wisdom of countless *gurus* and *sadhus*, to feel the aura of meditation and the transcendental – in short, to fathom the deeper meaning of life. It was 1977 and I felt like I had reached my goal. Yet, my journey had just begun. After years of preparing for my undoubtedly life-changing journey, an idealized image of what awaited had grown within me. Without Instagram and Facebook shots, without TV correspondents on the ground, without travel agencies to consult beforehand, there were no limits to my imagination. With Hermann Hesse's book *Siddhartha* in my pocket, I had expected to see an Indian meditating under almost every banyan tree and anticipated Govinda, Ganesha or Sarasvati around every street corner. I had also secretly hoped to hear the sound of sitars and smell the scent of lotus incense sticks on every second street corner.

The reality check was sobering; the huge culture shock lasted for several weeks. It started with the train journey – I was a second-class 'tourist' on the regional train from Amritsar to Delhi, occupying a window seat in the third carriage. There were neither seat numbers nor seats. No working toilets. No ventilation. People sat, stood or lay down, even in the luggage nets. At stops – which felt like they were occurring every fifteen minutes – more and more people boarded the already overcrowded train. The aisles and doors were already impassable, so people got on and off through the open windows. Many spared themselves the tedious task of getting off at railway stations to find a toilet, by letting nature take its course in the compartment itself. Chewed betel nuts landed on my shoes and shirt. I was drenched in sweat and couldn't understand a word of the conversations taking place around me. The train halted for hours on the open track; the

heat and cramped conditions were unbearable. There were no loudspeaker announcements and no train attendants. After two nights and three endless days, the train reached Delhi.

It was early July, and the monsoon season was beginning to take hold. All I wanted to do was shower, sleep and eat. I headed for the backpacker district, Paharganj, just behind the main train station. In my exhaustion, I came to realize that it was a huge red-light district, with young girls on display behind bars. Countless run-down hostels, hardly worthy of their grand names and reachable via steep wooden stairs in rickety buildings, were lined up next to each other. It was hot, stuffy and dark, and everything was covered in dirt. I chose the next best place to stay – the Gulzar Hostel. I collapsed onto the mattress and fell asleep. Far from being the land of enlightenment I had envisioned, India was a nightmare for me in the first few weeks.

Today, I ask myself: why didn't I go to the airport the very next day and take the first flight back to Germany? I would have had more than enough money for that – my savings from the night shifts as a cab driver in Munich, my truck transfers to the Middle East and my saved civilian service pay were actually geared towards three or four years of travel. Why was I exposing myself to all this? Travelling can also teach you that home is the best place to be. I met a lot of people who would have been better off not coming to India in the first place. They spiralled into drug abuse, went insane and turned into lost souls. You had to be able to endure this kind of life in India, living in the cheapest accommodation and at the bottom of the social ladder. The human psyche has a hard time coping with the intensity of everyday challenges, constant noise, honking of horns and agitated people. Even with money to spend, the discomfort of unsanitary conditions, excessive heat or strange scents could be difficult to tolerate.

However, there was no alternative. I wondered if I should move into a luxury hotel. But was that the India I wanted to find? No! I was looking for the real, pleasant India in the countryside. And indeed, after a few weeks in Agra (which was still rural at the time), Khajuraho and Jaipur, with detours to Goa and Kerala, I found more balance, saw the advantages and disadvantages, and felt the beauty and grace of the Indian temples, people and nature. I experienced the contradictions, the goodwill and the limited scope for action within the masses. In 1977, the population of India was around 650 million, and today, it has more than doubled. Centuries of colonial rule had left India impoverished in the aftermath of its independence. The challenges India faces in providing basic services to its population is something we cannot even imagine in Germany. With all these experiences, my judgement became milder and more balanced.

The question of how India deals with this burden has never left me – not even today. Even in 1977, with all its moments of shock, India continued to show me its wonderful face: breathtakingly beautiful and profound. Nowhere else have I ever experienced spirituality and the most intense impressions, diversity and cultural colourfulness – with the constant questioning of the meaning of existence – as clearly as in India. After six months, in February 1978, when I decided to leave India for Nepal, it was not because I had understood or ‘checked off’ the country from my bucket list. In fact, it was just the opposite: I could no longer cope with the intensity of India. My senses, my mind and my body needed some rest.

In Nepal, I experienced peace and tranquillity, but I soon began to miss the exploding kaleidoscope of intense impressions that is India. I missed the vitality of the enormous country. After

recovering from hepatitis in Pokhara, I continued my adventure. India was no longer one of my destinations. I travelled to Burma (now Myanmar), Thailand, Indonesia and Hong Kong (crossing several South Sea islands), and then to California. I subsequently headed south to travel across the South American continent for two years. By the late summer of 1980, I had run out of money and my desire to travel had waned. And after almost four years, I wanted a break from travelling, and wished to pursue a career and do something meaningful instead of just being an adventurous traveller.

So, I returned to Munich in mid-October 1980. I spoke several languages and had travelled to dozens of countries, but had little desire for superficiality. I wanted to contribute to the betterment of our planet and the lives of the countless people I had encountered. A week later, as a newly enrolled law student, I was sitting among fellow students who were strangers to me and we had little in common. I could only relate to those who had at least made short trips to distant countries. My career goal remained unclear: lawyer, journalist or development aid worker? I would never have dreamt of becoming a diplomat.

My experiences with this species on the long journey had not been the best: officials at the reception desks of the embassies (where I sometimes picked up mail or reported a stolen passport in Guatemala, for example) were quite arrogant towards hippies. Also, a career as a diplomat seemed to mean living in a parallel world of isolated enclaves that were far removed from the ground realities present in the countries of residence. I was also convinced that someone like me – with a background that did not include attending expensive preparatory schools in Geneva, Brussels or the US, but rather years of travel for its own sake – would have no chance of succeeding in the entrance exam

to enrol in the *Diplomatenschule des Auswärtigen Amtes* (the diplomatic academy of German foreign service) in Ippendorf, Bonn. However, I was proved wrong! Against all odds, I cleared the exam and began my training at the diplomatic school on 1 May 1988.

Even after sixteen international relocations, serving in various posts in a dozen countries and travelling through almost every country in the world, what I had suspected in 1977 held true: India remained the most enigmatic, complex, intense and challenging country for me. One thing was clear to me: I wanted to live there again for a longer period of time, to immerse myself – this time as a diplomat – in all aspects of the country’s DNA.

The end of March 2019 marked my long-awaited return to India. I was returning to Delhi, but this time, instead of travelling in a rickety train carriage and staying in a hostel in the red-light district, I arrived in a limousine (provided by the German state) at my residence in Chanakyapuri as the future German ambassador. I then embarked on a three-and-a-half-year journey to explore the soul of modern-day India and observe the changes that had taken place in the country in the last forty-two years. Could I decipher the subcontinent this time?

Aunty Amby – On the Road with a Legend

Day one at the embassy office in Delhi. My residence and the residential building were right next to the embassy. Having just arrived, the first thing I wanted to do was meet my new colleagues, so I set off to do so.

As I walked past the parking lot, I spotted a familiar silhouette in a dark corner and couldn’t believe my eyes. The red paintwork was barely recognizable under the dust, but it was precisely this

car model that populated the country's streets during my first stay in India – mainly in the form of black-and-yellow cabs, but also in white for government purposes and in multiple other colours otherwise. It was often spotted on the roads, amidst rickshaws, lorries, colourful trucks, cows, elephants or camels. Could it be that after more than forty years, such a classic was gathering dust on the embassy grounds?

Next to the brightly polished, ready-to-use and stately models of German provenance, it – or rather 'she' (as it would soon turn out) – presented an inconspicuous, if not sad, picture. My drivers, Fahrid and Jerry, thought they had misheard me when I asked them to manoeuvre the red vehicle to the front. I wanted to take a closer look at the battered beauty. And my initial hunch was correct. Under all the dust and dirt, like Cinderella in disguise, was a red Hindustan Ambassador. Not just any car, but an Indian legend: simple, robust and iconic. The kind of vehicle you imagine when you think of classic cars.

Although the Ambassador was discontinued in 2014, despite all the rumours about its sale and revival, it embodied India's national pride. Manufactured in Uttarpara near Kolkata, the Ambassador may have been modelled on a British Morris, but it stood as a symbol for India's independence. As one of India's oldest car companies, Hindustan Motors had been producing this car for more than five decades since 1958. Entire generations of Indians had learnt to drive in it, completed their first kilometres behind its wheel and travelled the country with the car fully loaded. The name 'Ambassador' also signified a message: *India is back!* The car heralded India's new self-confidence.

I didn't know any of this in the 1970s; the car was simply synonymous with India for me. However, when I saw the dusty duckling next to the top German limousines with their

fully digitalized cockpits, my heart leapt with joy. I saw all the details from another era – the chrome that gave the icon its contours, the spacious interior with two full-length bench seats, the lack of any frills, the focus on the essentials . . . And on my first lap around the embassy compound, when I heard the leisurely hum and felt the proximity to the asphalt, a decision matured – I wanted to drive it. Not just once, but as often as I could. Of course, there were concerns. What about safety, environmental compatibility, comfort and air conditioning in Delhi's midsummer heat? When I revealed my plan to restore the Ambassador for embassy use, Fahrid and Jerry stared at me in disbelief. What would the drivers of other ambassadors say when both of them rolled up in an Indian model, and that too in fiery red instead of the dignified black? But the garage did its best. Ultimately, the car was allowed to stay as my main service vehicle. My Indian colleagues at the embassy and the journalists immediately came up with a nickname: Ambassador became 'Amby', and as she aged she was affectionately called 'Aunty'.

'But how did Aunty Amby actually get into the embassy?' I asked Fahrid and Jerry. They recollected that the car was purchased by one of my predecessors for the German Unity Day celebrations. It was to be painted and embellished with iconic scenes from Germany's recent history, such as the fall of the Berlin Wall. After the celebrations, however, Aunty Amby had mostly stood around uselessly and was only used occasionally for mail runs.

But before she was allowed to go into action, Amby had to overcome an important hurdle – needed the unavoidable insignia of an ambassador. She was missing the standard flag holder. All ambassador vehicles were equipped with such flag holders – Mercedes-Benzes or BMWs that were used by diplomats, not only in Germany but in many countries around the world, had

corresponding equipment options. Armoured glass was also available, if required. Every German ambassador basically knew what to expect at the airport upon arrival: the familiar models from Munich or Stuttgart.

Amby, on the other hand, shattered all expectations – including the protocol for presenting the formal ‘letter of credence’ to the president. Hardly any other moment in the life of a diplomat corresponds so closely to the common perception of the supposedly glamorous and aloof life of the excellencies as this rather outdated protocol from courtly days – with the handover, the ‘ambassador designated’ becomes the ‘ambassador extraordinary and plenipotentiary’, who represents his state in the respective host country. Reason enough to celebrate this moment with all the ceremony and pomp a state can muster! Every step is laid down, from being picked up by motorcycle squadron (or in London, by carriage), horse parades, various flag-raising ceremonies, a meticulous schedule, strict protocol through to clothing, speech requirements and subsequent tea with the head of state. In short, a moment that is best not messed up, where dignity and diplomatic tradition are upheld, and over which only experienced protocol officers don’t lose sleep.

But because everything else in the world is changing, why not change this tradition, too? We are no longer in the world of fifteenth-century Venetian princes, but in the age of social media, AI and The Rolling Stones at the Buckingham Palace. Things can be a little more relaxed. The ‘excellencies’ of today are well suited to approachability, empathy, authenticity and a dash of coolness. I wanted to add a modern touch to 21 May 2019, the day on which my credentials were to be presented to the then President of India, H.E. Ram Nath Kovind.

With typical *jugaad*, which I will explain more about later, Auntie Amby was retrofitted – with the German flag fluttering

on the left and the Indian flag on the right. As per protocol, a uniformed escort met me at the German embassy. There were several motorcycles in front of the Amby, with some of the usual embassy limousines lined up behind her – a cinematic convoy. When we arrived at the presidential palace, the colleagues from the Indian state protocol were ready to open the door and welcome us. Many of the hardened protocol officers, too, couldn't resist a proud smile, and the Head of Protocol winked at me conspiratorially.

The President was already waiting inside. Just like the German federal president, the president of India has no executive powers, but is the representative head of state. In this capacity, he greeted me with the words: 'I hear you've come with a *Hindustani* car.' I nodded and introduced myself with a short speech in Hindi. He was impressed, and I was relieved. After all, trust is an ambassador's most important asset.

The protocol was to leave the President's official residence after the ceremony and return to the embassy. But I decided to give a press conference in the middle of Delhi, just 200 m away from Delhi Gate. In the midday heat, I answered the journalists' questions, some of which were regarding the Ambassador. The next day, all major newspapers carried articles about me along with the photograph of Amby parked in front of India Gate. They said: 'He brought his own message with him: appreciation for India and its people.'

Meanwhile, the bright-red icon had gained a life of its own. When I would be out and about for my appointments, *Dilli walas* (the residents of Delhi) would often ask me: 'What's our Amby doing?' When the pandemic began, Amby drove around wearing a face mask made out of a huge blue bed cloth. At Christmas, dozens of balloons adorned Amby. At some point,

we asked people to send us the pictures they had clicked of Amby – when they saw her on the streets of India – via social media for a contest.

There were ample opportunities to do so, as 90 per cent of my appointments in Delhi during my three-and-a-half-year term as an ambassador involved her. The winning photographs were rewarded with a baby Amby – a small, red souvenir car. Even as I would travel to distant states – almost 2,000 km away from Delhi – officials would playfully ask me if I had arrived with Auntie Amby, if I would bring her along during my next visit, or they would simply ask me to convey their regards to her. At any event in the capital, the hosts and the media would immediately know whether I was attending or not – no Amby, no ambassador. Sometimes, the hype came to the point where it was not me who people wanted to see, but the red icon: ‘Nice to see you, Excellency, but where is Amby?’

Fahrid and Jerry, who were initially a little ashamed to drive the German ambassador around in a small Indian car despite having luxury limousines in the fleet, became proud representatives, seen in newspapers and TV clips. In the company of drivers from other embassies, they became admired Amby confidants. Whenever passersby happened to spot Amby out on sidewalks or parking lots, they would stop to click selfies, talk about her among themselves or simply marvel at the sight. Everyone had a story to tell: first love, first ride, first trip. Even German guests would usually ask about Amby straight away. The then German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, took a photo with Amby; her then Minister of Foreign Affairs, Heiko Maas, ventured into the night-time stir of Delhi’s old town Chandni Chowk with Amby; the then German Federal Minister of Economic Cooperation and Development, Gerd Müller, asked me to pick him and his wife (Gertie) up from the airport in Amby.

And me? Amby was much more to me than just a loveable oldie. She was a reminder of the India of my youth, a symbol of permanence despite enormous changes, a counterpoint to the fast pace of a life driven by high technology and automation, and, above all, a piece of the Indian soul. And the Indians felt it: This was not a PR stunt, it was real. Aunty Amby was often the initiator of conversations, opening hearts, creating closeness and symbolizing the desire of wanting to understand the other.

Amby earned Germany a lot of sympathy from India – especially during the difficult times of Covid-19, when people longed for positivity. She will always remain a part of the Indo-German family, whether she is amidst the wild traffic on Delhi's streets or relaxing in the parking lot of the German embassy.