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‘Happy in Holland’: The Hindostani Elders in The Netherlands

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It is often assumed that elders from a non-western background are vulnerable and face many problems in western countries. Contrarily, the Hindostanis in The Netherlands, who migrated from Surinam and have an Indian ethnic identity, appears to be not so vulnerable. A survey of 300 Hindostani elders in 2008 revealed that most of them are satisfied with their lives in The Netherlands, and only a small number intends to return to Surinam. This paper explores their life and times in The Netherlands.

[Keywords: gerontology; Hindostanis; Indian diaspora;
The Netherlands; wellbeing]

You are asking if I am happy. Well, I am very happy in Holland. But I must remark that your behaviour also determines your happiness.

– A Hindostani man, born 1928 in Surinam

In western European countries the population is ageing. This greying population encounters some socio-economic, health, physiological, and psychological problems. Although some western European countries like The Netherlands are welfare states, elders face some problems like loneliness. A small proportion of the population of these western European countries belongs to ethnic minorities or migrants. They have some specific problems with their integration in these countries. Among the migrant population there is also the trend towards ageing. It is assumed that the migrant elders or elders from non-western background are facing and will face certain problems and that they are more vulnerable (Patel 2003).¹ All the same, little research has been done on

migrant elders, and their cultural needs and life trajectories. The few reports give a picture of vulnerability of migrant elders in the western European countries. Many seem to be unhappy and many feel sick or even homesick (*ibid.*; Schellingerhout 2004; AMEE Projects 2008; COE 2008; Forum Magazine 2008).

A comprehensive study done by the Social and Cultural Planning Office (Sociaal Cultureel Planbureau) in The Netherlands (see Schellingerhout 2004) found the group of vulnerable elders among the Surinamese group to be large. This Office further observed that these vulnerable Surinamese elders cannot take care of themselves because there are more single elders in this community than in other minority communities. But it must be taken into account that the Surinamese community in The Netherlands is an ethnically diverse community. The two largest groups in The Netherlands among the Surinamese are the Hindostanis and the Creoles (persons with a Black African background). More than 2 per cent (about 350,000) of the total population in The Netherlands has Surinamese background. Approximately 45 per cent of this Surinamese community are Hindostanis (Choenni 2011: 18). There are distinct (cultural) differences between them and the Creoles. Creoles are descendants of the black slaves from Surinam, who were set free in 1863, and Hindostanis are the descendants of indentured Indian labourers of Surinam.² Furthermore, Surinamese elders are heterogeneous, constituting different migrant life trajectories. Unfortunately the Social and Cultural Planning Office did not differentiate between these two large groups in their research.³ The Hindostanis are a distinct minority group in The Netherlands, and the Hindostani elders constitute a special category of elders. My interest is in the Hindostanis, and this paper focuses on the elderly Hindostanis who migrated to The Netherlands from Surinam and who have a strong ethnic Indian identity. They are 'twice migrants'. Their great-grandparents/grandparents/parents migrated from (British) India to Surinam and they migrated from Surinam to The Netherlands.

The Hindostanis in The Netherlands

The Hindostanis are the descendants of indentured labourers who emigrated from British India to Surinam between 1873 and 1916. After their indenture, most Indians became small farmers and settled down in Surinam. Over the years, their number increased through a high birth rate and they became the largest ethnic community in the country. After World War II, the upward socio-economic mobility of Hindostanis accelerated: they penetrated different spheres of economic life, and

became an affluent group rivalling the dominant Creole group. This caused political polarisation between the two groups. The dominant Creole party, Nationale Partij Suriname (National Party of Surinam), gaining political power in 1973, announced that Surinam will become an independent state in 1975. Fearing Creole dominance and marginalisation after independence, a large number of the Hindostanis fled from Surinam to The Netherlands and settled in different parts of that country, but with a concentration in the capital, The Hague.

During the two years preceding the independence of Surinam (on 25 November 1975), the Kingdom of The Netherlands had to deal with a mass immigration of the Hindostanis. After over 35 years, in 2011, these Hindostanis and their descendants numbering 160,000 formed 1 per cent of the Dutch population of more than 16 million (*ibid.*). The emigration from Surinam to The Netherlands in the 1970s consisted of families and singles, but not many elders. But, in 2008, the elders within the Hindostani community constituted a substantial group of 10,000 persons. The Hindostani community in The Netherlands, as in Surinam, consists of different religious groups: the overwhelming majority (almost 80 per cent) are Hindus; while 18 per cent are Muslims, the remaining are Christians. The Hindus among the Hindostanis are divided into two main groups: the larger group is the orthodox group known as the Sanatan Dharma, and the smaller group, which is more reformist in orientation, is known as the Arya Samaj. Among the older generation, the differences and rivalries between these two groups are still stressed. But most of the younger generation are either not aware of the differences between the two groups or do not care about it (Choenni 2000). All the same, while integrating structurally in the receiving society, they have retained and cherished their culture and cultural heritage (Clarke, Peach and Vertovec 1990; Choenni and Adhin 2003; Choenni 2011; High Level Commission 2001).

Almost all the 10,000 Hindostani elders (in 2008) who reside in The Netherlands were born in Surinam. These elders belong to the first generation and, on an average, most of them have lived approximately thirty years of their lives in The Netherlands. The majority of them immigrated to The Netherlands prior to the independence of Surinam in 1975. A majority of the Hindostani elderly are women: the sex ratio is three women to two men. More than half of these elders are single and almost half are widowed. As many men were older than the women when they married, the percentage of Hindostani widows is higher than of Hindostani widowers.

The Survey

The main research question in the survey, on whose findings this paper is based, focused on the integration of Hindostani elders into the Dutch society. A differentiation was made between the *structural* and *cultural* dimensions of integration. Thus, two key research questions were:

- i. How do Hindostani elders participate and perform in the Dutch society [the structural dimension]?
- ii. What is their opinion about the services, the dominant values and norms in relation to their religious orientation and culture and their wellbeing in the Dutch society [the cultural dimension]?

For the purpose of the survey, the elders were defined as persons above 60 years of age, and four characteristics were used as a reference to select the respondents, namely, age group, gender, religious affiliation, and regional concentration. Since Hindostanis are not registered as a separate ethnic group, but as Surinamese, in the records of the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS), we had to use the method of quota sampling based on these four characteristics. The Hindostani interviewers used snowball method to recruit the respondents. We interviewed the respondents who were living independently as well as those living in the Hindostani housing facilities/centres. Of the 309 respondents interviewed with the help of a semi-structured interview schedule, we could use data from 291 interviews. The questionnaire consisted of closed questions and statements, and some partly open or open questions. Twelve Hindostani interviewers were recruited and trained for conducting these interviews.

Comparing the profile of the respondents with that of the relevant population (based on data of Central Bureau of Statistics of The Netherlands (CBS 2008) we find no difference in the proportion between men and women. In 2008, among Surinamese elders, the proportion of men and women was 43 per cent and 57 per cent respectively. In the respondent group, the respective percentages were 44 per cent and 56 per cent (see Table 1). However, as regards age, we see that the age- group 60–64 is underrepresented and the age-group 65–69 is overrepresented among the respondents. The interviewers had focussed their efforts on the age-group above 65 as they considered it more difficult to contact this group of elders.

Religious affiliation was another characteristic used for selecting the respondents. We have strived to interview sufficient number of Muslims (N = 63) among the Hindostanis, because there are important differences

between the Hindostani Hindus and the Hindostani Muslims. As regards regional concentration, we have respondents from all the relevant parts of The Netherlands, except from the south. Since we recruited the respondents through snowball sampling, some chance of selectivity remains. Also we have not interviewed the most problematic Hindostani elders and those who were in poor state of health. These are elders who are (staying as) patients in hospitals and in nursing-homes. Despite these limitations, the results of this survey can be generalised for the majority of the Hindostani elders.

Table 1: Age-group and gender of the respondents

Age Group (in years)	Men	Women	Total
60-64	20 (37.04) 15.6	34 (62.96) 20.9	54 18.6
65-69	54 (42.19) 42.2	74 (57.81) 45.4	128 44.0
70-79	37 (46.84) 28.9	42 (53.16) 25.8	(79) 27.1
80 and above	17 (56.67) 13.3	13 (43.33) 08.0	(30) 10.3
Total	128 (43.99)	163 (56.01)	291

Note: Figures in parentheses refer to row-wise percentage.

Additionally, we conducted twenty in-depth interviews with the respondents, and ten interviews with key informants like directors of housing centres, well-known volunteers helping elders, and the community leaders. We had three focus group sessions with Hindostani elders in different parts of The Netherlands to collect additional (qualitative) information. Furthermore, we have done participant observation in the central hall of the housing centres for Hindostani elders, and during festivals, celebrations and other events when the Hindostani elders come together. The data from the combination of research methods (triangulation), we hope, adequately reflects the life and times of Hindostani elders in The Netherlands.

Data was collected about income, employment history, level of education, housing, (family) networks, and leisure-time activities of the sample of respondents. We have also gathered information about their opinions concerning the health and social services, the Hindostani community, and their wellbeing in The Netherlands. Furthermore, their opinions about the Dutch and other ethnic minorities and contacts in The Netherlands and their relationships with Surinam were elicited.

The Findings

Ethnic Housing Centres

The elders in The Netherlands can financially afford to live independently⁴ and our research has shown that almost all Hindostani elders are leading independent lives and have their own household, or they live in ethnic housing projects, or elderly care centres. Only a small percentage (3.5 per cent) lives with their grandchildren/children. This is remarkable considering that, twenty-five years ago, it was considered shameful if children would not live with elderly parents and take care for them. Some respondents had even stated then *'they would never house their parents in elderly housings, because this was a jail for elders'* (Choenni 1983: 39). It has come to be gradually accepted in the Hindostani community that children do not share accommodation with their elderly parents. The Hindostani elders have also grown accustomed to professional care. Thus, it is no longer considered shameful if children cannot take care of their parents.

The ethnic housing centres for elders were built after lobbying with the local governments, so that financial support could be received from the government. When, in the 1980s and 1990s, some reports were released about the ethnic elders and their housing needs, the Hindostani community established, in collaboration with the local government and organisations, ethnic housing projects. The Hindostani organisations took care of their elders at the community level and built a cultural infrastructure. A very active national organisation (Nederlandse Hindoe Ouderen Bond [Netherlands Hindu Elders Union]) organises cultural activities and disseminates relevant information in co-operation with various branches at the regional level. The ethnic housing facilities and day-care centres offer various ethnic services. One fifth (19.8 per cent) of Hindostani elders live in these facilities and spend their old days in their own cultural setting. Most are content in those housing centres because their food, cultural, and religious needs are met there.

Contentedness

The majority of Hindostani elders who live independently are content with their housing situation, as they are leading a life that is comfortable yet private. As compared to twenty-five years ago, the elderly now have access to good housing with central heating facility. They own mobile phones and, whose costs being minimal, they are in easy contact with their family and friends. These material comforts and wellbeing have

rendered them contented with their lives. We must also emphasise that, within the Hindostani community, financial independence and material wealth are highly valued.

The Hindostani elders, many of whom have lived sober and worked hard in Surinam, have still kept this lifestyle. Most of them had worked in low-skilled jobs because they were less educated – 17 per cent had no education and 50 per cent had education up to primary level only. The fact that the majority of Hindostani women (75 per cent) were not well educated did not hinder their integration into the Dutch society. Most of them have educated themselves gradually (learning to read and write) and mastered the Dutch language as spoken in The Netherlands, as most of them have had jobs which brought them in contact with the Dutch-speaking people. They are aware of the norms and conventions of the Dutch society and know the Dutch culture quite well. Besides, Surinam was a Dutch colony and they could already communicate in the Dutch language in Surinam.

Happiness

We asked the sample of Hindostani elders to rank their life in The Netherlands on a ten-point scale ranging from 1 (very bad) to 10 (excellent). On an average, they gave a score of 7.4 (sd = 1.13); only a very small minority (10 out of 237 respondents) gave a score ranging from 3 to 5 (average 4.7 and sd = 0.75). They are thus happy in Holland as compared to their life in The Netherlands in the past and the situation of their peers in Surinam now. Most Hindostani elders do not have a high pension because they were engaged in low-skilled jobs or had been unemployed. Although the income of the majority of Hindostani elders is low (consisting of a state pension [Algemene Ouderdoms Wet] and a pension based on the years they have worked), most do not complain, as they compare this with the income they had in Surinam. A professional working with Hindostani Elders put it this way:

That most Hindostani elders are content with their (pension) income is logical. In Surinam, they would get only 125 Surinamese dollars a month. That is far more than ten times less than what they get in The Netherlands. They know that too, because they have contact with family in Surinam and many of them have visited Surinam several times.

After a stressful migration, many of the elders look back with satisfaction on their life in The Netherlands. Most of them are content with the performance of their children. They need not raise children

anymore and, therefore, feel unstressed. Also, they do not have large financial expenditures. Besides, many of them have also saved money, particularly in women's jewellery, and this works as a safety net in their old age should they be in need of money. Only a small group of highly educated men are not content, because they are critical, assertive, and feel discriminated by the Dutch people. They have experienced a decline in their status as men and as husbands in the Dutch society compared to the dominant position men still enjoy in Surinam.

Services

The majority of the Hindostani elders are content with the health and extended care services, although one fifth are not. The feeling of contentedness is related to their opinion that they can rely on these services when needed. Most Hindostani elders often consult professional services. Only about one-fourth of the Hindostani elders (28 per cent) agree with the statement that the professionals cannot help as one's children do. Some diseases like diabetes and cardio vascular complications are more frequently reported among the Hindostani elders than among other elderly groups. Although there are some projects to change their lifestyle, still one-in-four often feels ill. This feeling is significantly more among women than men and among the low-educated ones. But the health situation of the elders is better than what it was twenty-five years ago because of their improved lifestyle, regular physical exercise, and consumption of healthy food. More than half of the Hindostani elders agree that they must have more physical exercise, as many of them watch the Indian TV or films almost the whole day thus missing out on sufficient exercise.

One-fifth (20 per cent) of the Hindostani elderly men are addicted to alcohol and belong to the risk group. Furthermore, a small proportion of Hindostani elders say that they are tired now, they are old and do not want be active in their life, because they need rest. The remark *'Hamar zindagi ghail'* ('I have lived my life'), was often heard from the respondents belonging to the 'weary' group.

It is comprehensible that the majority of Hindostani elders are content with the services of care and health. This is because the services have become gradually more culturally sensitive to their needs. And also the cultural competence of the personnel and volunteers has improved. Still more than half of the Hindostani elders prefer Hindostani professionals and volunteers. At the same time, about one in four (28 per cent) state that they still rely on their grandchildren/ children.

Overall, we can conclude that the Hindostani elders are more or less successfully integrated in the structural sense in The Netherlands. But, what about their cultural integration?

Ethnic Identity

The majority of Hindostani elders have also integrated culturally quite well in the sense that they speak the Dutch language and have gradually internalised Dutch values and norms. They also cherish their privacy. But, at the same time, they stick to their ethnic community and, for most Hindostani elders, their ethnic identity is important. They have retained the 'Indian' culture. Particularly, the availability of Bollywood films, soaps (TV serials), and music DVDs and CDs fill their leisure time. It means watching Indian satellite television and films on DVDs and listening to Indian and Hindostani songs on (inexpensive) CDs. They regularly visit each other or their families to watch television programmes or films. Women do this more often than men. They inform each other and discuss the content and the themes, and they perceive this as a form of meaningful and relevant entertainment for them in their retired life. This has to be put also in a historical perspective. When these elders were in their teens or twenties in Surinam the price of a ticket to watch an Indian film in a cinema hall was quite high. Furthermore, they often did not have enough time to watch these films. But now they can fully enjoy watching all the old films they dreamed of at rock-bottom prices. Thus, the modern media based on Information Communication Technology have changed the conditions for their entertainment. The more active Hindostani elders participate in activities of the Hindostani community or do voluntary work for other elders.

Less Loneliness

Loneliness is one of the main problems among elders and also an indicator for assessing their wellbeing. To measure the feeling of loneliness among Hindostani elders we used the validated De Jong-Gierveld Loneliness Scale that consists of 11 statements (De Jong-Gierveld and Van Tilburg 1999). From the pre-test it turned out that the statement 'I miss people around me' was considered by both Hindostani elders and experts as sensitive and complicated to explain. Given the large and intense family relations among most Hindostanis, it is understandable that this statement generated an adverse reaction. They asked why we want to know if they miss people around them. Some respondents felt accused and reacted: '*Why you are asking this to me?*' Others thought

that this statement was quite the same as the statements 'I miss having a really close friend.' Therefore, in the definitive questionnaire, we deleted the statement. Although our scale consists of 10 statements and is not exactly the same as the De Jong-Gierveld Scale of 11 statements, we are sure, it measures adequately the feeling of loneliness among the Hindostani elders.

Table 2: Score on Loneliness Perception Scale

	Statement	Men	Women	Total
1	There is always someone I can talk to about my day-to-day problems	66.7	70.6	68.9
2	I miss having a really close friend	26.6	34.0	30.8
3	I experience a general sense of emptiness	19.8	24.1	22.3
4	There are plenty of people I can lean on when I have problems	60.5	74.2	68.3
5	I miss the pleasure of the company of others	20.2	21.1	21.3
6	I find my circle of friends and acquaintances too limited	16.3	25.3	21.4
7	There are many people I can trust completely	44.3	42.6	43.3
8	I often feel that I am rejected	9.2	24.7	18.1
9	I can call on my friends whenever I need them	56.9	60.7	59.1
10	There are enough people I feel close to	65.6	69.6	67.8

Note: Figures in columns refer to the percentage of respondents in agreement with the statement.

Cronbach's alpha = 0, 81; N = 123 men and 163 women

From the analysis of the scores on the loneliness scale it turns out that the vast majority of Hindostani elders do not feel lonely. Less than one in five Hindostani elders said that they feel lonely.⁵ Among the Dutch elders, those feeling lonely is one in three (GGD 2006). Interestingly, contrary to expectations, single Hindostani elders do not feel lonely more than those with a partner. This finding does not match with the finding of the Social and Cultural Planning Office study (Schellingerhout 2004) that Surinamese elders are more lonely and vulnerable because there are more single persons among them. Perhaps single Hindostani women enjoy greater freedom and independence, and therefore they do not feel lonely. They do not have a husband (anymore) who can impose restrictions on their behaviour and ambitions. And many are satisfied with their Bollywood entertainment.⁶ As Pabitri, a 74-year Hindustani widow said:

I do not feel lonely and bored. I have everything around me. My children and other grandchildren visit me often. They call me very often. I can talk for hours with them. I am a family person and do not have a lot of friends and acquaintances. I have little contact with white people. They are jealous and they prefer their own people. If you choose for an underdog position than you are accepted; if not you will face problems with the Dutch people. They cannot bear it when you are more affluent. For example if you have a bigger car. While they do not know that you are working harder to pay. As I said I am satisfied with my family and my Indian movies. I love to watch Zee TV the Indian movies and to listen to the Indian songs. I can spend the whole day watching Indian films and listening to Indian songs. I do not long for Surinam, because I am happy here. We can get everything in Holland such as tropical vegetable, tropical fruit and spices.

There are two significant differences between men and women. More women than men ($p = 0.044$) say they can count on people around them in case of problems. Some Hindostani single men do not have social networks or have quarrels with their family members. More women than men say that they often feel rejected ($p = 0.003$). This is probably related to comments of significant others towards the liberal behaviour of the Hindostani single women.

In the Hindostani community, family relationships are very important. More men (61.3 per cent) than women (49.1 per cent) agreed with the statement 'If you do not have contact with your family members in The Netherlands you do not need to feel lonely' ($p = 0.013$). From the analysis of open-ended questions it turned out that a small group of Hindostani men feels lonely because they have lesser contact and their status has decreased in The Netherlands. Most are widowers. They rely on professional help and, mostly, not on their family. For example, some of them find it beneath their dignity to call their children when they are in need. They feel that their children have the obligation to call on them. This is obvious because generally widowers experience more loneliness (Dykstra and Fokkema 2007: 6).

Extended Ethnic Network

Most Hindostani elders have an extended ethnic network to which they are strongly oriented. This is particularly so with reference to their family and the circle of acquaintances. The low-cost mobile-phone communication facilitates maintenance of contacts and prevents loneliness. Thus, it is understandable that, with the extended networks and active participation in organisations and activities of day-care centres and the

cultural infrastructure, the majority Hindostani elders, do not feel lonely. Besides, more than one-third of the Hindostani elders have more than three children. Many have grandchildren. Thus, they have an extended family network. The grandchildren/children often keep daily contact with them about their whereabouts and wellbeing. Contact with the grandchildren, in particular, is mostly through the mobile phone. Although the extended family among the Hindostanis is weakening, new relations with Hindostani friends and acquaintances have developed in cities and regions where they are residing.

In brief, it can be suggested that the Hindostani elders in The Netherlands combine the best of both worlds. On the one hand, they have kept the vertical relations across generations with their family and, in particular, with their grandchildren, based on the Indian traditions. On the other hand, they have developed horizontal relations with their peers, friends, and acquaintances, especially other Hindostani elders.⁷

Remigration

Although there is a strong attachment to the Bollywood cinema and a growing orientation towards India, only a small number of the Hindostani elders prefer India over Surinam as a country for spending their holidays. Most of them have been on vacation in India, but are disappointed over poverty, dirt, glaring inequalities, and caste discrimination there. Some of them have been even cheated in India and their bad experience is conveyed to their friends and acquaintances. While the majority of Hindostani elders often recall and reflect on their life in the country of their birth (Surinam), only a minority of them think of remigration. Most of them say they will not re-emigrate to Surinam because the care and health facilities there are not as good as in The Netherlands. In fact, between 2002 and 2006, less than 1 per cent of Surinamese elders re-emigrated to Surinam. Although they could retain their Dutch state pension in Surinam, as they are Dutch nationals, the overwhelming majority say they will stay in The Netherlands. The social and medical services and their pensions are highly valued by them. The Netherlands is perceived as their 'fatherland'.

Furthermore, keeping contacts with families and friends has become easy through mobile phones, Skype, and the low-cost telephone calls. Also, ethnic news about Surinam, including those of birth, marriage, and death of Hindostanis there, is broadcast on the Hindostani radio. Thus, the need for visiting Surinam frequently is no more pressing.

Less Homesickness

Although most Hindostani elders feel a strong connection with Surinam as their motherland, only a minority (22 per cent) feel homesick. Those who are homesick have more homesickness towards their past; they especially value the solidarity, unity, and friendly relations among the different ethnic groups in Surinam in the context of the strained relations between ethnic groups in The Netherlands. These elders, however, know that Surinam is also changing. Obviously, the majority of Hindostani elders will not return to Surinam. A highly educated 84-year old Hindostani man said,

I have been often on vacation in Surinam, but I will not return back definitively. The country is run by people who do not have a vision about the future. In The Netherlands, I want to live in a home for elderly based on Hindu basis, if necessary. But it must be clean and you must have people to communicate with. We must respect the Indian identity. India has a high and old culture. We must keep the Hindostani culture and the language.

Religion and Modernity

Religion and (religious-)cultural traditions are very important in the life of the majority of Hindostani elders. Almost all of them are religious and more than half (55.3 per cent) say that, compared to the past, they are more actively practising their religion. However, a large minority the Hindostani elders (40.0 per cent) are less active in practising religion, that is, they do not pray daily, visit *mandir* (Hindu temple) or mosque more than once weekly, and/or read religious books. The majority is content with the religious activities, services, and buildings like *mandirs* and mosques. But they regret that the Hindostani language (Sarnami) is losing ground, particularly among the younger generations.

Although religious minded, the majority of Hindostani elders have modern opinions. Only a minority (29.5 per cent) regrets when a Hindostani marries someone from another ethnic background. Only a quarter (25.6 per cent) agrees with the statement that 'Parents are the most competent persons to decide who the best suitable partner for their son or daughter.' Very few elders (3.2 per cent) agree with the statement that 'Education is more important for boys than for girls.' Only a quarter (27.5 per cent) agrees with the statement that 'Women must stop with job (career) when they have children.' Nevertheless, some traditional Hindostani values like not living together before marriage is still

important. Only one-third (36.1 per cent) agreed with the statement that 'Men and women can live together without marrying.' And, only about one-fifth (19.7 per cent) do not regard homosexuality as a problem.

There is among Hindostani elders a group that is modern and a group that is retaining some traditional values; one-half of Hindostani elders agrees with some modern trends, while the other half has more traditional opinions. For example, almost half of Hindostani elders agreed with the statement 'Hindostani youngsters must raise their children in the same way their parent did it.' Also almost half agreed with the statement 'Older family members must have more influence on important decisions than younger family members.' But only less than one-fifth (17.3 per cent) agreed with the statement that 'The Hindostani parents can decide which study is the best for their son or daughter.' And one-third (35.3 per cent) agreed with the statement that 'Children have to take care for elders.' These results indicate that among Hindostanis there is diversity and that some change in values is discernible.

Hindostani Single Women

Although the transition from traditional to more modern opinions about gender relations has been gradual, the impact of gender relations among the Dutch and the women's liberation and feminist movements have accelerated the pace of change among the Hindostani elders. Hindostani men rationalise this by saying, 'After all *The Netherlands is a country governed by a queen and a country where women have equal rights – "Maharani ke raj he"*' [After all, the queen is the boss here].

Moreover, the history of migration from India to Surinam had already created the conditions for women's emancipation, as there was a shortage of women migrants, the proportion was approximately only two women for every five men. Thus, Hindostani women could claim a more equal footing with men and some freedom and autonomy. As Sarnamilal, a 79-year-old Hindostani elder elucidated:

My nani [maternal grandmother] had two husbands. The two men had a lot of respect for her. I never saw them quibbling or a sign of jealousy. Sometime two brothers shared one wife. In those days women were respected very much. The women were independent. They sang together and even danced in public. I saw seldom oppression of these women. At least, among the older generation. When [the] sex balance gradually became more even and the parents could afford keeping their daughters inside the house and they need not work on the land anymore. Then the freedom of women was curtailed. But when the emigration to The

Netherlands started Hindostani women in Surinam were again already liberating themselves from male oppression.

In The Netherlands, most Hindostani women took the opportunities that came on their way to liberate themselves and find their way into the Dutch society. For example, it is quite easy to have a divorce legally and a number of Hindostani women divorced their husbands in The Netherlands. It was also rather easy to earn your income (at least, if you accept some job, for example working as a cleaner) or get social security (income) from the government as a single women. Half of Hindostani elderly women are widowed and a small minority is divorced. Most of these women cherish their acquired autonomy and freedom. They do not prefer a male partner anymore because they feel they would lose their freedom. These women have at last got the opportunity to enjoy life. Most of them do not want to take care of a new husband. As Dropati, a 75-year-old divorced woman put it, they do not want a man *'who will only sit on the sofa [settee] and will be the boss of the remote control [of the television] and you also have to feed him.'*

The single Hindostani women have often contact with other Hindostani women and some have white male partners. Because they have the competence to take care of themselves and most have also acquired the competence to deal with (bureaucratic) Dutch services, they do not face many problems. Thus, the single Hindostani women can better take care of their life than single Hindostani men.

Hindostani Single Men

A small group of men, particularly from the middle-class background, is less competent to take care of their own life. They often cannot cook or clean and do other household-keeping tasks properly. Furthermore, the disappearance of patriarchal norms and the modern mores make it hard for them to communicate with women and youngsters. Their status has declined and they are from a generation which only gave orders to their family members. Now they have to negotiate and communicate on an equal footing. Some perceive themselves as losers or, at least, not so successful in life. Some have been divorced. Often they hesitate to ask for help. They find it difficult to call their children and ask for help. An elderly social worker said,

Some Hindostani elderly man has many problems. Not the elderly women. They have not learned to communicate on the same level with the women and persons younger than them. Their notion of respect is that they must be

obeyed and that they give orders. But the time has changed. These men will not call for help. They feel themselves "too high" and consider it not appropriate with their dignity and status to ask for help from younger persons. They become lonely and cannot find a female Hindostani partner. Because the single Hindostani women cherish their freedom and do not want a boss but the real friend as husband.

Conclusion

The Hindostani community in The Netherlands has gradually experienced westernisation. It is now considered normal that elders do not live with their children or depend on them, while twenty-five years ago this was not the case. At least there was the expectation that Hindostani children should take care for their elders. Moreover, gradually, most Hindostani elders have also adapted to the Dutch lifestyle. For example, they respect the privacy of others and want others to respect their privacy. Most prefer professional help. They keep in touch and with their grandchildren/children or other family members through mobile phone and visit them only when necessary.

While they have adapted some western values, some Hindostani values are still very dominant. They are modest and use Indian wisdom for their life like the dictum '*Santokham Paramsukhum*' ('if you are satisfied with yourself, everything will be all right'). That the overwhelming majority of Hindostani elders is happy in Holland is not only related to this attitude, but also to the Dutch welfarestatism. The excellent Dutch medical service and social security system, and the state pension for every elder in The Netherlands guarantees their material wellbeing.⁸

In the Hindostani community material wellbeing is much valued. Elders get a basic income in the form of State pension. This income is higher than the average salary they got in their country of birth. They have visited Surinam and most compare their lives and their material wellbeing with their peers in there. They compare it also with their life in Surinam when they had to struggle and even then many of them did not have such a high income. Furthermore, the Hindostani community has developed ethnic housing centers with the help from local governments and a cultural infrastructure is responding to their ethnic needs. Gradually, specific ethnic social services have been arranged. Almost all ethnic products like spices, vegetables and fruits are available in The Netherlands and there is even Hindostani radio service.

Last, but not the least, the cultural heritage and the easy availability of Bollywood (Indian films, serials and songs) guarantees a happy retired

life. Also religious services are available in The Netherlands. They have retained an extensive network with family, friends, and acquaintances in The Netherlands and also in Surinam, with whom they can interact through the mobile phone and Skype. The Hindostani elders organisations and volunteers give a helping hand when needed. Most Hindostani elders feel at home in The Netherlands because of their flexibility to adapt and their cultural heritage. The triangle of The Netherlands, Surinam, and India for retaining their transnational cultural identity is important and perhaps will become more important through the advancing Information and Communication Technology.

Notes

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1. Since recently, in Western Europe, politicians and researchers have been concerned with migrant elders. One important initiative in this regard is the 'Active Ageing of Migrant Elders across Europe' (AAMEE) project initiated by the Ministry for Intergenerational Affairs, Family, Women and Integration of North Rhine-Westphalia (Germany). This project has identified areas for further research (housing, income, health, leisure activities, continuing education, social patterns of the first generation and civic and political participation) in the framework of the new born AAMEE European Research Network. I was present at the AAMEE Conference in October 2008 in Bonn (Germany) and presented a paper on Hindostani elders (see Choenni 2009).
2. Surinam is small country on the northeast coast of South America. It was a Dutch colony known also as Dutch Guyana and became independent in 1975.
3. In the official records in The Netherlands, the Surinamese groups are not differentiated. However, with the help of the Dutch Central Bureau of Statistics, I have been able to differentiate various Surinamese groups (see Choenni 2011).
4. The Netherlands has one of the best health and social services for elders in the world. Moreover, elders (above 65 years) get a state pension of almost € 1,000 per month, sometimes besides their own pension. Almost everybody can afford a house and can get a subsidy if they cannot pay rent. In 2011, The Netherlands ranked third among 186 countries, after Norway and Australia, on the Human Development Index in the Human Development Report of United Nations Human Development Programme. In another report, The Netherlands ranked fourth concerning happiness, after Denmark, Finland, and Norway (See *World Happiness Report*).
5. Given the three options (agree, disagree, and do not agree or disagree) and ten statements, the maximum score on the Loneliness Scale is 30 and the minimum score is 0. When the score is high, the loneliness feeling is low. We have assumed that the Hindostani elders who have a score of less than 20 belong to the 'loneliness group'. It turns out that of 18.8 per cent of them belong to this group.

6. In The Netherlands, the word 'Bollywood' is used as a *pars pro toto* for the Indian film and amusement industry (Choenni 2006).
7. An interesting finding in a study of ethnic minority elders in Great Britain is that Indian elders report a lower rate of loneliness than elders originating from China, Africa, the Caribbean, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. In America (New York) too, the rate of loneliness is lower among Indians than among Chinese and Japanese (see Victor *et al.* 2012).
8. The issue of planning appropriate elderly care for the oldest immigrant populations came only recently on the political agenda of many European countries. In The Netherlands, however, a policy for migrant elders was developed as early as in 1994 (see Ministerie van WVC 1994). The relevant services were made culturally sensitive and the staff inter-culturally competent. It was detected that a common European trait is the under-usage of services by migrant elders. A related problem is the lack of resources faced by the minority voluntary organisations which are able to provide only basic support, such as lunch clubs and day-care. In the UK the notion of double penalisation suffered by the ethnic minority organisations is prevalent. That means that migrant elders are persistently ignored by mainstream services, whereas their voluntary bodies have been also denied the core funding to develop culturally appropriate care to mainstream standards (Clegg 2005). Across the western European countries the important role of voluntary organisations acting as a bridge between mainstream institutions and service users as well as in enhancing cultural identity and social cohesion is recognised. Many of these organisations have been actually set up to overcome problems, give advice and information, and address lack of multicultural competence of staff in mainstream provision (Patel 2003).

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**Ethnicity and Politics:
Political Adaption of Hindostanis in Suriname**

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This article explores the relationship between ethnicity and politics in Suriname during the 20th century, particularly focusing on the political adaptation of the Hindostanis. It finds the primordialist approach to be meaningful in the analysis and description of the role of ethnicity in politics in relation to the Hindostanis in Suriname.

[Keywords: ethnicity; Hindostanis; Indian diaspora; politics; Suriname]

The relationship between ethnicity and politics is a highly contested theme. Even the origins and contents of ethnicity are contested. Simply stated, ethnicity is the sense of a common ethnic identity among a group of persons. Whether ethnicity is primordial or constructed in interaction with other groups creating ethnic boundaries is still debated (Barth 1969; Geertz 1971; Bulmer and Solomos 2011; Gowricharn 2013).

According to Clifford Geertz (1971), ethnic groups exist because of primordial sentiments that result from assumed primordial givens such as kinship, birth into a specific religious community, fluency in a specific language, or adherence to certain customs and manners. This approach, labelled *primordialism*, implies that these assumed givens (of social existence) are natural and have an ineffable and at times overpowering coerciveness in and of themselves.

The approach that denies the primacy of primordial givens is known as *constructivism* or *circumstantialism*. One special variation of constructivism in ethnicity studies is expressed in the proposition that ‘the ethnic boundary ... defines the group, not the cultural stuff that it encloses’ (Barth 1969: 15). The constructivist point of view on (ethnic) identity formation presupposes an imperative influence of environmental and time variables. In other words, people are adaptive and receptive to

their environment and by means of 'selfing' and 'othering', their ethnic identity is intrinsically related to other group identities (Appiah 1992). According to the constructivists, ethnic groups derive their identity from the interaction with other ethnic groups which also purport a constant evaluation and exchange of cultural values with other groups.

This article explores the relationship between ethnicity and politics in Suriname during the 20th century, particularly focusing on the political adaptation of the Hindostanis. It shows the primordialist approach to be meaningful in understanding the role of ethnicity in politics in relation to the Hindostanis.

Multi-ethnic Suriname

Suriname is the smallest country in South America, but belongs to the Caribbean region. Ethnically, its half million population is diverse; almost half of them reside in the capital city Paramaribo. While in the 19th century some 25,000 Asians (Chinese, Indians, and Javanese) entered the Dutch colony of Suriname primarily as indentured labourers; in the 20th century 40,000 more followed. Thus, Suriname changed from being an African-Caribbean society into a multi-ethnic society (Hoefte 2014: 17). In Suriname, the people of Indian origin are named Hindostanis, meaning descendants of migrants from Hindostan – one of the names for India. Furthermore, by the end of the 20th century, the Hindostanis became the single largest ethnic group. This ethnic demographic shift has had impact on their political adaptation and the relevance of ethnicity in relation to politics. In this paper, I will focus on the political and cultural developments in Suriname and particularly on the political adaptation of the Hindostani group during the 20th century.

In 1950, 1972, and 2004, the Creoles and the Hindostanis were the two largest groups. The descendants of the enslaved African people (Black Creoles – *Volkscreolen* in the Dutch language) and the persons of mixed origin (Coloured people, primarily Mulattos) were grouped together as the Creole group till 1972. But, in the census of 2003, this group was separately enumerated as (Black) Creoles and a mixed (ethnic) group.¹ The majority of the mixed group belongs to the so-called Coloured middle-class, which during the first half of the 20th century (the colonial era) held political power, often opposing the Dutch colonial government. In 1948, Suriname got autonomy, but the colonial rule ended only in 1954 when Suriname became an independent part of the Kingdom of The Netherlands. In 1975, Suriname became an independent country.

Table 1: Population of Suriname in 1950, 1972, and 2004

Ethnic group	1950	1972	2004
Creole	81,000 (37)	119,009 (31)	87,202 (18)
Hindostani	65,000 (30)	142,917 (38)	135,117 (27)
Javanese	38,000 (18)	57,688 (15)	71,879 (15)
Maroons	22,000 (10)	35,838 (9)	72,553 (15)
Other	11,400 (5)	24,155 (6)	31,975 (6)
Mixed			61,524 (12)
Not specified			32,579 (7)
Total	217,400	379,609	492,829

Source: Algemeen Bureau voor de Statistiek (General Bureau of Statistics) (1951, 1973, 2005).

The Hindostanis

The Hindostanis are the descendants of the 34,000 Indian indentured labourers who migrated from India with sixty-four ship transports (leaving from the port of Calcutta) during 1873–1916 and 3,000 Indian emigrants from the Caribbean, particularly British Guiana (now Guyana). Two-third of the indentured Indian labourers settled in Suriname; they and their descendants became an important ethnic group in the 20th century. From the beginning of the 20th century, their proportion rose from one-fifth of the Surinamese population to almost one-third in 1950. Due to a higher birth rate, gradually the Hindostanis became the largest group by 1970. But, afterwards their numbers declined, as well as those of the Creoles, because large numbers of Surinamese emigrated to The Netherlands, particularly in the years preceding the independence of Suriname in November 1975. On the eve of the 21st century, the Hindostanis remained the largest ethnic group.

The third large ethnic group are the Javanese, descendants of the indentured labourers from Java, the main island of Indonesia. The Javanese were surpassed in numbers in 2003 by another group of African ancestry, namely, the Maroons, who are the descendants of the runaway enslaved people. Like the Javanese and the Hindostanis, the Maroons have a strong sense of ethnic identity. In the category of ‘Others’ are the Chinese, the Amerindians, and the whites.

Inter-ethnic marriage and miscegenation among the Asian groups (Indian, Javanese, and Chinese), on the one hand, and between the Asian groups and the other groups, on the other, is not high. Thus, in 1999, among the Hindostani heads of households, 92 per cent had a partner of the same ethnic background; among the Creoles, 82 per cent; among the Javanese, 92 per cent; and among the Maroons, 95 per cent (De Bruijne and Schalkwijk 2005: 251). The mixed ethnic group constituted 62,000 or 12 per cent of the total population in 2003, and was primarily Mulatto (mix of white and black Creoles) in origin. The ethnic identity is weaker among the Creole group and the mixed group than among the Asian groups.

Relevance of Ethnicity

While in countries like Suriname, with a large Indian population, ethnicity was important in politics in the 20th century. On the eve of the 21st century, ethnicity was reinforced in the cultural domain, too. The rise of the diasporas and the impact of global diasporic culture, particularly on the Asian groups in Suriname, have reinforced ethnicity in the cultural domain. The idea of the Indian diaspora and the ‘digital penetration of Bollywood’ have given a boost to the ethnic identity of the Hindostani community.

Although some experts on Suriname (see Menke 2003) and Marxists (see Hira 1983) have expressed doubts about the importance of ethnicity in politics (they, instead, stress the socio-economic class), most scholars recognise the relevance of ethnicity.² Writing on Suriname, Bruijne de states:

Ethnicity is an important structuring factor in society. In politics it is a striking phenomenon that parties are organized mainly along ethnic lines. It seems that ethnicity plays a larger role in the stratification of Suriname’s society than social economic background. Although ethnic separation has never been propagated in Suriname, it is noticeable that even in an ethnically mixed city as Paramaribo, social contacts outside the school and the workplace are largely determined by ethnic background. Ethnic background, thus, determined the social network of every urban resident, yet this separation does not create much overt tension at present (2001: 380).

Recognising the relevance of ethnicity in the quotidian life of its citizens, Suriname has been labelled as a plural society. This concept has been useful to analyse this multi-ethnic society and the relationships between its ethnic groups (see M.G. Smith 1965; R.T. Smith 1971; Lijphart 1977; Dew 1978). However, it is important to stress that, in

multi-ethnic societies, where groups like the Indians/Hindostanis are a major constituent of the polity, ethnicity becomes more relevant because these groups have a strong sense of common ethnic identity, in particular among the Hindostanis because of their connection with their Indian cultural heritage. Other large groups with a lesser sense of ethnic identity – like the Creoles – have to respond to the ambitions of the Indians/Hindostanis – for example, in countries like Mauritius and Trinidad (see Eriksen 1992). Thus, ethnicity becomes more relevant in the interaction with other groups (Barth 1969).

To analyse the relationship between ethnicity and politics in Suriname the consociational model has been applied. Democratic stability is explained by the role played by the elites of the political parties representing the larger ethnic groups. They co-operate in coalition governments. But this model fails to explain the period of Creole dominance (1973–80) and to some extent the period of perceived rising of the Hindostani dominance (1969–73) in the period preceding the independence of Suriname (Lijphart 1977; Dew 1978, 1994; Van Lier 1978; Choenni 1982). Nevertheless, Suriname, unlike neighbouring Guyana, is an ethnically harmonious society and has not experienced race riots and racial killings.

Six Phases of Political Adaptation

As people originating from India, the Hindostanis have gradually become a community with a strong ethnic identity (see Choenni and Choenni 2012; Gowricharn 2013). Furthermore, their ethnic interests and retaining ethnic identity has been a main characteristic in their involvement in politics. Regarding the role of ethnicity and modes of the political adaptation of the Hindostanis in Suriname, we discern six historical phases in the 20th century. These consecutive phases are: (i) *ethnic marginality* (1900–20), (ii) *ethnic consciousness* (1921–49), (iii) *ethnic fraternity* (1950–68), (iv) *ethnic polarisation* (1969–79), (v) *depolitisation of ethnicity* (1980–87), and (vi) *ethnic power sharing* (1988–2000).

After describing these phases, I will focus on the relevance of ethnicity in the last phase in the cultural domain in reinforcing the ethnic identity and ethnic continuity. The ethnicity literature refers to three mutually reinforcing categories of primordial forces that account for ethnic group formation: (i) ethnic institutions, (ii) communal networks, and (iii) group identities. Ethnic institutions are familial structures, language, religion, recreation and social life, and behaviours that underlie group-specific values such as the pursuit of harmony or social progress.

These primordial forces have shaped the Hindostani community in Suriname.

Ethnic Marginality: 1900–2000

In the first phase, the Hindostanis were still a rather heterogeneous and less cohesive community. Although they shared an Indian background and most of them originated from the present-day north Indian states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, there were differences in caste, customs, and language. Most were single men and the shortage of women hindered community-building. Many still worked on the plantations, although a group had already settled in Suriname acquiring free land (mostly one hectare) and 100 guilders in lieu of their free return passage to India. Moreover, the Hindostani population was still fluid. While indentured labourers were arriving from India till 1916, some were also returning to India after the expiry of their five-year contract. Nevertheless, a process of homogenisation had started due to ‘the great amount of freedom allowed to Indians to maintain their own habits and customs.’ (Speckmann 1965: 37).

While Hindostanis were not represented in the Colonial Parliament, the Dutch administrators (the Governor, District Commissioners and the Agent General of Immigration) defended their interests and culture against assimilation pressure from the Coloured (Creole) middle-class. The colonial ideology was that the retention of the Indian culture was beneficial to their agrarian orientation and food production in Suriname. Furthermore, in Suriname, a British Consul was installed. He represented the interests of the indentured labourers because they were British subjects and he delivered yearly reports to the (British) Indian government. Hence, the Colonial Government and the British Consul became, to some extent, the protectors of the Hindostani group against the assimilationist pressures of the Coloured middleclass.

Furthermore, the powerful Coloured middle-class and the Creole population often despised the Hindostanis as ‘coolies’ and ‘interlopers’, and they also faced discrimination (De Klerk 1953; Speckmann 1965; Choenni and Choenni 2012). While the Hindostanis were not yet a cohesive group, they were perceived as one homogenous group by others. More neutrally, they were referred to as people from Calcutta (*Karkata soema*); they referred to themselves often as *Kalkatiyas* (people from Calcutta) or *Krantrakis* (people who came on [indentured] contract).

Partly as a reaction to their discrimination, the Hindostanis became more cohesive and developed an ethnic identity as Indians. Ethnic

institutions and cultural organisations developed, new relationships were forged among the Hindostanis, and religious holidays and cultural festivals were celebrated leading to greater cohesiveness and internal solidarity. A process of community building started, although the communal networks were hindered by bad infrastructure. There were few roads in the Hindostani districts and one had to travel by river (on boats) to the capital city Paramaribo; that took several days. Because their numbers were small, Hindu and Muslim solidarity and even inter-religious relationships and mixed marriages took place. Gradually, caste differences and languages differences faded resulting in the development of one ethnic language, namely, Sarnami (Hindostani).

The feelings of frustration and maltreatment led to uprisings. For example, when at Mariënborg – the largest sugar plantation – the (white) plantation director was killed by indentured labourers in 1902, sixteen protestors were shot dead by the military. Nevertheless, the opportunities in Suriname and the ethos (diligence and thrift) among the Hindostanis resulted in their successful settlement as small farmers. Furthermore, they could raise families because land was fertile and easily available. In this phase, some Hindostani organisations – like the Surinamese Immigrants Union, founded in 1910 and renamed in 1923 renamed as Bharat Oeday, meaning Rising India) – were established to promote the community interests.

In 1917, the indentured labour system was abolished. Interestingly, this was regretted in Suriname. A delegation of four (India born) leaders from Suriname went to India in 1920 to plead for re-opening the indentured labour and/or sending free emigrants, particularly women and families, to Suriname. They argued that the Indian immigrants had a better life in Suriname than in India. The delegation also met Mahatma Gandhi, but their efforts were in vain (De Klerk 1953: 179). After their infructuous visit to India, these leaders promoted permanent settlement among the Hindostanis in Suriname. The Surinamese Immigrants Union also decided to call the people of Indian origin as Hindostanis, instead of British Indians, and propagated to become Hindostani Surinamese citizens. Although the number of the Hindostani group had risen to almost one-quarter (26,096) of the total population (107, 354) in 1920, they were still considered ‘an exotic minority’ and located outside the mainstream society (Hoetink 1962). Hence, between 1900 and 1920, the Hindostanis in Suriname were a marginal ethnic group; but, during the second phase, their position would change.

Ethnic Consciousness: 1921–49

In the second phase, starting from 1921 till the halfway the 20th century, the Hindostanis evolved as a community with a strong ethnic identity. They became an ethnic group as defined by Max Weber:

Those human groups that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent because of similarities of physical type or of customs or both, or because of memories of colonization and migration; this belief must be important for group formation; conversely, it does not matter whether an objective blood relationship exists (1978: 389).

The majority of Hindostanis settled down as small farmers and the numbers returning to India decreased drastically. Also, the number of Hindostanis working under contract labour or as free labourers on the plantations declined. Most large plantations were abandoned and the Hindostani farmers took to food production. A stable ethnic community could now be formed. The proportion of Hindostani women rose; older Hindostani men married younger women. The Hindostani population grew rapidly and the extended families were involved in producing food and dairy products. The Hindostanis became producers and vendors, while the Creoles, particularly in Paramaribo, were buyers and consumers. Hence, the Hindostanis and the Creoles had no relationship of competition; their relationship was complementary in this phase.

Infrastructure improved, roads were built linking the Hindostani districts with Paramaribo, and the geographical isolation of the Hindostanis decreased. Hence, more communal networks developed, Hindostani radio and Indian films were introduced, and Hindostani culture flourished. In 1929–30, national religious organisations of Hindus and Muslims were formed. Hindostani organisations pleaded with people at large to abandon the use of derogatory label ‘coolie’; they aspired to be treated as Surinamese citizens. In 1927, Hindostanis born in Suriname (the second generation) were legalised as ‘Dutch subjects’. But, at the same time, the British Consul left Suriname, the Agent General for Immigration was discharged, and the Immigration Department was liquidated. The Hindostanis were hardly represented in the Colonial Parliament. Moreover, in the councils, unions, and social organisations, the Hindostanis were seldom represented and, if they participated in activities, they had to behave in accordance with ‘Creole norms’ (Hoeft 2014: 68, 85). Hence, their interests were badly represented. But, in 1933, Professor J.C. Kielstra was appointed as the Governor of Suriname (1933–44). He appointed some Asians (Hindostanis and Javanese) in the Colonial Parliament and, contrary to the wishes of the Coloured middle-

class, legalised, in 1940, the practice of Asian (Hindu and Muslim) marriages. The Coloured middle-class considered itself to be the 'real Surinamers' and promoted an assimilation policy. Professor Kielstra valued the Asian lifestyle and respected the Indian/Hindustani culture and stated that small-scale agrarian producers should be allowed to retain and follow their own cultural practices.

During and after the World War II, Suriname experienced economic growth, because 3,000 American troops were based there to protect the bauxite mining industry and bauxite was exported in huge quantities. When Suriname got autonomy in 1948 and general elections would be held in 1949, it was evident that ethnicity would be a dominant force in political mobilisation.

The Hindostanis established their own political party, the Verenigde Hindostaanse Partij (VHP; United Hindustani Party), which has remained a major political party of Suriname. Representing the Creoles and the Coloured middle-class was National Party Suriname (NPS). After much discussion, an electoral system was introduced based on the 'one man, one vote' system. With the 'winner takes it all' system, the constituencies were drawn in a manner to prevent the Asian ethnic groups from gaining political power. Furthermore, ten of the twenty-one parliamentary seats were for the then 'Creole' constituency of Paramaribo. Some small 'Creole' constituencies in countryside were overrepresented (in seats), while the constituencies with Asian ethnic groups were underrepresented compared to their demographic strength. Needless to say, it was presumed that voters would vote along ethnic lines. This proved correct and ethnic voting, to a large extent, is still the norm in Suriname.³

Between 1921 and 1949, the Hindostanis used every opportunity for creating their own cultural space and developed a strong sense of ethnic identity. They could rely on their cultural heritage and linkage with India, their spiritual homeland. R. Gowricharn (2013: 396) concludes that, among the Indians of Suriname 'ethnogenesis' developed and this was predominantly primordial in nature. And J.D. Speckmann states: 'we designate this important period in the history of the Indians in Surinam by the term cultural renaissance' (1965: 50). In this phase, ethnic consciousness was strengthened. Halfway the 20th century, demographically and economically, the Hindostanis were a viable ethnic group in Suriname, but they still lacked political power. In next phase, they would become a mature political group.

Ethnic Fraternity: 1950–68

There was a split in NPS between the (Black) Creoles and the Coloured middle-class. The charismatic (Black) Creole leader, J. Pengel became the leader of NPS and the Coloured middle-class formed an independent party. Pengel and the dominant Hindostani leader of VHP, J. Lachmon designed an ethnic fraternity (*verbroederings*) approach. It meant that the two largest ethnic groups would co-operate politically and respected each other's culture. But, in the elections of 1955, Pengel was not even elected as a parliamentarian, because the party coalition representing primarily the Coloured middle-class won the election by a narrow margin in Paramaribo. Through a by-election, Lachmon offered Pengel a seat in the Surinamese Parliament. Pengel had to stand against an Indian candidate in a predominantly Indian constituency; he was promoted as our Creole brother and was elected.

In 1958, NPS and VHP won the elections. The growth of the Hindostani population, their urbanisation, and the growing co-operation with the (Black) Creoles was perceived as a significant political phenomenon.⁴ The leader of the Coloured middle-class, D. Findlay, explicitly appealed to Black Creole voters with the slogan: 'Do you want to be governed by the VHP? Do you want mass-immigration from a certain eastern country?' (Azimullah 1986: 121). His party coalition also referred to the growing influence of the Hindostanis in the commercial sector. But all this failed to appeal to the mass of the Black Creoles, and his party coalition lost the election and the political power.

However, ethnicity and the perceived 'Asian' threat were introduced into the political arena. An ethnic fraternity government (NPS and VHP) was formed. The assimilationist policy promoted by the Coloured middle-class was abandoned and ethnic-fraternity politics – meaning political co-operation and solidarity between the two large ethnic groups to prevent ethnic strife – was a success. It also meant that the ethnic groups could retain their culture and ethnic identity, and the ethnic diversity of Suriname was celebrated.

The ethnic fraternity politics led to a fruitful co-operation between NPS and VHP. The NPS–VHP coalition again won the elections in 1963 and formed the government. Pengel became the Prime Minister, while Lachmon became the Chairman of Parliament, a highly influential political position in Suriname. During this period the booming bauxite industry led to economic prosperity. While neighbouring Guyana experienced ethnic polarisation and race riots, Suriname had peaceful ethnic relations during this period. In 1963, the centennial anniversary of abolition of slavery was celebrated extensively. It was considered as a

demonstration of the power of Black Creoles on the national level and in the government.

Ethnicity was also important in the distribution of government jobs, in financing projects, and the award of scholarships. Sometimes it was openly acknowledged with reference to ethnic representation and proportionality; sometimes it was disguised. For example, if a Minister did not prefer the development of the agricultural sector but advocated the mining sector or vice versa, the choice was attributed to the ethnic group dominant in the chosen sector. Which ethnic group will benefit most was often the political compass. 'Accommodating' your own ethnic group was the (informal) aim of the ethnic parties. Ethnic political parties often openly 'accommodated' their own ethnic group and claimed specific ministries/departments.

While the various ethnic groups built their ethnic institutions in 'this golden decade of Surinamese politics', among both the large ethnic groups small sections became radicalised. The process of Black consciousness had started in 1959. The Black Creole movement *Wie Eegi Sani* (our own thing) was nationalistic and defined a Surinamer as a Creole person, alienating the Hindostanis and the Javanese. As a reaction to the ethnic nationalist ideology of the Creole nationalist movement, the Hindostanis put forward the ideology of *Aneekta me eekta na ek vesta* (unity in diversity, not uniformity). Radicals among the Hindostanis founded an 'Action group' within VHP. Lachmon was, in their eyes, too moderate and too indulgent towards the Creoles. They stated, for example, that he accepted those national symbols like the national anthem in the Creole language (*Sranan tongo*) and a picture of a Creole woman on a banknote, while hardly any Hindostani symbol was accepted as a national symbol. Later, this action group broke away from VHP and became a separate political party.

The Black radicals founded their own party, namely, Party for Nationalistic Republic (PNR). Through activities of PNR, under the leadership of the Black Nationalist E. Bruma, the moderate leader Pengel was pressurised to advance the demand for the independence of Suriname. The Asian ethnic groups were against independence, as they feared Creole dominance after independence. They thought that being an integrating part of the Royal Kingdom of The Netherlands was a guarantee for protecting their culture and ethnic interests. The the Creole movement *Wie Eegi Sani* and PNR had the image of being anti-Hindostani and striving for cultural assimilation.

In the 1960s, Lachmon was in a position to opt for repealing the electoral system and introduce a more fair system. The electoral system

of 1948 was designed to prevent the Asian groups achieving political power. In reply to the Hindostani demand for a fair system, Bruma stated rhetorically: 'Do you think that 50,000 people in Paramaribo have the same limited political development as 50,000 *mais* and *baboens* [derogatory Creole words for Hindostani women and men] who plant rice?' (Dew 1978: 144).

After the elections in 1967, the broad coalition between NPS and VHP was abandoned, as neither Pengel nor Lachmon could agree about the sharing of cabinet posts. Lachmon demanded for more cabinet posts in the government proportionally to their numerical strength; Pengel did not agree. Pengel formed a government with the small Hindostani party (the action group). A coalition between a moderate Creole party and a radical Hindostani party was indeed a strange combination. It was a blow to the ethnic fraternity politics in Suriname. But Pengel had also appointed many incompetent Black Creoles as civil servants; there was political mismanagement in his new government. He also faced tough opposition from the Creole intellectuals and the Coloured middle-class. Pengel lost his majority in Parliament in 1968 and resigned as Prime Minister.

The role of the two dominant leaders, Pengel and Lachmon, was very crucial as well as their friendship and mutual understanding. Co-operation and harmony along ethnic lines was dominant. Personal friendship across ethnic boundaries was also important. Although the rapid growth of the Hindostani population, urbanisation, and competition with Creoles for government jobs was threatening the position of the Creoles, the ethnic fraternity politics lead to some kind of ethnic stability. But when Lachmon demanded more posts in the cabinet, according to the numerical strength of the Hindostanis, this successful political approach collapsed. Perhaps, in the process of political bargaining there are some limitations to ethnic power-sharing and the option to rule with the co-operation of a small party of the rival ethnic group weakens the base of a coalition between the larger ethnic parties.

An interim Cabinet took over the government and organised new elections in 1969. Meanwhile, the Creole intellectuals had founded a new Creole party, the Progressive National Party (PNP). A new political phase would start that year.

Ethnic Polarisation: 1969–79

Among the different ethnic groups there was a differential population growth. For a long time, the Creoles were the largest group; but, in 1970, the Hindostanis became the largest ethnic group, because they had a

higher birth rate. The electoral system had already been changed and was more in accordance with the numerical strength of the different ethnic groups. Because the NPS–VHP coalition was dismantled, new party combinations emerged. The result of the election in 1969 was spectacular. A coalition led by VHP with a Javanese party won nineteen of the thirty-nine parliamentary seats, almost a majority. The small Creole party PNP gained some seats. There was a fear among the lower-class Black Creoles that, their leader Pengel being defeated, they would be marginalised. A coalition government between VHP and NPS was not possible because of the rift between their leaders. Lachmon was aware of the strength of the Creoles in Paramaribo and the risk of a Black Creole backlash. He realised that he had to appease the Creoles. Hence, he formed a slightly representative government with PNP. He appointed a Creole as the Prime Minister. In the cabinet, four posts were for the Hindostanis, one for the Javanese, three for the Creoles, and one minister had mixed ethnic background. Lachmon remained Chairman of Parliament.

Although the Prime Minister was a Creole, the large Creole party was kept out of the government. Among the rank and file of the Black Creoles there arose hostility against the government. This was aggravated when, in the educational field, the Hindostani Minister appointed some Hindostanis in high level positions, because they were highly underrepresented at this level. Suddenly, in 1970, the charismatic Black Creole leader Pengel died. The feeling of a divisive Creole community grew, while the Hindostanis were united and now in power.

The perceived threat of rising Hindostani dominance was exploited by the Black Power movement in Suriname (Dew 1978:160–63). The moderate Creoles in NPS, who were in favour of co-operation with VHP, lost the struggle within NPS. A nationalistic and uncompromising Creole, H. Arron, took over the leadership of NPS. Arron constantly referred to the Hindostani threat and rising dominance. This perceived threat became more apparent when the results of the fourth census were released in 1972. It turned out that the Hindostanis were the largest ethnic group with a population of 142,000 (37 per cent); the Creoles numbered 118,000 (31 per cent); the Javanese, 60,000 (15 per cent); the Maroons, 40,000 (10 per cent); and the rest others. The total population was around 384,000. The Black Creoles had perceived themselves as the successors of the colonial power and Coloured middleclass to rule Suriname. But now, demographically, they had become a minority. Also the rising economic dominance of the Hindostanis was becoming more and more visible in Paramaribo.

Arron called for Creole unity and abandoned the ethnic-fraternity ideology for Suriname. A new organisation was founded for uniting the Creoles, namely, Krikomaka (acronym from *Krioro Kon Makandra*, meaning Creoles re-unite). With NPS in opposition and its linkages with the unions, the VHP–PNP government was confronted with strikes and public unrest in Paramaribo. Almost every appointment of Hindostanis in high educational positions was met with fierce opposition from the unions. Intimidation of Ministers and even arson was committed (*ibid.*; Mitrasing 1996). Creoles dominated the trade unions; Hindostanis were less active in unions. The political unrest had ethnic overtones, like *cooly mus saka* (The Hindostani [Minister] must be sacked). The VHP–PNP government survived because they had a clear majority in Parliament, but the Creole section (PNP) in the government lost its rank and file among the Creole population.

After the elections in 1973, a new era started in Surinamese politics with a leading role for the Creole nationalist leader Arron. The election of 1973 was a fierce battle with ethnic overtones between party coalitions of NPS and VHP. The NPS coalition (with a Javanese party) won the election with twenty-two seats; the VHP coalition won seventeen seats. The defeat of VHP was a political trauma for the Hindostanis and it resulted in their mass emigration to The Netherlands.

Arron became the Prime Minister and formed a government without Hindostani representation in his cabinet. He came heavily under the influence of the Creole radical Bruma. When Arron announced, in February 1974, that Suriname will be independent in 1975, not only the Hindostanis, but also a large group of Creoles emigrated to The Netherlands. In 1974–75, around 60,000 Surinamers, that is, more than 20 per cent of the population left the country. The number of Hindostanis declined. It was also a shock to the Hindostanis that the Dutch government, whom they still perceived as their protector, agreed to grant independence to Suriname within such a short time.

Some radical Hindostani politicians promoted to split the country in two parts: East Suriname for the Creoles and Maroons and West Suriname for the Asians. Other Hindostani politicians fuelled fear stating that Hindostani mothers, sisters, and daughters will be raped by Creole men after independence. The ethnic relations worsened. But Arron refused any kind of (ethnic) co-operation with VHP within his government. In 1975, the Arron government lost the support of the Javanese group. A stalemate in Parliament arose because some members of NPS abstained from voting in favour of the independence of Suriname. The ethnic tensions were high, also because radical elements of the two ethnic groups were inciting hatred and the two leading

political coalitions (NPS and VHP) could not compromise on the terms of independence. Then a Hindostani parliamentarian, who was considered as the successor to Lachmon, became a dissident in VHP. He stated that he did not want a racial war in Suriname and shall vote for independence. The Arron government would then have a majority again in Parliament. The ethnic relations were tense; radical Hindostani youngsters engaged in arson. Furthermore, in the debate in The Netherlands about the independence of Suriname, the VHP politician A. Mungra pathetically addressed the Dutch Prime Minister J. Den Uyl with the words: '*Avé, Den Uyl*' (Thou will die, salute you). But, it is important to note that, even at the height the political turmoil, the ethnic relations did not result in ethnic conflict and racial killings. At last, a week before Suriname would become independent, Arron conceded and gave Lachmon a *brasa* (embrace). Many tears flowed in the Surinamese Parliament.

Suriname became independent on 25 November 1975 with the approval of VHP with some assurance by Arron. But it was a sign of political marginalisation of the Asian groups that Suriname became independent with a government without a single minister of Hindostani background, although they constituted more than one-third of the country's population. If we bear in mind that many moderate Creoles and most Javanese were also against the independence of Suriname in such a short time, it is evident that only a minority preferred this independence. Although Lachmon had at last co-operated with Arron to prevent ethnic cleavages, the Asian groups were excluded in the formation of the government of the new republic of Suriname. The Netherlands donated a huge sum of 3.1 billion guilders for the development of Suriname. Unfortunately, most of this budget was spent on ineffective projects and corruption prevailed. The Arron government stayed in power without any changes. After independence, Arron broke his promises. For example, new elections were not held and promoting ethnic parity in the military was not implemented. Even a national government that included the largest ethnic group in order to broaden the base of the government was not formed.

The National Party Suriname and its allies won the – assumed rigged – 1977 elections. The majority of Hindostanis remained in the large political opposition, VHP. A small Hindostani party, the Hindostani Progressive Party (HPP) was included in the coalition led by NPS. Corruption, nepotism, and governing incompetence reached its peak during the second Arron regime. Ultimately, the Arron government proved incompetent in handling complaints of soldiers, which led to its

downfall. On 25 February 1980, non-commissioned officers captured the state power and overthrew the Arron government. The authoritarian behaviour of Arron and his growing arrogance resulted in his downfall. He was arrested and maltreated. A new era in ethnic relations entered Suriname with the military takeover; one in which the Hindostanis and other ethnic groups became a legitimate group to hold power.

It is important to note that, in spite of the irresponsible behaviour of some politicians, the ethnic relations were cordial and tolerance prevailed. The fact that many fled to The Netherlands had also an effect in reducing the ethnic tensions. After independence, the Hindostani women were not raped by Creole men, as had been feared, and nobody was killed during the height of the controversy about independence, as the radicals had predicted. In the next phase, ethnicity became less dominant in the political landscape, but was still a factor in the background to reckon with.

De-politicisation of Ethnicity: 1980–87

The military coup of the non-commissioned officers on 25 February 1980 was applauded and met popular enthusiasm. Although the rank and file of the military was dominated by Creoles, Hindostani and Javanese were also represented. But more important was the behaviour of the military leaders. They were ethnically neutral and, in the first years, politically more leftist oriented. When President J. Ferrier resigned in August 1980, a Hindostani judge acted as stand-in President. The excessive use of force against criminals generated opposition from democratic parties and the unions. But, interestingly, the ruling military and its allies, as well as the opposition had a multi-ethnic profile. Not only was ethnicity depoliticised during this period, but the Hindostanis and the Javanese were also appointed to high offices and were given due importance.

Military leaders reached out across ethnic lines. For example, the Creole military leaders visited Hindostani parties and created linkages with Hindostani businessmen. Indian music was played at political meetings and Indian music bands performed on stage. The ruling military appointed the first Indian as acting President in Suriname in February 1982. Although F. Ramdat Missier, a former Acting President of the High Court, was not a strong political figure, his appointment was an important symbolic gesture. That a Hindostani could be appointed as President of Suriname demonstrated that this new generation of Creole leaders was less ethnically oriented. In December 1982, the military leadership murdered fifteen leading figures, arguing that they were

planning a violent elimination of the military rule. The fact that the murdered persons were of Hindostani and Creole descent strengthened the notion that ethnicity had become less important in Surinamese politics. However, the Javanese and the Maroons also became important ethnic groups and wanted to be 'accommodated' in government positions and given government contracts. Ethnicity on political level, meaning promoting and standing for the ethnic interests of their group, became more salient among their leaders.

However, among the two large ethnic groups, the role ethnicity on the political level became less important. Commander D. Bouterse (later elected President of Suriname), with Amerindian roots and mixed descent, had and still has an ethnic-neutral image. Among the younger generation, in particular, the ethnic-neutral approach of the military leaders was popular. The old ethnic parties – NPS, VHP, and parties representing the Javanese and the Maroons – formed a front to struggle for return to democracy. The Hindostani leader Lachmon, who was asked by the military to form a government, had refused. He insisted on the involvement of NPS and driving the military back to the barracks. As elder statesman, Lachmon played a vital role in the return to democracy. In 1987, after seven years of military rule, democracy was restored and elections followed. A new era of democratic politics dawned in Suriname. In Suriname, the seven-year military rule came to be described as a coalition between 'Creole military leaders and Hindostani entrepreneurs', leading to mutual understanding in developing the economy, but also to the penetration of drug trafficking.

It is interesting to note that, during the 1980–87 period, the role of the leaders was almost decisive in relation to the role of ethnicity in the political field. They had depoliticised ethnicity in the sense that they appointed persons based on their qualifications and experience, irrespective of their ethnic background. The norm that only members of the ethnic group that was in power can benefit from the government was changed into a multi-ethnic approach. Qualifications, competence, and to some extent ethnic proportionality became important criteria for public office. Conversely, a multi-ethnic opposition emerged. During the military rule, ethnic politics became less important and the role of ethnicity in politics changed. While, in the preceding phase, ethnic power-sharing between the Creoles and the Hindostanis was normal, the two rising ethnic groups (the Javanese and the Maroons) more overtly promoted their ethnic interests.

Ethnic Power-sharing: 1988–2000

The military leaders had founded their own political party, namely, the National Democratic Party (NDP) with a multi-ethnic base, and it became a prominent political party. But the coalition of the old ethnic parties won the election in 1987. The coalition of NPS, VHP, and the Javanese party (Kaum Tani Persatuan Indonesia [KTPI], meaning party of people of Indonesian descent) won two-thirds of the parliamentary seats and formed the new government. While NDP, under the leadership of the former military Commander Bouterse, was defeated, his multi-ethnic party acquired an electoral base and a political stronghold in the Surinamese society. Under the new constitution and the new presidential system, the President became the head of state and Vice-President, the head of the cabinet. A Hindostani President and a Creole Vice-President were appointed in order to reflect the ethnic balance in Suriname.

The military briefly regained control in 1990, but the NPS-VHP coalition returned to power in the 1991 elections. The Creole R. Venetiaan, Arron's successor, became President, while the Hindostani J. Ajodhia became Vice-President. Lachmon and Arron became friends and were treated as elderly statesmen. But NDP broadened its electoral base and became a multi-ethnic alternative in the Suriname political landscape.

In the 1996 election, the coalition of NPS, VHP, and allies was electorally weakened. They lost the majority, and could hold on to just twenty-four of the fifty-one seats. Interestingly, VHP, still under the leadership of Lachmon, was split. Some prominent VHP parliamentarians left the party and launched a new Hindostani party. This new party and the Javanese party (KTPI) formed the government with NDP, which had won sixteen seats and was now a strong party in Suriname, rivalling NPS and VHP. The ethnic balance in the government remained. The Creole J. Wijdenbosch became President and a Hindostani, P. Radhakishun was appointed Vice-President. This coalition ruled till the elections of 2000.

Thus, in the period 1988–2000, to have some ethnic balance in government became normal. The posts of President and Vice-President were shared between the Creoles and the Hindostanis. The ethnic rivalry and competition at the political level also declined. Politically, ethnicity became less political important among the two largest ethnic groups in the political domain. The multi-ethnic party, NDP, and the rivalling ethnic parties, VHP and NPS, had to focus more on economic and other issues than on ethnic interests. But the politicians belonging to the Javanese and the Maroons had still a strong ethnic focus. They served

their ethnic group and were not represented in the multi-ethnic parties. The proportion of these two groups rose in the total population after the mass emigration of the Hindostanis and the Creoles. In 2003, Suriname had a population of 492,000, of which the Hindostanis constituted 28 per cent; the Creoles, 18 per cent; the Javanese and the Maroons, 15 per cent each. Furthermore, the Maroons had a higher birth rate.

Ethnicity in the Cultural Domain

While, at the end of 20th century, the role of ethnicity in the political field became less prominent for the Hindostani group in Suriname, ethnicity in the cultural domain became more important. The cultural diversity was reinforced, particularly because the Asian groups came in contact with the rising diasporas. The Hindostanis, the Javanese, and the Chinese could improve their cultural infrastructure through the use of information and communication technology. Satellite television, DVDs, CDs, the Internet, etc. facilitated the exchange of cultural goods (for example, films, songs, music, information). Films, music, songs, dance, and stories from their ancestral land became easy available. They consumed and relied more heavily on their ancient and now global culture. Also, low international travel costs, mobile phones and the Internet became driving forces. They could stick to their own culture, while the national Suriname culture remained primarily a Creole culture. Notions about the Indian diaspora, the Indonesian diaspora, and the Chinese diaspora penetrated these groups. India, Indonesia, China, and Indonesia became rising economies and the positive images of these countries also had an impact on (the revival) their ethnic identity. For the Hindostanis, for example, Bollywood became the main source for their cultural identity.⁵ Although there was some inter-ethnic interaction in dance parties, for example, the different ethnic groups still had their own cultural sphere. The Asian ethnic groups became affluent and could afford ethnic dancing halls like their own discotheques. Every ethnic group had its own cultural space and the boundaries became more salient. For example, every Asian group started its own television channel featuring films and soap operas. It is interesting that this was widely accepted. Moreover, the Afro-Surinamese group also searched for its roots and started identifying with the African diaspora. The legacy of black slavery became an important issue. This was also influenced by the developments among Afro-Surinamers in The Netherlands. The term Afro-Surinamers became more popular replacing the term Creoles. The Maroons had their own authentic culture and celebrated that more visibility. But a section of the

population, particularly the mixed group promoted the Surinamese national culture and strived for nation-building. Although the Surinamese national culture was presented as a diverse culture, it was often perceived as a Creole culture.

Front Stage and Backstage Behaviour

The nature of ethnic relations in Suriname during the 20th century can be characterised as one of mutual tolerance and harmony, but also of ambiguity. The role ethnicity played in daily interaction was tremendous and overt, but sometimes covert. The inter-ethnic relations were cordial. How persons presented themselves in Suriname in ethnic relations in daily life and in public discourse and politics could best be understood with the metaphor of front stage and backstage (Goffman 1984). In public life and also in political speeches, ethnic harmony and inter-ethnic solidarity prevailed. This can be labelled as *front stage behaviour*. In private domain, however, and inside ethnic political parties, intra-ethnic solidarity, loyalty, and ethnic preference were dominant. This *backstage behaviour* was even detectable in government agencies. For example, within some ministries the staff belonged primarily to one ethnic group and intra-ethnic communication was therefore 'safe'. When a name was used, mostly the ethnic group he or she belongs to was detected. But when one referred to persons without naming them in communication with a person belonging to another ethnic group, often the ethnic label was added. For example, a Hindostani man, a Creole women, a Javanese man, or a Maroon boy were widely used a labels qualifying a person. No offence was meant, but it was assumed as relevant information. Already in 1960, Naipaul wrote, 'The Surinamers have avoided racial collision not by ignoring group differences but openly acknowledging them' (1962: 164).

Before 1980, sometimes derogatory words were also used, for example, *coolie* boy (Hindostani boy) or *blaka* man (Black man). Sometimes some Afro-Surinamese still use the ethnic derogatory word *djuka* for the Maroons. What is important is that, in Suriname, ethnicity was and still is considered relevant. Ethnic labels are used in a relaxing way and they make sense. Often jokes and ethnic stereotypes are used in interaction without offence. But this does not mean that in every setting and everywhere ethnic difference and ethnic labelling are prevalent.

The different ethnic groups are unevenly represented in the various economic sectors. Creoles are more represented in the civil service than the Hindostanis; the Hindostanis are more active in commerce and agriculture. But, gradually, the ethnic niche is changing. Urbanisation

and competition among ethnic groups have been impacting the political power structure.

Conclusion

In the 20th century, ethnicity turned out to be very important in Surinamese politics. The primordial forces constituted the Hindostanis as an ethnic group with a strong ethnic identity and cultural heritage. With the help of the Colonial power and afterwards with self-acquired political power they remained unassimilated. Surinamese politics show different modes of political adaptations of the Hindostanis. In the first phase (1900–20), the Hindostanis were perceived by others to be a homogenous group and an ‘exotic minority’, and were often treated as ‘coolies’, while among them there were still differences in religion, caste, language, and regional origin. But a process of community building, ethnic identity, and internal solidarity started. In the political field, they remained a marginal group, but their interests were taken care of by the Colonial administration and the British Consul.

In the second phase (1921–49), the Hindostanis became a consciousness ethnic group striving for Surinamese citizenship, but without losing their ethnic identity. In the third phase (1950–68), the Hindostanis gradually became a powerful group. Fraternity and ethnic harmony prevailed and ethnic interests were accommodated in government jobs.

In the fourth phase (1969–80), ethnic polarisation took over. After 1969, the perceived threat and economic dominance of Hindostanis resulted in a counter reaction of the Creole radicals. They succeeded in reuniting the Creole group. This resulted in political marginalisation of the Hindostani group. This marginalisation and fear of oppression by the Creoles led to a mass emigration preceding the independence in 1975, not only of the Hindostanis, but curiously also of the Creoles. However, even when rivalry among the politicians was looming large among the population, the ethnic relations remained rather harmonious.

In fifth phase (1981–87), ethnicity became less important in the political domain through intervention of the military. The Hindostanis returned to power. In the last phase (1988–2000), to some extent, ethnic power-sharing between the two dominant groups prevailed. But the Javanese and the Maroons demanded ethnic ‘accommodation’, while ethnicity among the Hindostanis and the Creoles became less important in the political field. Their focus shifted more towards economic development.

While, at the end of the 20th century ethnicity in the political domain became less important among the Hindostanis and the Creoles, a new development took place through globalisation and the continuously advancing information and communication technology. Ethnicity in the cultural domain was reinforced, particularly among the Asian ethnic groups. The easy availability of cultural goods from the ancestral land reinforced their ethnic identity.

The case of Suriname can explain why ethnicity becomes less or more prominent in the political sphere and salient in the cultural domain, and also why relatively harmonious ethnic relations prevail. The role of the leaders and their views and the specific history of the ethnic groups are important factors. The long-lasting exposure to each other and mutual respect for each other's culture leads to tolerance. The assimilation policy promoted by the Coloured middle-class was not fruitful, because the Dutch colonial power promoted the retention of the Hindostani culture and their agrarian orientation. Leaders of the large ethnic groups celebrated the cultural diversity, allowing the ethnic groups to retain their identity. Surinamese politicians were proud to present and promote the cultural diversity. Furthermore, the ethnic groups found a *modus vivendi* to live together in relative harmony.

Particularly, the Hindostanis have a strong ethnic identity and are proud of their cultural heritage. This case study of the political adaptation of the Hindostanis during the 20th century reveals that ethnicity was a main characteristic in Surinamese politics. Primordial sentiments among the Hindostanis and interaction of with other groups were important in their political integration. The 'cultural stuff within', that is, the cultural heritage of the Hindostanis and the ethnic boundaries through interaction complemented each other.

Thus, the primordial and constructivist approaches turned out not as opposites, but as explanation of the ethnogenesis and ethnic continuity among the Hindostani group in Suriname and to a certain extent among other groups. Because the erstwhile broad group of Creoles was not distinguishable as an ethnic group and the boundaries were not clear, skin colour was an important marker too. In the colonial, era an assimilation policy was promoted by the Surinamese power elite, the Coloured middle-class. But the colonial Dutch government promoted the retention of the ethnic identity of the Hindostanis. The Asian ethnic groups, the Hindostanis, in particular, used these opportunities for creating their own cultural space. They developed a strong sense of ethnic identity. They could rely on their cultural heritage and the linkage with India, their spiritual homeland. Moreover, the importance of belonging to old civilisations and relying on old religious songs for comfort is, for

example, often underestimated by scholars who do not belong to these groups.

However, the strong ethnic identity of the Asian ethnic groups had the effect that other groups had to perceive themselves also as ethnic groups in due time. For the Asian groups, and also the Maroons, who have retained essential parts of their African culture, their ethnicity is essential and was and still important in politics. But, among the Creoles, the sense of ethnic identity is more fluid. Hence, ethnicity differs among the various groups depending on their history. Hence, the importance of the historical approach to understanding the formation of ethnic groups and the role of ethnicity in politics in plural societies.

Notes

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1. Nowadays, the Creoles refer to themselves as Afro-Surinamers or Black Surinamers. To distinguish this group from the mixed group the term *Volkscreolen* – most lower-class Creoles – is used.
2. The Hindostanis in Suriname have not only retained their distinctive culture, but also have strong roots in India. They belong to an ancient civilisation, which allows them to form their distinct ethnic identity. Being part of this ethnic group offers its members the possibility of mutual affective relations; it forms the bedrock of an ethnic identity, and cements a group feeling among them. Traditionally, this identification with India and Indian culture, that is, Hindostani culture, has played a prominent role.
3. While NPS won the majority of seats, VHP won only six of the twenty-one seats. This controversial electoral system was much debated and has been changed several times. The number of seats in Parliament has been increased and some kind of proportional representation has been introduced.
4. The capital Paramaribo is the only important city in Suriname and almost all the important institutes and organisations then were located there. Half of the country’s population resides there. The Creoles (Afro-Surinamers and mixed persons) were concentrated in Paramaribo; the Hindostanis and the Javanese were concentrated in the countryside. But, after the World War II, urbanisation became important. After 1960, the number of Hindostanis and to a lesser extent the Javanese residing in Paramaribo has risen, because the areas adjoining Paramaribo have come to be included in the city.
5. In Suriname, Indian films and soap operas on television, the Indian music industry, the quality of dancing and choreography, and the glamour of Bollywood rival the

western culture. The Hindostanis identify with and cherish these Indian cultural goods.

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7 From Bharat to Sri Ram Desh

The emigration of Indian indentured labourers to Suriname

Chan E.S. Choenni

In 2004, descendants of the 24,000 Indian indentured emigrants who originally settled in Suriname numbered over 300,000 more than half of whom have come to reside in the Netherlands. This more than ten-fold increase compares favourably with other parts of the Caribbean such as Trinidad and Guyana where their number has grown by three to four times the original number. This substantial increase in number is even more startling when one takes into account the fact that the recruitment of Indians to Suriname through indenture occurred much later here when compared with other parts of the Caribbean. In addition, Indians in Suriname have displayed considerable socio-economic mobility, while sustaining their Indian cultural and linguistic heritage.

This chapter will explore the nature of the indenture experience for Indian labourers of Suriname particularly in terms of the emigration process. It argues that the specific features of the indenture system in the former Dutch colony to some extent provide an explanation for the remarkable demographic growth, and the sustenance of their cultural and linguistic heritage in Suriname. As British subjects in a foreign country Indian indentured labourers not only received special protection, but also profited as relative latecomers from the enhancements made to the system, particularly in terms of better methods of recruitment, a greater proportion of women indentured labourers, and improved medical care. In exploring these issues, the chapter will study the recruitment of Indian emigrants, their voyage, the conditions they faced in Suriname, and the reasons that led to the abolition of the indenture system.

Introduction

Following the abolition of slavery in Suriname on 1 July 1863, the necessity to find an alternative source of labour was a matter of great urgency for plantation owners. To prevent the exodus of slaves from the profitable sugar and coffee plantations, a policy of *Staatstoezicht* (State supervision) was employed after the abolition of slavery; this effectively obliged 'former' slaves to work ten years after their 'liberation'. With the *Staatstoezicht* scheduled to end in 1873, concerned plantation owners lobbied the Dutch government, and the colonial parliament of Suriname, to allow the procurement of indentured labour from British

India. In 1868, G.J.A. Bosch Reitz, a member of the colonial parliament of Suriname, prepared a brochure arguing that the import of indentured Indian labour was crucial in preventing an 'imminent miserable situation' (*'uit den treurigen toestand'*).

This was not the first time that planters in Suriname had turned to indenture as a replacement for slave labour. Prior to 1863, indentured labourers from China and Madeira had been recruited to work in Suriname. This experiment was not a success. In 1864 only 353 Chinese workers were procured through this method. Moreover, labourers from China and Madeira were found to be unsuitable for hard plantation labour, with many Chinese workers using every opportunity to set up retail shops. A system of recruiting free labourers for Suriname from 1863 also failed due to an inability to gather sufficient recruits. These failures led to stronger calls for the recruitment of indentured labour from British India, a system that had proven to be successful in neighbouring British Guyana.

In 1862, the Dutch government contacted the British government for permission to recruit Indian labourers for Suriname, and while the British responded positively, there was considerable delay in implementing this request. After considerable debate, the Suriname immigration treaty was drafted on 8 September 1870, although it took almost three years before the actual emigration of Indian labourers took place.

The immigration treaty

The Suriname immigration treaty was based on an earlier convention between France and Britain, dating from 1860, that regulated the emigration of Indian labourers to French colonies. The Indian indentured labourers signed a contract for five years. A close reading of the 27 articles in the treaty reveals that at least on paper, humane conditions – measured by the standards of that time – prevailed in the requirements for recruitment, shipping, boarding and treatment. Article 6 of the treaty states:

No immigrant shall be embarked unless the Agent described in the preceding article shall have been enabled to satisfy himself that his engagement is voluntary, that he has a perfect knowledge of the nature of his contract, of the place of his destination, of the probable length of his voyage, and of the different obligations and advantages connected with his engagement.

Article 8 of the treaty also regulated the salary, working hours and days of indentured labourers, the right of a free return ticket to British India at the end of the contract of five years and free medical treatment.

Admittedly those involved in implementing regulations did not always apply these humane regulations strictly, yet emigrants to Suriname had a more favourable treaty than Indian indentured labourers who had emigrated to British plantation colonies. For example, article 9 of the treaty posited that the duration

of the engagement between an emigrant and the Dutch government was five years, although it could be extended annually or for another five years. Furthermore the British government itself acted as a pressure group for their 'subjects' (the emigrants to Suriname were British subjects till 1927) who were employed in a foreign country, demanding that the regulations be strictly observed. Moreover since Indian emigrants to Suriname were recruited much later than in British Guyana (1838) and Trinidad (1845) – the earliest arrived in Suriname on the *Lalla Rookh* on 5 June 1873 – they benefited from the changes that had taken place in the system, including stricter health checks at the time of recruitment, better health facilities, a larger proportion of women migrants and a better regulation of working hours amongst others.

The Suriname immigration treaty stated that the recruitment, embarking and shipping of Indian emigrants to Suriname was the responsibility of the Dutch government. A specific agency was created for this operation. The enrolment and recruitment in India was put under the management of an emigration agent. He was appointed by the governor of Suriname and was the superintendent of the main barrack in Calcutta known as *dipu* (a corruption of the Dutch word *depot* meaning barrack) among the Indians. Important emigration agents for Suriname included W. Durham (serving 1872–5), E. Van Cutsem (serving 1875–88) and L. Gommers (serving 1901–22). The emigration agent appointed medical practitioners, interpreters and sub-agents (often Indians) who were named *sirdars*. The sub-agents in turn appointed recruiters, the so-called *arkatis* (recruiters). The British government also appointed a 'protector of emigrants', responsible for the interests of the Indian indentured labourers. Dr W. Comins and Mr I. Grant became well-known protectors of emigrants.

The highest authority of this operation was the Agent-General who resided in Paramaribo, the capital of Suriname. Appointed by the Dutch government and the head of the immigration department, he managed the staff in the main barrack in Paramaribo. The emigration agent in Calcutta recruited Indian labourers based on the instructions of the Agent-General who in turn received annual applications for Indian indentured labourers by plantation owners based on which a quota for the enrolment of Indian labourers was fixed. When the labourers arrived in Suriname the Agent-General allocated them to the plantations. He was required to report regularly to the British government on the conditions of indentured Indian labourers. Furthermore Indian labourers could claim juridical assistance from the British representative appointed to assist and protect the Indian labourers in Paramaribo.

Early British checks on Indian emigration to Suriname

Between 1873 and 1874, six batches of Indian indentured labourers arrived in Suriname. It was found, however, that in spite of the preparations that had been made to safeguard the health of recruits, there was a high incidence of disease and a relatively high death toll amongst the recruits. The British government held the view that the relief and care given to indentured labourers on the

journey and in Suriname was inadequate and that the health-checks conducted on potential recruits in Calcutta were not sufficiently meticulous.

Without informing the Dutch government, the British government postponed the emigration of Indians to Suriname indefinitely. The great need for labourers in Suriname resulted in the Dutch government taking measures to improve the living conditions of the Indian immigrants. A medical institution¹ was founded to provide medical care for immigrants. The main barrack in Paramaribo was refurbished, as were the toilets and the bathing area where new showers were installed. In 1877, the British government, after an inspection of these improvements, agreed to resume the emigration of its subjects to Suriname.

The initial check undertaken by the British government went a long way in improving the condition of indentured labourers to Suriname. Plantation owners were required to ensure that labourers were free after working hours, on Sundays and on religious festivals, which included 32 holidays for Hindu and 16 holidays for Muslim religious festivals in a year (Emmer 1984: 259). Labourers also had the right to re-migration to British India upon the completion of their contracts. The Agent-General, appointed by the Dutch government as the protector of recruits, became an important institution in upholding the legal rights of labourers as he had a considerable hold on the plantation owners. If a plantation owner acquired a bad reputation for mistreating labourers, the Agent-General could restrict or bar that owner from recruiting new Indian labourers.

The first Agent-General Cateau van Roosevelt (served 1872–91), known commonly as *Koelie-papa* (*father of the coolies*), was so popular amongst indentured labourers that his funeral attracted a mass audience of Indians.² His successor Agent-General Barnet Lyon (serving 1891–1902) was also well liked and the Indian community in appreciation erected a bust for him that was placed at a prominent spot in Paramaribo, near the presidential palace. Others such as the Agent-General C. Van Drimmelen (serving 1902–21) were less popular because he and his aide, the Indian interpreter Sital Persad, were perceived as authoritarian by the labourers.

Although the juridical protection of the emigrants was improved, they continued to be subject to strict penal sanctions (*poenale sanctie*) in cases where they were found guilty of breaking the law. To allay plantation owners' fears of desertion by Indian labourers, emigrants were not allowed to leave their plantation without a permit. Where labourers were found guilty of indecent and improper behaviour, absenteeism and desertion, strong penalties were meted out by the commissioner of the district who was authorised to penalise emigrants.

Recruitment

After the emigration agent in Calcutta received applications for labourers from Paramaribo through telegram, he ordered sub-agents to begin the recruitment process. The sub-agents in turn mobilised the *arkatis*. Sub-agents were paid 25 *rupees* for every male and 35 *rupees* for every female recruited. *Arkatis* in turn received their remuneration from sub-agents and were only paid for those

persons who were deemed fit for labour. The average number of enrolments for an *arkati* for Suriname was 35 persons annually. If the *arkati* was not sufficiently diligent in performing his duties, his recruitment licence, which was valid only for one year, was not renewed.

The main recruitment areas were West Bihar and the United Provinces (now Uttar Pradesh). Sub-barracks, where preliminary medical checks were conducted, were situated in Benaras, Allahabad, Ghazipur, Muttra (Mathura), Basti, Gorakpur, Fyzabad (in the United Provinces), Patna and Muzaffarpur (in Bihar). *Arkatis* usually sought potential recruits from crowded areas such as bazaars, markets and train stations (Bhagwanbali 1996: 87). Potential emigrants were asked if they wanted employment: '*Naukari loge?*' ('You want to work?') *Naukari* (meaning delivering service in lieu of money) had an honourable meaning. As far as possible, only those that were perceived to be strong and healthy were approached because sub-agents and *arkatis* had to pay the costs of transport to Calcutta and a possible return passage for those who were rejected.

In general, *arkatis* informed potential emigrants that they had to work in another country, although they did not define exactly where this country was. Names of the colonies were sometimes mentioned. Mauritius was known as *Mirchdesh* (Country of peppers), Trinidad was *Chinidad* (Country of sugar) and British Guyana was named *Damra* or *Damraila* (corruption of Demerara). Suriname was associated with the country *Sri Ram*. The passage to Suriname was thus depicted by many *arkatis* as a pilgrimage to the holy country of the god Ram, named *Sri Ram* or *sarnam* ('famous') or *srinam* ('sublime name'). Occasionally, *arkatis* would say that the area of work was simply located on the other side of the Ganges but their ability to falsify the location of work was somewhat constrained by the fact that they would not receive payment if recruits deserted upon arrival in Calcutta.

The *arkati* was better placed, however, to provide false information as to the nature of work. This was usually represented as relatively simple, just *chini chale* (cutting and transporting of sugarcane). When the potential recruits were policemen or were from a higher caste and unwilling to perform manual work, they were often [mis]informed that they would be given service-orientated jobs and not plantation work. An important element in winning over potential recruits was the *arkati's* promise that they would be protected by the *Sarkar* (the British government), and that their work was somehow linked to the army. This was particularly crucial in recruiting emigrants with a martial background from the *chatri* caste (Kolff 1999: 18–22), many of whom had lost their livelihoods in the army following the Indian mutiny in 1857.

However, the most important factor in recruitment was the opportunity to earn money. *Arkatis* portrayed Suriname as an affluent country where food was served in gold *thalis* (plates) and gold *lotas* (bowls) were used for drinking. The *arkati* told stories of returned emigrants who had made a fortune and had even become *zamindars* (landlords). The *arkati's* myths did not go uncontested. There was resistance especially from orthodox Hindus who argued that by crossing the so-called *kala pani* ('dark waters') the emigrant would lose his caste and

be subject to the anger of God. In addition there were stories of macabre practices in the colonies. One was that oil was withdrawn from the head of emigrants, and pamphlets were distributed showing Indians hung upside down to extract oil from their bodies.

In spite of such resistance, the severe economic conditions in the region did result in many turning to emigration. The Gangetic plain was (and remains) a very densely populated area, and it had witnessed numerous famines in the second half of the nineteenth century. Between 1873 and 1875 acute famines prevailed in Bihar, Oudh and other provinces. Period of famines and bad harvests corresponded with high numbers of emigrants and likewise during periods of good harvest as in 1902 and in 1904 it was more difficult to procure emigrants. A decrease in the availability of jobs in the construction of railway tracks in the region after 1870 and the decline of the local cotton and textile industry due to the popularity of ready-made textiles from England led to an increase in unemployment. Besides economic reasons, personal motivations like family feuds, escape from legal penalties, fear of blame (of unmarried mothers and fathers), a spirit of adventure and the restrictive caste system were some of the other reasons for emigration.

If push and pull factors did not work sufficiently, the *arkati* was not averse to employing more forceful means. The kidnapping of people, though not common, was used. Also, the *arkatis* employed other methods such as money-lending to procure recruits. When a person in debt to the *arkati* defaulted on his loan, he was asked to emigrate and repay the debt following his return. *Tohar namak khaili, girmit katib* ('because I have eaten your salt, I shall perform agreement labour'), was a well-known phrase at the time.

Gender and the socio-economic profile of emigrants

The overwhelming majority of the Indian emigrants to Suriname were recruited from eastern United Provinces while a minority came from western Bihar. Speakers of *Bhojpuri* and *Awadhi*, the interaction between these migrants led to these two languages gradually merging into Sarnami-Hindi, which remains an important language in Suriname. The emigrants to Suriname were not exclusively farmers. In one shipment, the majority consisted of domestic servants, soldiers, policemen, barbers, shopkeepers, street vendors and persons with a profession other than agriculture. Artists, in particular musicians, were also recruited. A group of *nautch* (dancing) girls and male actors were also known to have been recruited to entertain the emigrants during the long passage. Other emigrants recruited included wrestlers and persons who could fight with sticks (*gutka*) (Tinker 1977: 52).

Some 82 per cent of the emigrants to Suriname were Hindus, the majority belonging to the Sanatan Dharma and a small number to the reformist group, Arya Samaj. The caste profile of emigrants was also diverse including those from the higher castes. Small numbers of Kabir Panthis, Jains, Sikhs and Parsis also emigrated to Suriname. However, these groups are not recognisable

anymore, and many have integrated into the Hindu community in Suriname. Muslims, comprising Sunnis, Shias and Ahmadiyahs, formed 17.5 per cent of emigrants.

The British and Dutch governments had agreed that for every 100 men, 40 women were to emigrate.³ In particular in the later period of emigration – between 1880 and 1916 – the 100:40 rule was strictly applied, because in the colonies the sex imbalance among the Indian emigrants was known to have led to killings, rape and social unrest. As a result the departure of ships to Suriname was sometimes postponed until the 100:40 quota was achieved. The strict application of this rule resulted in a higher percentage of (unmarried) women emigrating to Suriname when compared to other colonies (see Table 7.1). It is plausible that this is an important reason for the higher growth of the Indian population in Suriname compared with British Guyana, Trinidad and Jamaica.

The 100:40 quota for the recruitment of women was a matter of concern for both the authorities and the *arkatis*, since there were few women available for emigration. This explains why the *arkatis* received more money for females than for male emigrants and were known to have deceived and even kidnapped widows and unmarried women and registered them as emigrants. According to the Indian emigration expert De Klerk (1998), however, the kidnapping of women was an exception. He argues that it is unthinkable that large groups of emigrants could forcefully be locked up in the sub-barracks while the British government controlled these places. The British emigration expert Tinker states that, in particular, young widows who did not have children were more agreeable to emigration because they were often rejected by their community. Many were recruited from Mathura, a place of pilgrimage in the United Provinces (Tinker 1977: 195). For the salvation of their husband's soul – and often with no real home to which to return – these widows were, after their pilgrimage, willing to undertake the journey to Suriname, known to them as *Sri Ram Desh* (land of lord Ram).

The need to fulfil quota requirements for female emigrants meant that sometimes the *arkati* recruited prostitutes. As Emmer (1984: 250) points out,

Table 7.1 Married and unmarried women as a proportion of Indian emigrants in some colonies (1893)

<i>Colony</i>	<i>Men</i>	<i>Women</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Percentage of women</i>	<i>Percentage of unmarried women</i>
Suriname	682	275	903	30.5	66.7
Guyana	3,298	1,395	4,693	29.8	45.0
Trinidad	1,181	507	1,688	30.0	51.3
Jamaica	323	130	453	28.7	35.5
Fiji	513	206	719	28.7	46.1
Mauritius	247	130	377	34.5	43.1
South Africa	361	154	515	29.9	46.1

however, the word prostitute in the Indian context at the time must be interpreted broadly. Women who had sexual relations with a man before marriage, or had been adulterous, or did not live with their husbands because they were dissatisfied with their arranged marriages, were considered prostitutes. The authoritative report of McNeill and Chimman Lal concludes that in Suriname

approximately one third consists of married women that migrated with their husbands, others are often widows and women who left their men ... a small percentage are ordinary prostitutes ... the large majority however are not as often is stated shameless immoral. They are women who had faced trouble and emigrate to prevent that they would live their life in India as prostitute.

(Tinker 1974: 205)

Final selection and the journey from Calcutta

The potential emigrant travelled from the sub-barrack under the attendance of a *chaprasi* (an attendant in uniform) to the main barrack in Calcutta. Usually recruited labourers arrived by train to the Howrah station in Calcutta. From Howrah, they were brought to different barracks situated at the banks of the Hooghly River. Four main barracks served the different colonies. Those bound for Suriname went either to the barracks at Ballygunj or at Chitpur. After their arrival in the main barrack in Calcutta the emigrants obtained new clothing. Most emigrants took some of their own possessions with them, particularly jewellery carried on their body. Women were often heavily dressed with jewellery and some emigrants were known to have brought musical instruments and religious books (Bakker 2002).

The barracks had high walls meant to exclude undesirable immigrants and to prevent desertion. They were also well guarded by *durwans* (gatekeepers). In spite of these restrictions, there are stories of immigrants who did not qualify for indentured labour – for health or other reasons – succeeding in embarking as stowaways to the colonies. Similarly there were cases of desertion. For example, between 1 August and 17 September 1902, 26 recruits managed to escape from the main barracks for indentured labourers bound for Suriname (Weller 1968).

At the main barracks, the final selection took place on the basis of a stringent medical examination in the presence of the British protector of emigrants and under the attendance of the medical inspector. The emigrants had to be deemed fit to survive an arduous sea journey of almost three months and to undertake hard plantation labour in a strange tropical country. There was also a need to ensure that they were free from diseases so as to prevent epidemics on board the ship. In registers of the characteristics of the emigrants distinctive physical marks like stains and scars were mentioned. Potential contract labourers would be rejected if they showed signs of internal bleeding or fracture.

According to Emmer (1984: 255) the emigrants were also selected on their 'relative superior physical condition' which involved meeting the demands of a

medical and 'mental' abilities test, and meeting height requirements. While statistics of the average height of Indians are unavailable, it is highly plausible that the Indian emigrant to Suriname was quite tall by Indian standards at the time. Half of the emigrants averaged 1.60 metres, a quarter averaged 1.50 metres and the remainder 1.70 metres. In comparison, in 1890, the average height of young men (18/19 years) in the Netherlands was 1.69 metres (Hira 2000: 27). Almost two-thirds of emigrants were aged between 20 and 30, a quarter under 20 years, and less than 2 per cent of emigrants to Suriname were aged above 40 years. Few children emigrated to Suriname because it was not stipulated that children should emigrate. No payment was given for children under 12 years, as they were deemed unfit for plantation work. Families with more than two children were not encouraged to embark because this would raise the risk of epidemics like measles. All in all it can be surmised that there was a rigorous selection process for contract labourers bound to Suriname. Of the 52,330 Indians originally enlisted for emigration to Suriname only 34,395 Indian emigrants finally left. More than one-third of these potential emigrants were excluded (Bhagwanbali 1996).

After the (medical) examination, all approved emigrants had to meet the protector of emigrants in accordance to article 6 of the treaty of 1870. Emigrants were required to sign the agreement voluntarily. To ascertain their voluntary accord, the conditions of the agreement, which bound them to a period of indenture for five years, were read in the Hindustani language. If there were no protests, the emigrant would 'sign' the agreement usually by marking a cross on the agreement form because the majority could not write (Bhagwanbali 1996: 120). The emigrants were then required to further testify that the agreement was voluntarily signed. The labour agreement between the Indian labourer and the Dutch government came to be known among the Indian labourers as *girmit*, a corruption of the word agreement. Serving the agreement period was called *girmit kate*. The Indian indentured labourers were known as *girmitwallah* or *kontraki*, the latter term a corruption of the Dutch word *kontrakt* meaning agreement.

After signing the agreement, the indentured labourers received a tin plate with their embarkation number marked upon it. The tin plate was carried around their necks. When a sufficient number of approved emigrants were available in the main barrack in Calcutta and all the administrative formalities had been conducted, embarkation began.

The voyage

Only British ships were used for the transportation of Indians to Suriname. Between 1873 and 1916, 64 ships with names like *Ganges*, *Sheila*, *Sutlej*, *Dewa*, *Zhenab* and *Zanzibar* transported more than 34,000 Indian emigrants to Suriname. Up to 1907, 38 batches of indentured labourers were transported by sailing ships, and from 1907, 26 batches arrived by steamship. Amongst these the *Laleham* and *Peshwa* made two journeys (De Klerk 1998: 71–3). The

number of emigrants that each ship carried varied from 350 to 800 persons. Emigrants received an identification number that corresponded with the number of the departing ship. Thus the emigrant could be traced through this identification number to the ship, the date of departure from British India and the year of arrival in Suriname.⁴

The journey to Suriname, via the Bay of Bengal to the Indian Ocean and around the Cape of Good Hope (South Africa) to South America lasted three months for sailing ships depending on sailing conditions. On steamships the journey was shorter, usually five to eight weeks. These ships tended to call at the island of St Helena in the Atlantic Ocean to stock up on fresh drinking water and fruits. According to article 14 of the Suriname immigration treaty, emigrants could depart on sailing ships from 15 August until 11 March. If ships departed between 11 March and 15 September, there was a requirement that emigrants receive at least a double blanket because of the cold weather conditions in the Southern hemisphere.

Indian emigrants were divided into groups of 25 and a headman (*sirdar*) was appointed who was responsible for his group. Some emigrants were appointed as barbers, cooks (*bandaras*), cleaners and nurses. It was compulsory that on every ship one or more interpreters be appointed. To prevent men from visiting women at night, women's quarters were guarded. The cabins of unmarried women were situated at the front of the ship and the cabins of unmarried men at the back, with the cabins of families in between. Entertainment on the upper deck ended at eight in the evening and by 10 pm all had to return to their sleeping cabin.

Article 15 of the immigration treaty provided detailed prescriptions on the living conditions of emigrants on board. The cabin had to be fully covered and not less than six feet high (1.80 metres). A surface area of six square metres (two by three metres) was to be made available for every person. Ships were constructed according to these guidelines. While space was limited, very few complaints about living space and life on the ships were registered. The hospital was situated on the lower deck, and the surgeon was required to make regular inspections of cabins particularly to ensure that they were properly ventilated. Emigrants were encouraged to stay as long as possible on the upper decks to get fresh air. Although flammable material was forbidden in the cabin, smoking was allowed in a separate area. Emigrants, however, were not allowed to consume alcoholic beverages and drugs (like *ganja*).

Provisions were acquired and stocked in accordance with the number of emigrants on board. Water and other amenities were distributed daily at six in the morning. The daily ration for an emigrant was: 20 ounces of rice, four ounces of lentils (*dhal*), two ounces of tobacco, two pounds of salted fish and one gallon of water. The ration further included clarified butter (*ghee*), salt, pepper, onions, turmeric and garlic. Once a week, sheep or goat meat was served. For 100 persons, about six sheep or goats were carried on the ship. Vegetables were provided twice a week and sometimes pumpkin and yams or potatoes were included in the menu. When bad weather hampered cooking, emigrants were fed more

basic rations (Geoghegan 1874: 25; cited in Weller 1968: 143). In the distribution of provisions and food, children above ten years were considered adults, while for those under ten, two counted as one adult.

The captain, the surgeon and the crew of the ship received pro-rata payment on the basis of emigrants that completed the voyage, and an extra payment for every immigrant that arrived in good health in the colony. If mortality rates or the number of patients suffering illnesses was high, the company that owned the ship could refrain from the service of the captain and the surgeon in the future. Thus it was in the interest of the captain and surgeon to ensure the health of emigrants. The surgeon on board was usually European although on occasion Indian surgeons were used, as in the case of one who demanded better conditions for the indentured labourers on board. Labelled an agitator, he was forced to disembark on the island of St Helena (Tinker 1974). Surgeons were required to ensure that a strict hygiene and nutrition regime prevailed. At the upper deck, breakfast was served at 9 am, lunch at 1 pm and dinner at 5 pm. The surgeon ensured that the meals were hygienically prepared. For children under seven years, there was milk daily. After each meal, the upper deck was cleaned thoroughly. Inspection of the food supply took place periodically. To maintain a healthy appearance, especially at the time of their arrival, the emigrants also had to be massaged twice a week with coconut oil. During the voyages, surgeons occasionally had to deal with child-birth and during one journey, on the ship *Elbe* in 1889, as many as 15 children were born. An extensive report of all aspects of life on board was maintained and all surgeons were required to write a medical report of the journey, which was then delivered to the Agent-General in Paramaribo. Sometimes rapes and suicides occurred, but these were exceptions (Shepherd 1995).

Because of high mortality rates in the initial period of emigration to Suriname, continuous improvements were made on ships. Professional cleaners (*topaz*) were appointed, the hospital was moved to the upper deck, and extra care was given to ensure the cleanliness of water on board. Later water distillery equipment was included. These improvements went a long way in ensuring a reduction of mortality rates especially in the latter period of Indian emigration to Suriname.

On the voyage, no special arrangements were made for emigrants of different castes or classes. The harsh weather conditions, the spatial restrictions of life at sea, and the inability to cater for specific food restrictions had an impact of breaking down caste divisions. Religious obligations, such as prayers five times a day amongst Muslims, or regular Hindu prayers (*puja*), could also not be properly observed.

To alleviate boredom during the long voyage, emigrants partook in various forms of entertainment such as dancing and singing, drumming, wrestling, swordsmanship competitions and stick fighting (*latimar*). Sometimes professional dancers and wrestlers were recruited as emigrants for entertainment purposes. Some such as the wrestler Hari Sing and the dancer Alarakhi would later become well known in Suriname. *Birhas* (elegies) were also sung of their departure from homes, the loss of families and their uncertain future. Life on board

ship also included its fair share of quarrels with occasional accusations of theft such as stealing one's *lota* (bowl) or *thali* (plate).

In spite of these arrangements, the voyage to the Caribbean was a dangerous enterprise and most emigrants had ambivalent feelings towards their journey. Dr De Wolfe, a surgeon on an emigrant's ship sailing in 1883 wrote: 'most of the coolies are very homesick after they have left India. They arrived in a strange world... Fear has taken them while from their nature they are timid' (Tinker 1974: 157). Most emigrants suffered from sea-sickness at the beginning of the voyage and diarrhoea was a common ailment.

Over 40 years of indentured emigration to Suriname, the average mortality rate on the sea voyage was 1.2 per cent, slightly less than the average death rate of 1.3 per cent on sea voyages to all the colonies (Bhagwanbali 1996: 150-1). Of the 34,395 Indian emigrants leaving British India 34,011 arrived in Suriname alive. The number of deaths recorded was quite high especially on the sailing 42 of the 748 emigrants on board perished, amongst whom 32 were children. Most perished in the Bay of Bengal, when high waves shook the *Elbe* heavily. On other ships which recorded high mortality rates, the usual cause was the outbreak of contagious disease. An outbreak of measles on the sailing ship *Ailsa II* in 1880 led to the death of 83 of the 461 emigrants. Similarly on the sailing ship *Sheila* in 1882, 49 of the 452 emigrants succumbed to cholera, and another 14 perished shortly after their arrival in Suriname. On average, however, usually between five to ten emigrants perished on board, and the mortality rate on steamships was lower than on the sailing ships. Only one of the 64 transports to Suriname was shipwrecked: this was the *Laleham*, which was stranded in 1884 off the east coast of Sri Lanka. The *Laleham* emigrants were shipped to Suriname on the next ship, *Peshwa*. In May 1916 the *Dewa* brought the last 303 Indian emigrants to Suriname.

Through the common experience of dangers, and the considerable interaction in small quarters, a bond was formed amongst emigrants during the voyage traversing the *kala pani*. Eating the same food and drinking water from the same tank strengthened this bond. Friendships and relationships were made for life. They became *jahaji bhai* and *jahaji bahin* (ship brothers and sisters), a relationship that to some was so sacred that even marriages between children of those who became brethren during the ship journey was not allowed.

After their arrival in Suriname, emigrants were hosted for 48 hours at the expense of the immigration department in the Coolie barrack in Paramaribo. After further medical checks, the emigrants were allocated to the plantation owners and transported to their plantations, where they were met earlier settled indentured labourers who saw them as an important source of information on developments in British India.

The end of Indian indentured emigration to Suriname

In the early twentieth century, the indenture system came under sustained attack from Indian nationalists. In 1912, G.K. Gokhale introduced a resolution in the

Indian Legislative Assembly to prohibit indentured labour, arguing that the system deprived people of their freedom. His views were supported by the renowned female poet Sarojini Naidu. Besides apprehensions that indenture marked a transitional stage between slave labour and 'free' labour, there were also concerns about the recruitment and departure of strong and healthy Indians from British India. Following the organisation of an agitation and Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya's and Mahatma Gandhi's insistence on the abolishment of the system, the British government finally relented. On 12 March 1917, the emigration of labourers under indenture from British India officially ceased.

Both the Surinamese government as well as the Indian community in Suriname were disappointed with this decision to end indentured emigration. In 1920, a delegation left Suriname, on the steamer *Madioen*, to plead for the re-opening of indentured emigration. Members of the delegation included H.N. Hajari, an official of the immigration department, interpreter Sital Persad, businessman (and son-in-law of Sital Persad) Lutchman Singh and J.B. Singh, a prominent Indian from Suriname. Using the report of McNeill and Chimman Lal (1915), they argued that emigration and the indenture system held more advantages than disadvantages for immigrants. They met Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya in Varanasi, Mahatma Gandhi and Shaukat Ali in Ahmedabad and Chimman Lal, the writer of the report on emigration to Suriname, who was then mayor of the city of Meerut. According to Hajari, while the Indian leaders were impressed by the good treatment and position of Indians in Suriname, with the exception of Chimman Lal, they all rejected a re-opening of emigration.

Between 1922 and 1924 the emigration agency and the main barrack in Calcutta for indentured emigration was liquidated. In 1927, the Indians in Suriname, who were till then British subjects, became Dutch subjects thus bringing to an end protection from the British government. The immigration department in Paramaribo was shut down in 1932.

Conclusion

It is clear that in general, Indian emigrants to Suriname were selected stringently and not, as is often portrayed, picked up against their will from the streets and transported to Suriname and other colonies. Many were eager to emigrate to the colonies to earn money. Because Indian emigrants to Suriname arrived at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century they were able to profit from the improvements in the indenture system especially with regards to provisions on ships and medical care. These emigrants were also provided protection on the basis of the rules of the immigration treaty between the British and the Dutch. The fact that two-thirds of the more than 34,000 Indian emigrants later settled in Suriname and gave up their free passage back to British India is to some extent proof that, for them, life in Suriname was better than in British India. Many returnees to India, in fact, regretted their decision and tried, in vain, to obtain a new agreement for Suriname.

The emigration of Indians to Suriname can be considered a 'success story'.

The relatively good medical treatment that was provided to these emigrants and the fact that the gender ratio for indenture was strictly adhered to led to a huge and rapid growth of the Indian population in Suriname which compares favourably with other Indian diasporic communities in the Caribbean. Similarly, when compared to other parts of the Caribbean, Indians in Suriname have been better able to conserve their Indian culture and heritage.⁵ Indians in Suriname also benefited from government policies that introduced obligatory education for boys from 1875 and encouraged educational activities for girls from early on.⁶

Through their diligence and their perseverance Indian emigrants were able to sustain the plantation economy until competition from beet sugar, and other innovations and circumstances, destroyed the labour-intensive plantation system. Building on the crown land they got in the settlement after indenture, many sent money to their families or relatives in British India. Additionally, Indians fostered the cultivation of large parts of Suriname introducing the farming of rice and a wide variety of vegetables and developing cattle-breeding. Furthermore they indirectly aided in the establishment of high quality of medical care and the medical institute in Suriname (Van der Kuyp 1973).

In commemoration of the 75th anniversary of the Indian emigration in 1948, governor Brons addressed the Indians in the former coolie barrack as 'Citizens of Suriname'. Within two decades following this monumental statement, Indians had become the largest, most influential and prosperous ethnic group in Suriname. Many would re-migrate to the Netherlands prior to the independence of Suriname in 1975 - mainly because they wanted to keep their Dutch nationality and felt insecure about the economic and social prospects of Suriname. Notwithstanding this re-migration, or possibly also because of it, the emigration of Indians to Suriname should in the final analysis be seen as a positive journey from Bharat to *Sri Ram Desh*.

Notes

- 1 For a long time, this college was the only higher educational institute in Suriname. It was founded because of the high mortality rate amongst Indian emigrants in 1873 and 1874.
- 2 The passing of van Roosevelt in 1891 at the age of 68 was deeply regretted by the Indian emigrants. A large crowd of Indians was said to have attended his funeral. See Fontaine (1980: 114).
- 3 See Emmer (1984: 240, 250).
- 4 See database Amrit (1998).
- 5 According to Tinker, most Indians in the Caribbean, after three or four generations, lost the ability to speak or write in their mother tongue. In drawing this conclusion, it is possible that Tinker did not account for Suriname where Indian languages remain vibrant. See H. Tinker (1974: 13).
- 6 The spread of education amongst Indians in Trinidad and other British colonies in the Caribbean was more gradual when compared with Suriname. For example, even in 1953, half of the Indian adults in Trinidad were illiterate. Part of the reason why education did not spread as quickly amongst Indians in the British colonies in the Caribbean was due to concerns of conversion to Christianity. In Trinidad, the Sanatana Dharma Maha Sabha had to fund Hindu schools to educate the children, mainly due to these

concerns. In Suriname there was less pressure to become a Christian if you wanted to be educated. In addition there were non-religious coolie schools for children. Such schools were largely absent in the British colonies in the Caribbean.

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The South Asian Diaspora

Transnational networks and changing identities

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