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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 from 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 Mariënburg – 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' (Hoefte 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/Hindostani 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 February1974, 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 came 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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