

# No “holy cows” in Surinam: India, communal relations, identity politics, and the Hindostani Diaspora in Surinam



**Ellen Bal** <sup>1</sup>

*VU University Amsterdam*

and

**Karthika Sinha-Kerkhoff** <sup>2</sup>

*Asian Development, Research Institute, Ranchi (India)*

## Introduction

In 2003, the Government of India (GOI) organised the seventh World Hindi Conference (WHC) in Surinam. Among others, the GOI hoped that by holding the WHC in Paramaribo (Surinam's capital) it would, 'help us to establish better relations between India and various Caribbean countries'. J.C. Sharma, Secretary Ministry of External Affairs (GOI) also expected that the conference would 'strengthen the global relation between all those people in the world who spoke a form of Hindi'.<sup>1</sup>

There was trouble however when local participants during the conference started questioning the GOI's hidden intentions. Many Indian delegates, participants objected, seemed to mistake the World *Hindi* Conference for a World *Hindu* Conference.<sup>2</sup> Some of the Hindostanis<sup>3</sup> we interviewed thought it a shame that India had been 'trying to export her own problems to the Caribbean'. They meant the edgy relationship between the Hindus and Muslims in India, which is generally referred to as the problem of 'communalism'.<sup>4</sup> Interviewed participants from Surinam said that they had 'nothing to do with those communal problems that exist in India' and added that, 'Hindostanis here in Surinam have a very harmonious relationship among themselves and religion does not divide us like it divides people in India'.

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Ellen Bal is an Assistant Professor, Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology, Faculty of Social Sciences, VU University Amsterdam, Netherlands, Email: [ew.bal@fsw.vu.nl](mailto:ew.bal@fsw.vu.nl)

<sup>2</sup> Dr. Kathinka Sinha-Kerkhoff is the Director of Research, Asian Development Research Institute (ADRI), Ranchi (India). Email: [dirresearch@adri.co.in](mailto:dirresearch@adri.co.in)

Indeed, during our field-visits in Surinam between 2001 and 2005<sup>5</sup>, we were time and again struck by the fact that Muslims and Hindus were united by a firm ethnic consciousness more than separated by strong religious sentiments (Bal and Sinha-Kerkhoff 2005 and Brinkerhoff and Jacob 1994). Neither do present-day developments in India seem to have much local impact in Surinam, nor does the incidental visitor from India fundamentally influence (national or communal) identities of these Hindostanis. Clearly, Hindostanis (Hindus and Muslims) are Surinamese and Indians are Indian (Sinha-Kerkhoff and Bal 2003).

Nevertheless, ethnic and linguistic similarities between Indians and Hindostanis in Surinam are recognised and so are other cultural parallels such as food habits and religious practices. Besides, Hindostanis in Surinam also mentioned that they share a common history with Indians in India. Thus, although Hindostanis are explicit in the rejection of equivalence between Indians and Hindostanis, the territory of their origin is very much present in individual memories, which are ingredients of identity formation. In other words, there is a link between members of this migrant community in Surinam and the nation of origin (India); a link that is needed for a diaspora to come into existence (Bruneau 1994).

In this article the connections and disparities between Surinamese Hindostanis and India are centralised. We demonstrate that while identities among these Hindostanis emerged through territoriality, the process of linking with its history accompanied a conscious disassociation from contemporary developments in India. We illustrate the beginning and the end of this identification with the history of Indians in India and argue that during these somewhat contradictory processes the community emerged as an ethnic diaspora, rejecting communalist identities.

India and Surinam are separated by around 20,000 kilometres and we found that this considerable distance has also impacted the minds of those whose ancestors embarked on ships in the port of Calcutta since 1873 and crossed the *kalapani* (black waters) (Cf. Carter 2000). Among those who stayed put in Surinam only a few were able or willing to maintain contacts with India. After the first generation of migrants had passed away, most relations with relatives in British India ceased to exist. By 1916, when ships stopped bringing in new migrants from India, migrants increasingly looked upon India as the land of their ancestors if even that. Besides, in 1927 these British Indian *aliens* formally became recognised as Dutch subjects in colonial Surinam and then the Netherlands also became the official motherland for many among these Hindostanis.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, simultaneously the route to India was not altogether forgotten (Cf. Rajasingham–Senanayake 2003).

In this article we demonstrate that the first half of the twentieth century witnessed a change in focus among the British Indians. Slowly but steadily they came to perceive of Surinam as their ‘beloved Surinam’, ‘dearly beloved country’,<sup>7</sup> without forgetting Hindostan, their ancestral land.<sup>8</sup> We furthermore argue that the years between 1927 and 1950 were particularly crucial in this process of identity

formation. In these two decades religious tensions between Hindus and Muslims developed in various parts of Surinam. We analyse these events against the background of communal conflicts in India between the 1880s and 1947, in terms of differences, similarities, influences and outcomes, and aim at understanding the impact of place on communal relationships (Cf. Bal and Sinha-Kerkhoff 2006).

During periods of communal strife, religious differences are generally projected as absolute (and therefore global) and not as localised. People are made to believe, for example, that Hindus and Muslims form two separate and antagonistic religious categories, wherever they live, and that *nowhere* they can live together in harmony. The present-day reality in Surinam defies this (communalist) theory and demonstrates that communalism is a local rather than a global phenomenon. The religious tensions between Hindus and Muslims in Surinam were rather dissimilar to those witnessed during so-called communal riots in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century India, although the latter also impacted the former, but in a rather unusual way. In India communal strife worsened and resulted in the partitioning of British India and the formation India and (East- and West-) Pakistan. In Surinam, on the other hand, tensions were more or less solved and in 1949 a joint political party was founded under the name 'United Hindostani Party' (VHP). The party's new slogan was: 'Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Isai; Saba haim bhai bhai; Bharat mata saba ki mai' (Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Christians: all are brothers; Mother India is the mother of all of us) (Gautam n.d). By then, the British Indian migrant community in Surinam had thus developed into a diaspora which, conform to Connor's definition (quoted in Safran 1991, pp. 83-4), retained 'a collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland – its physical location, history, and achievements' and continued 'to relate personally or vicariously, to that homeland in one way or another, and their ethno-communal consciousness and solidarity' was 'importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship'.

We thus agree with McKeown (1999, p. 309) that 'if diaspora is an excellent position from which to highlight diversity, it is also a fine perspective from which to focus on links and flows (...) This version of diaspora can be the basis for a history that starts from the connections between places, and the flows, interactions, and transformations that take place through these connections.' With Smith (quoted in Yeoh, Willis and Fakhri 2003, p. 208), we argue that 'transnational identities, while fluid and flexible, are also at the same time grounded in particular places at particular times.' Such a transnational understanding of identity formation 'disavows essentialist and unchanging notions of identity and emphasizes interconnectedness across borders, highlighting the notion that identities are constantly (re) worked'.

## Communal conflicts and *Kurbani*<sup>9</sup> in India and Surinam

### Kurbani in India

When in 2002 D.N. Jha, a distinguished historian at the University of Delhi (India), wanted to publish his book “The Myth of the Holy Cow”, he received death threats (Pye 2002 and Doniger 2004). In his book, Jha argues, among others, that though many Hindus have alleged that it was only with the Muslim conquest that cows were first slaughtered in India, in truth it was only in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that the cow became the sacred animal of Hinduism. Several reformers, Jha argues, most famously Mahatma Gandhi, made vegetarianism a central tenet of Hinduism. With the Hyderabad Civil Court banning the book, it is clear that in the India of 2002 it was difficult to question not only the sanctity of the cow but “holy cows” (particular ideologies/ideologists) in general.

Though cows have been, for centuries, cultural symbols of non-violence, the tradition of using the alleged literal sanctity of the cow to disenfranchise Muslims, some of whom eat beef and/or slaughter the cows that many Hindus eat, can be traced to the end of the nineteenth century when in various places in British India, as scholars have convincingly shown, people have often used “holy cows” to protect their political and economic (i.e. secular) interests. These scholars demonstrate that it was in particular during 1888 and 1917, and in the Bhojpuri-speaking districts of east Uttar Pradesh (U.P.) and west Bihar (exactly the regions from which the Hindostanis migrated to Surinam) that powerful “Cow-Protection Societies” or *Gaurakshini Sabhas* were launched (e.g., Pandey 1992; Singh 2002). Developments in these districts culminated in serious rioting between Hindus and Muslims in particular during the Bakr-Id festivals. During the 1880s and 1890s, the *Gaurakshini Sabhas* had circulated numerous pamphlets, leaflets and pictures of the cow to drive home the sanctity of this particular symbol.

Several scholars have shown the politics behind the “Myth of the Holy Cow” and have for instance demonstrated why particular Hindus who felt economically and socially threatened rallied round the cow. They have shown why these Hindus became active in the fight for a ban on cow-slaughter or why Muslims fought for their right to practise *kurbani*. These scholars thus explain why sectarian symbols became symbols of authority and focal points of strife, and also how this finally led to communalism in British India (see for instance Krishna 1982 and Bandhyopadhyay 2003). Scholars also show how several Hindu Samajes and reform movements, in order to “purify” their respective religions and combat the powerful propaganda of the Christian missionaries in nineteenth century colonial India, agitated over sectarian symbols with particular concern for cow-protection. These movements of revivalism and reform, these scholars argued, played no small part in deepening the consciousness of different classes of Indians as members of particular religious denominations.

### Hindu-Muslim antagonisms in Surinam: The Boycott

Between 1873 and 1917, 64 boats carried approximately 34,000 Indian indentured labourers from India (Calcutta) to Surinam. Every one of these boats also carried Muslims. According to the personal database of Hindostanis, the first boat, the Lalla Rookh, counted at least 35 Muslims (Cf. Mahawat Khan 2003)<sup>10</sup>. All in all an estimated one fifth of all East Indian or Hindostani arrivals were Muslim.<sup>11</sup> When the contract labourers left British India neither nationalist nor communal identities had crystallised. The schism of the Indian religious communities and its dramatic consequences took thus place after they had left.

In Surinam, Hindu-Muslim relations never developed along the same communalist lines as in India. However, irritation arose occasionally and various sources indicate that in the late 1920s and early 1930s tensions between Hindus and Muslims did give rise to communal antagonism, generally known as the Boycott (e.g., Biswamitre 1978, pp. 223-24). Though Surinam was spared the bitter clashes between Hindus and Muslims that were witnessed in India, the Muslims we interviewed still remember how after 1927 till at least 1943, many Hindus started boycotting Muslims by cutting all socio-cultural and economic links that had previously existed between the two communities. Though the movement was not very widespread and did not encompass all members of the two religious groups, many Hindostanis nevertheless recollect this period as a dark page in the history of the ethnic group. In their memories, like in India, cow slaughtering (i.e. *kurbani*) became a focal point of strife and allegedly antagonised Hindus and Muslims in parts of Surinam.

The most extensive written account of the Boycott is of the hand of Munshi Rahman Khan, a Muslim with a vast knowledge of the Ramayana and other Hindu scriptures. Rahman Khan<sup>12</sup> penned down his memoirs and thereby provides a unique account of the British Indian migration history.<sup>13</sup> Part IV of his autobiography Jeevan Prakash ("Life's Light") (Sinha-Kerkhoff, Bal and Deo Singh 2005: 191-258) provides the most detailed written description of the period in which the Hindu-Muslim tensions arose and subsided. According to Rahman Khan there had been major frictions amongst the Hindus, in particular between a small minority who had become members of the Arya Dewaker and those who remained part of the Sanatan Dharm. There furthermore was discord between upper and lower-caste Hindus and even tension amongst (self-appointed) *brahmins*. Khan detailed however that the problems had primarily started in British India where before, 'people of either religion' had 'lived together in peace' and where there had been 'no sign of the Arya Samaj'. Rahman Khan believed that it had been, 'the formation of the Arya Samaj that led to social unrest in the country' (i.e. British India). He further narrated on pp. 192-193:

Changing times promoted Swami Dayanand to create an Arya Samaj as an off - shoot from Hinduism. The basic philosophy behind it was to criticise other religions and present itself as the true way of life. A society looking down on other religions, highlighting their drawbacks and tarnishing their image was formed. The Swami taught his disciples to be strict in his teachings and this extremism led to a rift between others, especially Hindus and Muslims. A negative impact on the society resulted and riots broke out in India leading to bloodshed and death of several innocents. It was through the newspapers that we learnt about it.

Rahman Khan thereafter continued describing the situation in Surinam on p.193:

In Surinam, the Indians lived peacefully and in harmony for sixty years like brothers and sisters. When Mehta Geminiji arrived in Surinam in 1929, the Hindus and Muslims alike warmly welcomed him. In his turn, he gave several lectures and talks at different places and laid the foundation of the Arya Samaj and with it, in a few days, the seed of discontent and ill will amongst the communities. He then returned to India.

Rahman Khan explained how initially this introduction of the Arya Samaj in Surinam caused internal frictions amongst Hindus but later caused a wave of communal hatred that began in 1933, following a cow sacrifice (*kurbani*) by Muslims, and which ‘engulfed the whole of Surinam by 1934’(p. 215), turning the two communities into bitter enemies. The “Boycott” (of Hindus against Muslims) had started and would last in Surinam, Rahman Khan narrated till 1943 (pp. 215-236).

#### Explanations of the Boycott

Most of our elderly Hindostani informants in Surinam had heard about “the Boycott”. Recollections varied however of the order and even content of the sequences. While Rahman Khan’s version of the Boycott is clearly favourable to the Muslim Hindostanis, other informants presented different accounts. The District Commissioner of the time, for instance, held the Muslims, ‘who did not want to listen to him’, responsible as he had, on the day before the slaughtering, personally tried his best to persuade these Muslims to refrain from slaughtering a cow, but this had been, ‘alas to no avail.’ He added however that the parties should not forget that they both constituted one race.<sup>14</sup>

Most of our informants who narrated the causes for the Boycott immediately referred to *kurbani*, which they argued had ‘disturbed the harmonious relations between Muslim en Hindu Hindostanis in Surinam’. A Muslim from Livorno near Paramaribo told us:

I think the reasons for the Boycott was the local *kurbani*. It had nothing to do with the Indian independence movement. Some local organisations were involved. Livorno became the epicentre of the fight. There was one butcher named Rozan. In the same locality, not far away from here, lived one Pandit Shiv Narain who used to sell milk at Batista. My uncle, Chote Khan also used to sell milk there. He also used to keep cows and owned a shop nearby. Both Rozan and Pandit Shiv Narain were drunkards. One day, Rozan killed a cow and he tied the head of the cow at the branch of a tree for everybody to see. When Pandit Shiv Narain saw this he got extremely angry and involved in a fight with Rozan, which took a serious turn.

An 85-year old Hindu Hindostani who had been a close friend of Rahman Khan also felt that, ‘there was no effect of India’s independence or its Partition in Surinam’. He proceeded:

Indeed some of us received the Sri Venkateswara newspaper from India whenever a ship used to come from there to Surinam. I also received Kalyan, a religious magazine from Gorakhpur. The Boycott lasted till 1943. Pandit Ram Narain, brother of Shiv Narain, and Rozan were the reason for it. Both were very close friends and used to drink together from one glass. But Rozan cut off the head of a cow and tied it on a roadside tree. Thereafter other people started instigating fights to gain popularity.

We also interviewed a *pandit* who used to visit Rahman Khan in order to learn Hindi and had called the latter his ‘father-in-law’ as his relation with Rahman Khan’s son was like that with a brother-in-law. This 94-year-old man narrated that,

In fact *kurbani* was the reason for the boycott in the 1930s. Before that Hindus and Muslims used to have very harmonious relationships with each other. The independence of India had no effect here and was not the reason for the problems around *kurbani* here.

Unlike our other informants, one 85-year-old Muslim, living in Livorno, one of the centres of the Boycott, did blame India for ethnic tensions in the Caribbean. He did not, however, point to the exemplary role of communalism in India, but to the role of the Indian *pandits* who came to various places in the Caribbean:

In the past, people were united but this has changed since India started all this. Fortunately, here it has not come so far. In Trinidad they used to be Trinidadians, now they are Hindustanis. Men from India are responsible for this situation. Guyana witnessed a massacre. Again, the responsibility lies with the men from India. That will be the case everywhere. I am against all this. Their slogan is ‘wherever you are, turn the place into Hindustan, a second India’.

Yet, while directly pointing at the harmful influences of Indian *pandits* on interethnic relations in several Caribbean societies, nowhere does this Muslim informant speak of similar disturbing influences of Indians on Hindu-Muslim relations in Surinam. In his version of the Boycott he too points to its local causes instead of transnational influences.

In short, “holy cows” had become central symbols of Hindu-Muslim conflict both in India and in Surinam. Large sections of one religious community united around the demand to stop cow-killings, which in turn united members of the other community and placed the two communities in an antagonistic relationship. Yet whereas in India, communalism was the outcome of the confrontation between Hindus and Muslims, the Hindostani diaspora in Surinam restored communal harmony, and antagonistic religious identities were rejected and replaced by a common ethnic identity (Hindus and Muslims became Hindostanis). Peace returned in the course of the 1940s, and in 1949 many Hindus and Muslims united in one political party to stand in the elections together. Hereafter we will show that we can only understand this differential outcome through local contextualisation of the events.

### **Contextualising Hindu-Muslim antagonism in Surinam<sup>15</sup>**

#### Hindu and Muslim Hindostanis among other communities in Surinam

Considering the seemingly close similarities between communal strife in India and in Surinam (i.e. in both cases Hindus rally round the cow), it seems logical to link the happenings in the two countries and to seek for causal relations. In a way, Munshi Rahman Khan’s argument is in that direction: Indian Arya Samajis, who had, according to him, also caused religious extremism in India, laid ‘the seed of discontent and ill will’ in Surinam as well. Yet, as also illustrated above, all our informants denied such a (global or transnational) link or causal relationship and emphasised that local factors were responsible for the Boycott. Even Rahman Khan could only explain the Boycott by meticulously exposing the local.

We believe however that in order to understand these local communal frictions we have to contextualise them. During the period of indenture, a strong and common identity developed among the labourers who had migrated from British India; an identity that united them but also set them apart from other migrant groups and the Dutch colonial rulers. Though these British Indians professed different religions and were of various regional and caste backgrounds, a more or less harmonious relation existed, based, among others, on cultural and linguistic similarities. From collected material preserved in Indian archives, it was evident that the colonial powers, both the Dutch and the British, and also (and perhaps because of that) the British-Indian migrants, had notions of caste differences and caste hierarchies. In Surinam, however, these were not institutionalised and the classification system was often altered. In fact, had class and caste to a great extent been linked in India (i.e. upper-caste Hindus constituted the upper class), in the Surinam of the late 1920s,

education, religion (in this case Christianity) and employment (and gender) seemed the primary directives for upward class mobility.

The large majority of British-Indians, who arrived in Surinam between 1873 and 1916, initially worked there as plantation labourers. Yet, already in 1878, when the first contracts expired, some contract labourers made use of the opportunity to settle as independent farmers. De Klerk (1998, pp. 162-65) reports however that the Dutch colonisation policies (and thus chances for upward mobility) only became successful from 1895 onwards (Cf. Hira 1998, p.13). Nevertheless, as a community, the British Indians were looked down upon. Their religious views were portrayed as pagan by the dominant elites, and Christians were given higher status. British-Indian traditions, languages, culture and religions were not perceived as ingredients of the local Surinamese society.

De Klerk refers to the first decade of the twentieth century as the start of Hindostani participation in civil society. In 1910 and 1911, the first two British (competing) associations, to represent the British Indians in Surinam, were founded.<sup>16</sup> Yet it was the abandonment of the indenture system in 1916 that led to the end of colonial politics of segregation and to the acceleration of integration (Gautam 1995, p. 15). Besides, when by 1927 the Hindostanis officially stopped being British-Indians and became Dutch citizens, in the colony Surinam they needed to invent new identities that helped them to get and maintain their legitimate place in Dutch-Surinam vis-à-vis other local migrant groups and the Dutch colonial power. At the time the British Indian community consisted of free agriculturalists, small businessmen, and unlike during the indenture period, many went through some sort of formal schooling and, 'The urge for a better societal position, to belong to the intellectual elite, to acquire possessions and social respect, formed the basis for a breakthrough in Hindostani attempts to emancipate in our country' (Ramsundersingh 1998, p. 93, translated from Dutch).

#### Fragmentation and the institutionalisation of religion

In this process of rooting in Surinam, the apparent harmony within the community started to crumble. By the end of the 1920s local contractions amongst Hindostanis became visible and they were many-sided. Differences between the 'educated' and 'uneducated' caused great schisms, and the peaceful cohabitation between the various religious groups had started to erode. Foremost was the dislike of Christian education, and Hindu as well as Muslim Hindostanis reacted by demanding (money for) their own schools from the colonial Government. This initially united them even more, but by the 1930s it led to strong competition for positions, jobs and status among themselves. Some Hindus, who had previously hidden or changed their ancestors' caste identities, now claimed they should be given the respect paid to the upper-caste *brahmins* or *kshatrias* in India. Other Hindus contested this and felt for example that education rather than caste should be the criteria for a position as *pandit* (priest).

Besides, as migration had brought severe dislocation of the existing social and economic relations among the Hindostanis, and caused a search for new identities, so-called reformers who had come from India to the Caribbean became quite successful in their efforts to introduce new religious and socio-cultural outlooks and life-styles amongst both Hindu as well as Muslim Hindostanis. The early 1930s therefore witnessed religious schisms – not only between Hindus and Muslims but also within both religious groups – and the foundation of different new religious organisations.

In the late 1920s, early 1930s, Muslim Hindostanis became divided in Sunnites and Ahmadiyyas. The introduction of the ideology of Ahmadiyyaism, preached by Moulvi Ameer Ali of Trinidad, who was invited by the local Muslims to teach on Islam, caused a schism amongst the Muslims. The Surinamese Islamic Association (SIV) soon came to be dominated by the Ahmadiyya doctrine causing many Sunni Muslims to leave and form several orthodox groups (Kassim 1999).

Representatives of the Arya Samaj had been active in Surinam since 1912. The Arya Samaj mainly aimed at the reconstruction of the Vedic traditions and strongly protested against contemporary social practices in India such as the practice of widow burning (*sati*), child-marriages, the hierarchical caste system, women's oppression, idol-worshipping and the social veneration of myths. These Arya Samaj missionaries from India had much more success amongst the Hindostanis than the Christian missionaries, and the Arya Dewaker soon swelled in numbers. They called for "self-purification" and a central symbol was selected to unite Hindus under one banner. Between 1912 and 1929, the Arya Samaj was also extremely active in the field of education and in 1929 the Dutch colonial rulers granted corporate personality to the Arya Dewaker. In the same year the Sanatan Dharm started its own organisation (De Klerk 1998, p. 194).

Thus, from a community of transmigrants, who showed much internal coherence but kept looking at India as the anchor for their community identity, the British Indians gradually changed into a Surinamese Hindostani community, in search for new identities. Agriculture, business and education led to upward mobility, but also – in a colonial context – to increased competition within the community and with others. There were struggles over scarce goods such as jobs, and religious conversion became a hot issue. Besides, huge controversies arose regarding each other's social status.

#### Emancipation and the politics of religion

The account of one *pandit* in Livorno is of extreme relevance as it shows there were not only divisions between but also amongst Hindus and Muslims:

I know about the Boycott. It was a Hindu-Muslim boycott as well as a boycott by the *brahmins*. So there actually were two boycotts. If someone ate before the *brahmins* during a function, the *brahmins* along with all other Hindus would boycott the meal. At that time, the Arya Samaj and the Sanatanis were all together. The boycott by the *brahmins* was prior to the Hindu-Muslim boycott. The *brahmin* boycott spread all over Surinam. All the *brahmins* stopped going to any ceremony. If one *brahmin* went to perform *puja* somewhere he would be discriminated by the other *brahmins*. He would lose respect. If the Muslim-Hindu boycott had not been initiated the *brahmin* boycott would have lasted till date. *Brahmins* tried to dominate during that period.

A report of a meeting of the Bharat Oeday held in Thalia on 24 June 1934, and reproduced in 'Onze Stem' as well as another one about the same meeting that appeared in 'De West' (Nieuwsblad uit en voor Suriname) (10 July 1934), also clearly illustrates these internal divisions. Most of the members who attended the meeting (around four hundred Hindostanis) were members of the Arya Samaj. The report both mentions the tensions between Arya Samajis and Sanatanis, and between Hindu and Muslim Hindostanis. The chairman of the meeting Mr. Ragoobar Singh regretted the tense relation between the Hindus and Muslims and explained that its roots lie in 1927, 'owing to the slaughtering of cows'. He asked: 'Since 1872, British Indians are in this country and we have always lived as brothers, so how can we explain these changes? He himself answered: 'The Muslims should not slaughter cows. We should work together if we want to get somewhere, still one party should not try to destroy the other. The action will diminish'. (Translated from Dutch).

However, B.R.A. Sovan in his comment on this report reproduced in 'Onze Stem' provides a different explanation for the tension between Hindu and Muslim Hindostanis. We quote:

In section 5 of the report, the president regrets the tense relations between the Muslims and Hindus. He continues that the British Indians have lived in peace from 1872 to 1927 and that the unbalanced relations among them date from 1927. So for 55 years they have lived in harmony. Why is this harmony now disturbed? Because in that year the sect of Aryans has come into existence in Surinam. Its main goal is to turn everyone into a 'Sudhi', a follower of the Aryan faith, and since the Muslims are not easily persuaded, the Aryans have started their campaign of 'Kudjat', the outcasting of Muslims. They preach amongst the conservative Hindus and against the Muslims. Because of their tolerant attitude the Sanatanis have accepted much. What did the Muslims do? They did not care about any of this and started their own organisation, to facilitate contacts amongst themselves. Then the president continues about cooperation instead of opposition. Where does opposition come from? Not from the Sanatanis, neither from the Christian Hindostanis, nor from the Muslims. The antagonism comes from the Aryans in the Board of Bharat Oeday.

It is further narrated that two members of Bharat Oeday's Board (Kalikhan and Katwaroe) had prepared a list of 65 names of men, all Muslims, who wanted to become member. As the Board rejected the majority of these names, a severe conflict erupted during the meeting and the report concluded that, 'it was clearly noticeable that all who were present were not pleased with the compounding of the board of the Bharat Oeday. Only the Aryans consented. The police had to interfere repeatedly to maintain order.'

In short, after 1927, when some people like Rahman Khan continued referring to 'Hindustan' as their home and to themselves as 'Hindostanis in an alien country', 'a country that was not their own', many, in particular those born in Surinam, abandoned the label 'alien' and felt that their roots were in Surinam. These (often educated) Hindostanis became absorbed in a process of upward mobility among others generated by the colonial Government, which had now made them 'Dutch'. Yet at the same time these Hindostanis remained subjected and they realised the country was still not their own. They felt inhibited, as there were not many alternative routes open to them. Amidst this a search for a new identity emerged, which could replace that of 'British Indian migrant' but which at the same time also could help them to further their interests as a diaspora. At one point, some of them chose religion as the main source of identification and either rallied against or in favour of the "holy cows" exported from India.

### **Concluding remarks: No "holy cows" in Surinam**

In India by 1915 the issue of cow protection, in particularly in U.P. and Bihar, received active support from all classes of Hindus. As a result, Hindu-Muslim conflicts over the controversial question of cow-sacrifice on the occasion of Bakr-Id took place in many parts of the two provinces. These clashes, which resulted in the desecration of mosques and temples and human casualties on both Hindu and Muslim sides definitely catalysed the process of Hindu-Muslim bitterness in British India. Scholars have argued however that initially this divide between Hindu and Muslims in many parts of British India was not of a stable nor permanent nature and that this kind of strife did not inevitably or automatically lead to 'communalism'. As Gyan Pandey argued: 'The contradictions in the locality remained many-sided, and it would be difficult to argue that the confrontation between Hindu and Muslim was the primary one among them' (Pandey 1983, p. 125). With this in mind we once more turn to Surinam where indeed the contradictions in the locality, as we have shown, were many-sided and did not lead to communalism.

We have shown in this article that the period of the Boycott was crucial for the formation of new shared identities as well as identities of difference among and between Hindu and Muslim Hindostanis. We argued that the Boycott transformed these Hindostanis from a transmigrant community living in an alien country, into a diaspora of Hindostan. The Boycott ended in 1943 when, 'after ten long and gloomy years, the Hindus and Muslims came together again through several meetings'

(Sinha-Kerkhoff, Bal and Deo Singh 2005, p.236). In the end, Hindostanis selected a (non-communal) identity as they believed that unity based on ethnic rather than communal lines would better help them to further their interests.

In India, among some Hindus, the line of thinking after the 1870s had become like: “We Hindus have always been here in India, and have never eaten cow; *those* Muslims have come in, and kill and eat cows, and therefore must be destroyed”. This “Hindutva” argument had even become part of a universalist agenda of communalist parties such as the Hindu Mahasabha, which had in 1937 envisaged a ‘greater Hindustan’ encompassing Africa, America, Mauritius, Bali and Surinam (Cf. Bénénéï 1998, pp.117-24). These parties therefore sought to export these arguments (“holy cows”) and thus trying to plant the seeds of communalism in these countries.

When a secular India came into being in 1947, its Constitution promised no discrimination on the basis of religion. Till date religious symbols are however still misused to restrain members of particular religious communities. Communal strife in India ended in communalism and its history has not ended with the establishment of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. In Surinam, Muslims and Hindus decided that a communal basis of politics would only divide and weaken the Hindostanis and that they better stand united. Accordingly, the ‘Vereenigde Hindostaanse Partij’ was established which till date, though not without difficulties and under the new name of ‘Vatan Hitkari Partij’ or ‘Progressive Reform Party’, has been able to maintain its position in the political arena in Surinam.

The so-called Boycott period is remembered as a dark page in the history of the Hindostani diaspora in Surinam. We offer a different memory however as we have tried to show that the Boycott period can be committed to memory as decades during which Hindostanis rejected the “holy cows” of India. In Surinam, the issue of *kurbani* did not deepen the consciousness of different classes of Hindostanis as members of two antagonised religious denominations. In fact, in Surinam Hindostanis came to constitute an *ethnic diaspora* and not a *Hindu diaspora* (Cf. Vertovec 2000 and Bénénéï 1998, p. 120) with neither India nor Pakistan but Hindostan (i.e. pre-partition India) as their homeland. A Hindostan in which as Rahman Khan described, Hindus and Muslims lived in harmony with each other following their own religion.

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with J.C. Sharma conducted by research assistant Alok Deo Singh in Paramaribo during the seventh WHC in 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Some Indian participants, after their return, also commented on this hitch during the conference. See for instance: Vimal Kumar's article in the *Outlook* (23 June 2003, pp. 54-55) (Hindi edition) on 'Hindi ke Daman par Sanperdayik Chiten' (Communalism through Hindi). He comments: 'Right wing writers and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (India) call the World Hindi Conference in Paramaribo successful yet the incidents that took place in Paramaribo tell another story' (...) 'But for a few, the coordination committee mostly consisted of Hindu writers with right wing leanings and thus organizers hoped the Conference will get a "Hindutva" colour'.

<sup>3</sup> People whose ancestors came from British-India to Surinam identify as Hindostanis. We here prefer the spelling Hindostanis above Hindustanis as the group encompasses both Hindus and Muslims, and because our informants prefer this spelling.

<sup>4</sup> We here use Bipan Chandra's rather long but very apt definition. Among others it says that communalism is, 'the belief that because a group of people follow a particular religion they have, as a result, common social, political and economic interests' and it is also the belief that, 'in India Hindus, Muslims, Christians and Sikhs form different and distinct communities which are independently and separately structured or consolidated' and that 'all followers of a religion share not only a community of religious interests but also common secular interests, that is, common economic, political, social and cultural interests'(Chandra 1984, pp. 1-4).

<sup>5</sup> This article is one of the outcomes of a completed project sponsored by the Netherlands Foundation for Research in Tropical Countries (WOTRO).

<sup>6</sup> *Gouvernementsblad van Suriname* (8 Augustus 1927, No.60). See also Choenni (2003).

<sup>7</sup> The newsletter *Vikaash*, published in the years 1946-1948, refers to Surinam 'as our beloved country' ('ons geliefd land Suriname') (May 1947, vol.1, no. 12), or 'our enormously dear Surinam' ('ons aller dierbaar Suriname') (June 1947, vol. 2, no. 13)) and 'our dearly beloved and dear Surinam' ('ons innig geliefd en dierbaar Suriname') (May 1948, vol. 2, no. 24).

<sup>8</sup> See for this: *Vikaash (Evolutie)* published by the League of Hindostanis (Liga van Hindostani's) 1947, vol.2, no. 24, p.5.

<sup>9</sup> *Kurbani* means (cow) 'sacrificing' but is often translated or understood as 'killing' or 'slaughtering', which is for Muslims not the same thing however.

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<sup>10</sup> These 35 people were marked as Muslim,"Musalman". There might have been more Muslims, who were categorised under caste names that were not recognized as Muslim castes by the Dutch administrators. See also: [http://www.nationaalarchief.nl/suriname/base\\_hindo/introductie.html](http://www.nationaalarchief.nl/suriname/base_hindo/introductie.html)

<sup>11</sup> De Klerk 1963, p. 61; Hajary 1937, p. 1; Karsten 1930, p. 11; Ramsodh and Bloemberg 2001, pp. 123 and 125.

<sup>12</sup> Rahman Khan, who was born on 11 August 1874, in Bharkari village, Uttar Pradesh in North India, had set off for Surinam at the age of 24, where he settled after completing his five-year labour contract. Despite a regular correspondence with his relatives back home, in which they repeatedly begged him to return, he never set foot in India again.

<sup>13</sup> Sinha-Kerkhoff, Bal and Deo Singh (2005) introduced and furnished an English edited translation of the autobiography, which was originally written in Hindi. We have also used (our) translations of other unpublished material written by Munshi Rahman Khan in Hindi. Among others a poem 'War between the Star and the Sun' in which Rahman Khan depicts a fight between Hindus referred to as Sun (Bajrang and Timal) and Muslims (referred to as Ushman and Aligol) and a letter 'Religious Warning' in which he addresses 'all knowledgeable and religious people about the importance and respect of mother cow, which has been mentioned in the Vedas and Shastras'. These translations are quoted in the introduction to the English publication of the autobiography by Sinha-Kerkhoff and Ellen Bal (2005: xi-lii). For the Dutch translation of the autobiography see Hira (2003). See also Gautam (1995).

<sup>14</sup> Report in Dutch from the District Commissioner concerning a meeting held between Hindus and Muslims in a public school in Livorno. Gouvernements-Secretaris Suriname, Immigratie en Kolonisatie, Landsarchief Suriname, no.: N 33/20.333, dated 19 April 1933.

<sup>15</sup> For this section we have used, apart from archive material found in the National Archives in Delhi, the West Bengal State Archives (Kolkata) and the Archives in Paramaribo: Grierson (1883); McNeill (1915); Karsten (1930); Hajary (1937, pp. 1-3); De Klerk (1942, pp. 97-117); De Klerk (1963); Malik (1993, pp. 204-8); De Klerk (1998); Mitrasingh and Harpal (eds) (1998); Orna (1999, pp. 120-24); Nandoe (2000, pp. 235-43); Ramdin (2000); Baumann (2001, pp. 59-81); Gautam (2001); Ramsodh and Bloemberg (2001).

<sup>16</sup> In 1910 the *Surinaamsche Immigranten-Vereeniging* and in 1911 the *Surinaamsche Britsch-Indiërs-Bond: Ikhtiyār aur Hak*. See De Klerk (1998, pp. 173-74).

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