

## **THE CONSTITUTION OF PLURAL SOCIETIES: THE CASE OF SURINAME**

Ruben Gowricharn

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A plural society is described as a society comprising two or more elements or social orders which live side by side, yet without mingling, in one political unit. In most cases, the concept is loosely used wherever there are two ethnic groups. The problem stemming from this casual use is that the constituent element of the plural society, the ethnic group, is taken for granted. This is conspicuous since in the last half century, the literature about ethnicity grew tremendously, enabling different interpretations of ethnic groups and hence, of plural societies. This paper deals with the ethnicity of groups in plural society. It takes the constitutive elements of the theory of plural society as its point of departure and argues that the plural society comes into existence only when ethnic groups are formed, thus implying that the presence of the group cannot be taken for granted. This argument is illustrated with a case study of the British-Indian indentured laborers in Suriname. The theoretical review yields a number of topics on the basis of which the characteristics of the plural society can be tested. After describing the ethnogenesis of the British Indians in Suriname, the final section discusses the concept of Furnivall. It is concluded that the Surinamese society does not fit into the model of Furnivall's plural society since crucial elements are missing. The concept of plural society requires a redefinition to comprehend Caribbean societies.

### **Furnivall's Plural Society**

According to Furnivall, a distinguishing feature of plural society is the lack of a common will. "...in a plural society there is no common will except, possibly, in matters of supreme importance, such as in matters of resistance to aggression from outside...In economic life this lack of common will, which characterizes plural societies, finds expression in the absence of any social demand" (1939, p. 447). The "plural economy differs then from a homogenous economy firstly because, in place of social demand common to the whole society, there are two or more distinct and rival complexes of social demand proper to each constituent element; secondly, by the grouping of production into castes; and, thirdly, by the further sectionalization of demand which follows when the social demand, proper to each constituent element, ceases to embrace the whole scope of social life and become concentrated on those aspect of social life falling within its separate province" (1939, p. 452).

Nine years later, Furnivall described the plural society as a medley of people, "...for they mix, but do not combine. Each group holds by its own religion, its own culture and language, its own ideas and ways. As individuals they meet, but only in the market-place, in buying and selling. There is a plural society, with different sections of the community living side by side, but separately, within the same

political unit. Even in the economic sphere there is a division of labor along racial lines. Natives, Chinese, Indians and Europeans all have different functions...as it were a caste system, but without the religious basis that incorporates caste in social life in India" (1948, pp. 304–305). And again, "Here is one of the distinctions between a homogenous society and a plural society. A plural society is broken up to groups of isolated individuals, and the disintegration of the social will is reflected in a corresponding disorganization of social demand. Even in a matter so vital to the whole community as defense against aggression, the people are reluctant to pay the necessary price" (1948, p. 310).

"In a homogenous society the desire of profit is controlled to some extent by social will, and if anyone makes profit by sharp practice he will offend the social conscience and incur moral, and perhaps, legal penalties" (1948, pp. 311–12). Furnivall also made a distinction between plural society and a society with pluralistic features: "Outside the tropics society may have plural features, notably in South Africa, Canada and the United States, and also in lands where Jews has not been fully assimilated into social life...There is a society with plural features, but not a plural society" (1948, p. 305). It is not clear whether and to what extent societies with pluralistic features lack a common social will.

The concept was applied in different continents, notably Africa and Asia, but it was the Caribbean area where it was fully employed. It was adopted by the Dutch scholar van Lier (1949) in his description of the social history of Suriname. A decade later, the concept was the subject of discussion at a conference on social and cultural pluralism in the Caribbean. The contributions to this conference, of which the leading paper was presented by Smith (1960), were published in a special issue of *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* (vol. 83). Except for a collection of Dutch conference papers (den Hollander et al., 1966) in the sixties, scholars were hardly critical and used the concept rather casually. In the seventies, the concept gained importance in political science (Lijphart, 2008), but it remained either attacked or under-theorized.

The methodological status of the concept was subject of discussion. Given the contested nature of the concept of plural society, the question of how to use it arose. One answer was that it should be used as an ideal type (van Lier, 1949). This implies that the concept does not describe a historical reality but acts as a device that orders facts and data, and in so doing, it is only used heuristically. However, the plural society was explicitly designed by Furnivall as a polar type. In order to establish the validity of the concept, the logical step is to test whether the assumptions of the plural society hold, and its peculiar features are consistent with the assumptions made. Smith (1960) took a different position: for him, the concept was a "reflection" of reality. In contrast to the ideal type approach, his position has the potential to contradict the underlying assumptions of the theory.

Basically, the responses related to the Caribbean societies on this concept can be classified in three categories:

- Some scholars found the concept useful, and tried to refine it along different lines (van Lier, 1949; Rex, 1959; Smith, 1960; Hoetink, 1967; Lowenthal, 1960; Speckmann, 1966; Oostindie, 2006);
- Others raised questions about certain features of the concept, without rejecting the concept overtly (Wagley, 1960; Rubin, 1960; van den Muizenberg, 1966);
- A couple of scholars rejected the concept, albeit on different grounds (Jenkins, 2008; Premdas, 1993);

For the application of the concept of plural society in Caribbean societies, four elements require discussion:

1. The issue of ethnicity. The presence of the groups is often taken for granted. This goes for both Furnivall and the Caribbean scholars (van Lier, 1949; Smith, 1960; Braithwaite, 1960; Lowenthal, 1972). While this may be legitimate for Asian countries, in Caribbean societies, this ethnic group formation requires explanation.
2. The number of ethnic groups. Furnivall requires a minimum of two groups (the white colonials and the indigenous population). This feature is based on the presupposition that the indigenous population is internally homogeneous, and thus, that the plurality exists by the grace of the colonials. In that case, after decolonization, the plural society thus defined ceases to exist (Wertheim, 1966, p. 91). Hence, it is logical to assume that the plural society should consist of at least three ethnic groups.
3. The size of the ethnic groups. One may wonder whether tiny groups like Chinese or Amerindians determine the plural nature of the larger Caribbean societies. Since the concept pretends to describe a social structure and corresponding cultural plurality, the groups should be sizeable enough to influence social structure, economy, and polity.
4. The issue of the social cohesion of the plural society or the lack of common social will (van den Muizenberg, 1966; Wertheim, 1966).

### **Explaining Ethnicity and Ethnogenesis**

A current definition of ethnic groups is from Max Weber: “We shall call ‘ethnic groups’ 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 the group formation; conversely, it does not matter whether an objective blood relationship exists” (1978, p. 389).

Banton points out that Weber "...neglected to investigate the processes by which sentiments of identification were reinforced or undermined" (2007, p. 32). This problematic relationship between the genesis and ontology of ethnic groups can also be found with other authors. This is obvious with Furnivall (1939). Geertz (1971, p. 199) is another example; for him, ethnic groups exist by the grace of "primordial sentiments," which result from "assumed primordial givens" such as kinship, being born into a specific religious community, speaking a specific language, following certain customs and manners. The "assumed primordial givens" are inherited elements that are stimulated in the process of modernization; they are givens from which nobody can escape. The logical implication of this point of view is that the problem of ethnogenesis is a non-issue: it is a "natural" or non-disputed given.

The description from Weber and Geertz can be interpreted as a family model: ethnic relations are assumed to be primordial and are overriding. This position has been elaborated by many other scholars (Horowitz, 1985; Roosens, 1998; Gil-White, 1999). A different position is described as circumstantialism: external factors drive individuals together and generate an ethnic group. This external approach is characterized by a combination of utility and instrumentalism: the ethnogenesis is often the result of a political or economic interest that the groups derive from the social context. Cornell and Hartman (1998, pp. 65–66) point out that the external approach has "...difficulty dealing with ethnicity in and of itself. It attributes the resilience of ethnicity to something outside the realm of the ethnic, to some other kind of forces, such as economic or political interests."

Barth's name (1968) is linked to a third perspective on ethnicity. According to him, the ethnic group is a social organization whose borders are not formed in geographic and social isolation. On the contrary, "...ethnic distinctions do not depend on an absence of social interaction and acceptance, but are quite to the contrary often the very foundations on which embracing systems are built..." (Barth, 1968, p. 10). Groups can be related culturally and yet be distinct (or want to be different), and vice versa, groups can be different from one another without a meaning being attached to this difference. Hence, Barth distinguishes between a cultural group and an ethnic group. The first refers to the "content" of the cultural group, and the second is determined by the borders the group draws with respect to other groups. By centering the border, the ethnic character of the group is defined by the relations with other groups. The border is variable and is determined in interaction with other groups—not in geographical or social isolation. Barth formulates his view in strong terms: it is "...the ethnic boundary that defines the group, not the cultural stuff that it encloses" (1968, p. 15).

One major flaw in Barth's conceptualization is the distinction between the "stuff" and the "boundary." In fact, the distinction seems untenable. The relational approach of ethnicity holds for all groups—not only ethnic groups—while social

borders are always determined in interaction. For example, access to an ethnic group may depend on the similarity of phenotype, command over the language, or professing of the religion. In case a person who clearly belongs to another racial group (for example, a white person in a south Indian village) does not have these characteristics, his access to the local ethnic group is not self-evident. Access to the local ethnic group is nonetheless possible, for example, through learning the language, practicing the religion, and adapting clothing. That is to say, the concrete nature of the “stuff” forms the border. The nature of the stuff and hence, of the border is different again and again, and it has a varying effect for different groups in different contexts.

According to Cornell and Hartman, the most important group ties are shared interests, shared institutions, and shared culture. Each of these ties generates another kind of tie. The shared interests are the most vulnerable because they depend strongly on external conditions. The shared institutions and culture are more stable, lasting, and decisive for the social life of those concerned (Cornell & Hartman 1998, pp. 86–87). Various authors argue that explanations of the genesis from primordialism and from instrumentalism are not mutually exclusive (Horowitz, 1985; Roosens, 1998; Eriksen, 2002). However, “context” does not have the same meaning for all authors. The general critique is that economic and political explanations underestimate the emotional force of ethnic ties and overestimate the influence of material forces. An ethnic group may have political and economic interests, but this is different from defining it in these terms (MacKay, 1982).

The three models of ethnicity do not disclose the origins of ethnicity. They are just explanations of what ethnic groups are, not how these groups come about. Yet, they have some relevance. Ethnogenesis presupposes that the group does not exist and has to originate. So there is a development from point zero to the mature ethnic group to describe. This final stage, the mature ethnic group, as well as the forces that might generate it, are described by the three models of ethnicity. The boundary-model will be disregarded: it is too general as it goes for all groups. Moreover, since this model concentrates on the boundaries rather than on the “stuff,” the “substance” of the group cannot be explained or described. That is not to say that the boundary-model is useless: it has a great potential to analyze processes of creolization, a potential that has to be elaborated. In this paper, we will employ the primordial and the circumstantial model for the analysis of the ethnogenesis.

### **Surinamese Society and Ethnicity**

Suriname is a former plantation colony that was exploited under Dutch rule. The white population comprised members of various European countries, including French Huguenots and Jews. Originally, the plantations were run with slave labor. The plantation economy deteriorated for various reasons, of which the most important was the increased use of steam mills. By this, the slaves were no longer

required and were frequently released (Gowricharn, 1985). These slaves turned away from the plantations, so that the planters feared a shortage of labor, and settled mostly as peasants. Later got increasingly employment as laborers and small producers in the emerging gold and balata production. In 1853, a decade before the abolition of slavery, the colonial administration experimented with the immigration of Chinese, which failed. In 1873, 10 years after the abolition of slavery, a start was made with the immigration of British-Indian indentured laborers. This lasted until 1914. In the period 1890–1939, Javanese from the present-day Java were imported. From 1930 onwards, this immigration consisted of free immigrants, as the plantation sector almost ceased to exist by that time.

It is generally assumed that black slaves constituted a group, but technically speaking there were a social category with a common interest vis-à-vis the white colonials. Among the blacks, there were different subcategories as house slaves, field slaves, free blacks, light skinned blacks etc. There was no ethnic similarity or unity, except for those moments that they revolted against worsening living conditions. Ethnogenesis, as meant here, happened, however, among the Maroons. Those blacks formed separate communities, with a distinct group consciousness that they were different from the blacks on the plantations and in urban areas, and that they had a different language and tribal culture (Hill, 1996). In its history, Suriname knew six Maroon tribes that lived in the interior of the country. Before the Second World War, they were hardly involved in the coastal society where the rest of the population lives.

After the abolition of slavery, the former slaves gradually retired. They settled in small-scale agriculture, specialized in commercial cacao and coffee production and cultivating a mixed assortment of products for subsistence use and sale. The cacao production expanded and the small peasants gradually transformed into an agrarian petit bourgeoisie (Heilbron, 1982). At the turn of the century, the flowering cacao production was severely hit by the Krulloten disease. As a result, the development of the creole peasantry to a petit bourgeoisie was arrested. The majority of the creole population could escape marginalization by getting employed in the gold and balata sectors, a small part remained in peasant agriculture or sought refuge to urban handicraft. This pattern of employment and settlement lasted until after the First World War.

Between the World Wars Creole ethnic sentiments started to arouse. Creole teachers, a highly prestigious profession at that time, blamed colonialism for the destruction and repression of their culture and their retarded position. The struggle for cultural revaluation concentrated on the defense of the use of the creole vernacular, during the 20th century, called negro-English. Black consciousness increasingly started to manifest itself. After the Second World War, the Surinamese government provided scholarships for study in the Netherlands. Especially among the black students, anti-colonial consciousness grew slowly and steadily and evolved

into a Creole chauvinism. This Creole chauvinism was subsequently equated with Surinamese nationalism (Marshall, 2003). Because there was no countervailing claim on nationalism and because the creole nationalism was not recognized as Creole ethnicity, this group was able to impose its definition of nationalism and “Surinamesehood” on the rest of the population.

After the Second World War, the Surinamese polity was modernized. Universal suffrage was introduced and political parties and trade unions were established, leading to the first general elections in 1949. All the major political parties were founded on religious and ethnic basis (Dew, 1978). The Creole population, composed of black and light skinned creoles, organized themselves in the Nationale Partij Suriname (NPS, National Party of Suriname), claiming an encompassing political representation. In the mid-fifties, this creole bloc fell apart along its color lines, the black segment taking the party over. Creole ethnicity was a response on colonialism, and this reaction included its light-skinned representatives. The Hindostanis organized themselves in the Verenigde Hindostaanse Partij (VHP, United Hindostani Party) and the Javanese established the Kaum Tani Persatuan Indonesia (KTPI).

Creole ethnicity was clearly a reaction against colonialism; its dynamic was determined by external forces. Had the forces that united them been internal, their ethnicity would have been primordial. However, a significant part of the Creole population wanted to escape “blackness,” preferred to mix with other races (Breeveld, 2000). As a result, the majority did not react against the external groups and the pro-black (ethnic) feeling remained limited. Not all groups had the same ethnogenesis, however. In the next section, it will be argued that in contrast to Creole ethnicity, Hindostani ethnicity was primordial in nature. The nature of the plural society was to a significant degree determined by their ethnicity since the British Indians were the second major group.

### **The Ethnogenesis of British Indians**

During 1873–1914, 34,000 British-Indian indentured laborers were imported through a 5-year labor contract. Approximately 11,690 of these persons choose not to stay in Suriname so that the immigration surplus was approximately 21,500 persons. The immigrants could return to British India, renew the contract afterward, or settle as peasants in the colony. From the beginning, the immigration policy was directed to both the creation of labor supply for the plantations and increase of the scanty population, although the accent during the first decades of the immigration was on providing labor for the plantations. To that end, the government established settlements near the plantations. After 1895, the accent shifted to settling of the immigrants as small farmers (Heilbron, 1982). For this purpose, the colonial administration increased the possibilities to get land on long lease. Subsequently, more and more immigrants settled down as peasants and increasingly this happened



outside the settlements. This trend made an early start as can be seen in the table below.

TABLE 1: NUMBER OF IMMIGRANTS IN SETTLEMENTS AND OUTSIDE IN SMALL-SCALE AGRICULTURE

<i>Year</i>	<i>Settlements</i>		<i>Outside settlements</i>	
	<i>Immigrants</i>	<i>Non-immigrants</i>	<i>Immigrants</i>	<i>Non-immigrants</i>
1906	3104	1827	2954	9260
1910	5633	3477	8853	11365
1915	9692	3226	7569	12489
1920	11449	3538	10729	10036
1925	14177	3534	17254	10275
1930	16561	2895	21982	10333
1935	21643	3128	29373	14562

*Source:* Colonial Reports, statistical appendices

The immigrants originated from the northeastern part of erstwhile British India. The vast recruitment area comprised the United Provinces, Bihar, Bengal, and Oudh, which together supplied more than 90% of the immigrants. It may be inferred that the migrants are characterized by rather diverging manners and customs. More than 70% of the immigrants were between 20 and 40 years and a substantial 14% was between 10 and 20 years (Bhagwanbali, 1996, p. 135). About 27% of the immigrants were women (see annex 1) and only 30% of them were women older than 10 years. According to estimates, 20-35% of the immigrants traveled as a family (Bhagwanbali, 1996, pp. 94–96). Other data collected by de Klerk (1953, pp. 111–12) also reflected a large variety in castes, professional groups, language, and lifestyle.

In terms of manners and customs, the people from British India were thus heterogeneous. The shaping of an ethnic unity was also constrained by the pattern of settlement. The immigration extended over almost half a century and consisted of the continuous arrival and departure of small numbers of immigrants who originated from different geographical, social, religious, linguistic, and cultural regions. Considering the wide distribution over plantations, settlements and plots outside settlements, the number of British-Indian laborers must have been small on all points. The question that arises is how these scattered small numbers of immigrants, who did not know each other, shaped themselves into an ethnic group.

### **The Community Shaping**

The community shaping evolved from a micro to a macro level. The first social contacts came into existence in the depots for the embarkation from Calcutta, the port from where the British Indian indentured laborers left for Suriname. During the journey, which lasted 3 months on average, new contacts were made and old



ones reconfirmed. This also happened during the forced stay in a depot on arrival in Suriname (Bhagwanbali, 1996). Men who made the journey together called each other *Jahadis* and these connections continued to exist in Suriname long after arrival (Gautam, 1999).

On the plantations, the indentured laborers distinguished themselves from the remaining black laborers. Most of the British-Indian laborers came from the northeastern part of India. Somatically, they had features that phenotypically show great correspondence with the Caucasian race. Thus, the differences in appearance with the black laborers appeared big—a phenomenon that Hoetink typified as “somatic distance” (Hoetink, 1967, p. 153). Among others, somatic differences were expressed in cultural stereotypes of the indentured laborers and the black laborers (Hoefte, 1998, pp.102–104). Racial blending rarely happened. There were on average two interracial marriages in the period 1892–1917 (Hoefte, 1998, p. 178). The somatic distance made for a “natural” line of demarcation between the various groups.

The formation of families has probably been a bottleneck in the early years of settlement. Assuming that the demographic reproduction took only place within the British-Indian community, this could not have happened on a large scale because of the small number of imported women (27%, see annex 1). The number of endogamous families must have been a third on average in that period, unless women from neighboring British Guyana, who had a longer immigration tradition, were recruited. The proportion of men and women was restored in later years, among others through the return of mainly men to India (Lamur, 1973).

On the plantations, a crystallization of the language, religious rituals, and feasts took place. Maintenance of social contacts and attendance in rituals and feasts outside one’s own settlement were difficult, however. Connecting roads were few and poorly maintained. The same can be said of the waterways. Contractually, freedom of movement was so limited that the contacts and activities were concentrated on the plantations. The demographic and cultural composition of the plantation population became homogeneous, although the relative share of the Dutch Indian laborers increased in the course of years. The black laborers retired from the plantations and settled in other sectors. During 1873-1910, their numbers on the plantations decreased from 10,604 to 1,737, while the number of Asian immigrants increased from 4,229 to 14,813 (Hoefte, 1998, p. 128). As the infrastructure improved in the second half of the 20th century (there were hardly any laborers under contract after the First World War), private person traffic among the British-Indians increased and thereby the social networks within the group.

Gautam (1999) points to two simultaneously occurring linguistic processes: on the one hand, a process of *koineization*, a contact between speakers of different dialects, lead to the emergence of a new language, which later became known as *Sarnami Hindustani*. Concurrently, a diglossic situation emerged within the

Hindustan community. The Sarnami became the informal *community language* that was spoken at home and at work. By contrast, during religious meetings or formal meetings, Hindi (and sometimes Sanskrit) was the language spoken. This hierarchy of languages still prevails.

Between 1890 and 1906, so-called coolie schools were established on a few plantations in which children were taught in their own language. These schools were a compromise between the desire to educate Hindustani children and their temporary stay in the colony. As more immigrants settled permanently in the colony, these schools were considered superfluous. During 1907 and 1929, non-graduated Hindustani teachers were given the option to teach at district schools with many Hindustani children. This education was either independent or as preparation for education in Dutch (de Klerk, 1953, pp. 129–30). The implementation of this scheme remained controversial. The *Surinaamsche Immigranten Vereeniging* (Suriname Immigrant Association), established in 1910, continued to strive for education in the native language but met stiff resistance from the Roman Catholic Church and the educational inspection. The option was withdrawn in 1929 (Hoefte, 1998, pp. 174–5). Since then, education in Hindi has been a private matter.

Besides family formation and language, the “demolition” of caste-related rituals and ceremonies was important for the development of homogeneous religious representations and practices (de Klerk, 1953, p. 170; Bihari, 1974; van der Burg & van der Veer, 1986). The complex character of the caste system could not be maintained as a result of the geographically wide distribution of the immigrants, in combination with the relatively small numbers of people in each region, the bringing into line of all indentured laborers in the labor process by the plantation authorities, the distribution of services and goods via the market or by other ethnic groups (especially Chinese) rather than through caste channels, the impossibility to maintain caste endogamy, and the waning of prescriptions regarding purity and food. This breakdown of the caste structure enabled the pundits to monopolize the ritual and knowledge function to become the only religious authority. With the disappearance of the caste system and the simplification of local Hinduism, social equalization and cultural homogenization of the immigrants became easier.

Parallel to the simplification or caving in of local Hinduism, the followers of the largest Hindu movement established in 1930 their own association, called *Sanatan Dharm*. One year later, the *AyraSamadj* was introduced, a monotheistic reform movement inspired by English colonialism with the rejection of the caste system as its main characteristic. At that time, its followers were few but their numbers have grown to an estimated one-fifth of the Hindu population. Besides, the Hindustani community comprised about 20% Moslems of mainly Sunni origin. In 1929, the *Surinaamsche Islamitische Vereeniging* (Suriname Islamic Association) was born. In terms of family forms, colloquial language, authority relations,

manners, and customs, the Hindustani Muslims in Suriname belong to the same ethnic group as Hindus.

As contacts outside the plantations increased, community life developed. This was expressed, among others, through attendance in special occasions such as birth(days), marriages, and funerals or other religious meetings. New forms of music, song, and dance emerged, while social intercourse, old manners, and customs changed and a number of “imported” festivals such as Divali, Holi, and Tadjia were celebrated. Other culture-specific elements such as traditional clothing, jewelry, and dishes were maintained (de Klerk, 1953, pp. 211–215; Sukul, 1947, pp. 81–83; Ketwaru, 1998). Association life started early, especially a flourishing sports club life in which mainly cricket and, to a lesser degree, football were popular. The clubs were named after the great men of India, such as Rabindranath, Gandhi, Azaad, and Nehru (de Klerk, 1953, p. 203; cf. Sukul, 1947).

### Participation and Group Consciousness

The colonial administration had conducted an assimilation policy via the Christian churches and the educational system. Children of immigrants were subjected to compulsory education, but those in the 10-15 age group were contractually obliged to work. The Christian mission met with resistance from the immigrants and a categorical approach - whereby, among others, Christian schools paid attention to Hindi education and Hindustanis were denied access to creole boarding schools - had little effect. This policy of the colonial administration and churches was intended to ease the integration of immigrants (Ramssoedh, 1995). To that end, the citizenship of the immigrants was also adjusted. In 1916, they were given the opportunity to select a first name and a surname like the other citizens - previously they were only registered with a letter and a number. Further, in 1927, a law was passed that gave the descendants the status of Dutch subject, which was identical to Dutch nationality (de Klerk, 1953, pp. 182–186).

The visibility of the new immigrant groups increased also through demographic growth.

TABLE 2: FIVE-YEAR AVERAGES OF THE TOTAL AND THE BRITISH AND DUTCH INDIAN POPULATION

	<i>Total population</i> (1)	<i>Asian population</i> (2)	<i>2 as % of 1</i>
1906–1914	100720	26924	27
1915–1919	115832	34351	30
1920–1924	129447	30101	23*
1925–1929	145768	60811	42

\*Data on two years are missing in this figure.

Source: adapted from Snellen (1933: 160)

Hindustanis continue to reject racial assimilation, because “their ‘*volkskracht*’ [‘people’s strength’] should not be leveled to their advantage” (de Klerk, 1953, p.211). Cultural assimilation nevertheless took place in the command over the Dutch language, the “adjusted” clothing, reduced number of differences between the sexes, and new forms of social conduct.

The relationships between the Hindustanis and black creoles were ambivalent at the outset. De Klerk (1953, pp. 221–24), using published colonial reports, mentions as cause among others: Hindustanis have a dislike of the black creoles on account of the color of their skin; it is a dislike that is reinforced by the perceived loose morals of the lower creole classes. Conversely, creoles look down on the coolies, whom they consider as intruders and who are perceived to be further removed than they are from the Western-Dutch culture. It was also believed that the Hindustanis lacked a sense of community, truthfulness, and reliability.

The light-skinned creoles shared these sentiments. They constituted the administrative class who possessed political power in the colony in the first half of the 20th century and who propagated Western culture as the ideal. They opposed the preservation of the culture of the new immigrants. With this, they collided with Governor Kielstra (1933–1943) who drastically changed the assimilation policy being followed to date. Kielstra, a former professor of colonial economics at the Agricultural University of Wageningen, professed the basic philosophy that agrarian producers should be left in their own cultural environment. On three counts, Kielstra collided repeatedly with the light-skinned elite who dominated the *Staten of Suriname* (the colonial Parliament).

The first issue was his *desa* policy. It included the immigration of Javanese and their settlement in traditional village configurations. This policy was diametrically opposed to the assimilation policy followed so far and it was considered as the “Indianization of Suriname.” Kielstra sidetracked also a significant number of higher Suriname officials, demanding that official posts in the rural districts should preferably be allotted to officials with experience in Indonesia. The second issue of conflict was the influence of other groups in the political decision making. Before 1936, the members of the States were elected on the basis of census suffrage, by which active and passive political rights depended on economic wealth and educational level. To strengthen the interests of the Hindustanis and Javanese, the constitution was revised and the possibility of nominating five members from the Staten by the Governor was opened. The third issue was the legal recognition of the ritually concluded Hindu and Moslem marriage, a measure for which leaders of the British-Indian immigrants had fought for two decades. Against the wishes of the State, Kielstra pushed this through in 1940 (Ramsoedh, 1990).

Kielstra’s strive to create cultural and political space for the Asian groups was also based on complaints and requests of the emerging British-Indian elite (de

Klerk, 1953, p. 175). The actual political integration ran via the development of the Hindustani leadership. In 1910, the *Surinaamsche Immigrants Vereniging* (Suriname Immigrants Society) was established with the objective of defending the interests of the British-Indian indentured laborers. The society changed its name in 1924 because it wanted to remove the term immigrant from its name and opted for *Bharat Oeday* (faithfully translated as “upcoming Hindustani”) as its new name. In 1911, a rival society, the *Surinaamsche British-Indische Bond* (Surinamese British Indians Union) was established whose creed was “Protection, fraternization, and integration of the British-Indians without distinction.” Note that it was after 37 years that the embryonal Hindustani political elite organized itself and made a stand for group interests while immigration was still going on. The ethnic group was perceived as people who originated from India. This reflected a (dawning) group consciousness that also intensified as a result of the problems around Kielstra.

Parallel to the political emancipation, the economic integration of the Hindustani took place. The policy of colonization, implemented after 1895, enabled an increasing number of indentured laborers to settle in the colony as peasants. They achieved prosperity, thanks to the possibility to own land, to the available physical infrastructure such as irrigation and drainage facilities, and to the availability of a sufficient number of family labor and markets. The Hindustanis became the rice producers in Suriname. The First World War isolated the country from the world market so that food import stagnated. The cultivators of rice profited from the domestic food shortage, enabling rice production to grow by more than 200% (Heilbron, 1982, p. 279). Although Hindustanis produced mainly rice, in most cases, their farms were mixed enterprises that also sold vegetables, (beet) roots, wheat, milk, and eggs.

The acquired welfare can be indicated by the land ownership of the British-Indians.

TABLE 3: SHARE OF HINDUSTANIS IN THE TOTAL NUMBER OF  
IMMOBILE PROPERTY TRANSACTIONS

<i>Year</i>	<i>Hindustanis</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>in %</i>
1937	55414	436710	12.7
1938	81298	571446	14.2
1939	54555	498887	10.9
1940	79811	625667	12.8
1941	156871	912177	17.2
1942	181959	1154827	15.8
1943	379532	1500510	25.3
1944	386588	2346941	16.4
1945	211845	1459398	14.5

*Source:* de Klerk, 1953, pp. 199–200

One indicator of the welfare is savings. According to the overviews of the Colonial Savings Bank [Spaarbank] on December 31st 1918, the number of depositors of British Indian origin was 2708 compared with 8583, the total number of Surinamese. The average amounts saved were, respectively, 144 and 44 guilders. Another indicator of the welfare is the ownership of companies: in the period 1939–1950, one-third of the number of registered companies in the capital Paramaribo, and 85% of the companies in the most important district of Suriname were in Hindustani hands (Gowricharn, 1990, p. 128).

In December 1941, the Dutch Queen promised to give more autonomy in domestic affairs to the colonies after the war. Although the message was primarily directed to the Indonesian nationalists and intended to prevent collaboration with the Japanese, the political effect was that universal suffrage was introduced in Suriname (Dew, 1978, p. 68–73). In 1945, the Hindustani-Javanese Central Council (Hindostaans-Javaanse Centrale Raad) was established, a committee of 13 religious and trading associations. The coalition between the Hindostanis and Javanese did not last. After the break up, this Council was transformed into the present United Hindustani Party (VHP). The VHP advocated the interests of the agrarian population such as more land, roads, credits, agrarian information, and more investments in educational and medical provisions. Politically, they advocated general franchise, proportional representation on district basis, autonomy in the districts, and training and education (Dew 1978, p. 60). By the Second World War, the Hindustanis got a clear ethnical and political shape and had evolved into a mature ethnic group.

### **Transnational Connections**

Understanding the ethnogenesis of British Indians in Suriname includes the contacts that the immigrants maintained with their country of origin. Although the concept of imagined community suggests a closed community that coincides with a nation-state, it can be expanded to refer to a transnational community. The most dominant types of transnational contact that emerged between the immigrants and British India were family contacts. One of the most revealing indicators of this contact is the transfer of money to relatives. Annex 2 shows the registered transfers of money of the immigrants in the period 1895–1939. These amounts are not complete, for those who returned also brought money and jewelry for fellow indentured laborers. Writing of letters was another form of communication. The same annex 2 gives a picture of the volume of the correspondence that took place despite limited technological, social, and physical possibilities. Since a large number of immigrants were illiterate, those letters were most likely written by literate immigrants such as interpreters and teachers.

Apart from these physical indicators, there are other forms of expression of the continuing orientation on the country of origin. It is more than plausible that there was an import of goods from British India. The community in Suriname felt

a need for culture-specific goods such as spices, clothes, jewelry, household appliances, and all kinds of religious artifacts that were indispensable for its institutionalization. As the settlement of the British-Indian indentured laborers progressed, the need for these culture-specific products most probably increased. It is also reasonable to assume that substitution of the required products partly took place, but a complete substitution is unlikely because of the big difference between Suriname and British India in terms of human and material resources and product technology.

Originally, communication with British India was maintained through the arrival of new immigrants who were the messengers of the "latest news." Later, memory was kept alive by the many references of names of associations and political orientations. The influence of religious leaders from India was reflected in the foundation of the major currents of Hinduism and Islam. To this may be added the many references in official speeches to India as the motherland (Bharat) and to Hindi education. Besides, there was a continuing political identification with India. This may be illustrated by the collection of thousands of signatures by the Association of Suriname British-Indians in 1913, meant to support its request for sending Mr. Chimman Lal and Mr. MacNeill who instituted an investigation into the conditions among the British-Indian immigrants in other plantation colonies. In a letter to these gentlemen, dated April 10, 1913, the president of the British-Indians Association expressed his gratitude for having been treated well in Suriname. "We request you on your return to India to be the courier for the entire British-Indian population of our best wishes and of the message that their compatriots in Dutch-Guyana are being treated well and that they still cherish love for their country of origin although being separated by thousands of miles" (quoted in de Klerk, 1953, p. 175).

Note the phrase of the continuation of "love for the country of origin" and that the group element consists of having a "common country of birth." In the same letter, there was a request to increase the number of female immigrants to more than 50% of the men, to recognize legally the marriages conducted according to the religious rites of the Hindus and Moslems and to apply better physical and mental selection criteria in the recruitment of new immigrants (de Klerk, 1953, p. 175). Nothing much came of the first demand on account of the start of the First World War and the termination of the labor migration by the Indian nationalists. Therefore, nothing came of the demand to apply a better selection process. The only demand yet to be complied with was the recognition of the ritually concluded marriage of the Hindus and Moslems. This was formalized in 1940, thanks to Governor Kielstra (Ramsøedh, 1990, p. 131).

### **Back to Furnivall**

The outline of Furnivall's conception has yielded five topics that define the specificities of the plural society. The first and most important of these was that the



presence of the ethnic group, that is often taken for granted. While this can be safely done for Asian countries, as Furnivall did, in Caribbean societies this ethnic group formation requires explanation. We have demonstrated that the formation of ethnic groups in Suriname followed two trajectories: one route to black ethnogenesis that was a reaction to slavery and colonialism, better known as reactive ethnicity; and an Indian ethnicity based on a family resemblance, called primordialism. The implication of these two forms is that when the external constituting forces diminish or vanish, the group cohesion is weakened. In contrast, the primordial ethnicity is felt as natural and of a longer duration. The nature of the ethnicity of other groups - Javanese, Chinese and even the *douglas* who have distinguishing features of a separate ethnic group - needs yet to be established.

Furnivall's statement that "Each section in a plural society is a crowd and not a community" (1948, p. 307) was an incomprehensible mistake. Regarding Suriname, race and kinship could have been diminished as binding forces as a result of exogamy. That process did not happen on a large scale, probably due to the success of the British Indians in establishing their cultural institutions. That success was partly attributed to a large homogeneity in class background, the existence of major differences in language and religion between immigrants on the one hand and society at large on the other, and the availability of ample symbolic repertoire. Internal factors were overriding. The genealogical development, expressed in a common past (immigration, race, kinship, and endogamous reproduction) went parallel with a group consciousness and an increase of the internal networks and ethnic cohesion.

Furnivall requires two ethnic groups for the qualification "plural society," including the white colonials. This implies that the validity of the concept of plural society is restricted to the colonial period. If the validity of the concept is to be extended, and assuming that after decolonization the colonial upper class retires or marginalizes, minimally three groups are required. These groups should be sizeable enough to determine the social structure of the plural society. Their impact can be read off, for example in the supply of labor, the significance of the sectoral specialization or the political influence. Although Furnivall did not specify the criteria to determine the importance of the particular group and even though it is hard to establish a precise yardstick for that purpose, it should be clear that not every ethnic group has the same weight.

More damaging is Furnivall's claim that the different groups meet in economic transactions. This interdependence might have legitimately assumed if and when the produce of the British Indians and creole population was consumed by the white upper class. There are reasons to believe that this was hardly the case. The domestic sale of agricultural produce was limited, while the majority of the black population was involved in gold and balata. These products were exported, as was part of the agricultural surplus produce. Apart from the food, other items for

household reproduction of the upper class, or to maintain their political power, could not have been produced by the British Indians and creole population. The “buying and selling” between the two classes was extremely limited.

The same absence of “buying and selling” characterized the relations between British Indians and black creoles. They were employed in different economic sectors that did not exchange products, labor, or capital. Insofar as they shared agriculture, they produced non-complementary goods. Here too, there was no need for trade and meeting in economic transactions. There is no room for an economic interpretation of interracial relations as Furnivall had. The closed boundaries of the groups had less to do with resource competition in the same market but were more likely the result of the way the ethnogenesis took place. However, this is not to say that there was no animosity. Fear of anticipated competition and feelings of inferiority or superiority have marked the interracial relations. From the material presented, two factors emerged, which are virtually absent in the literature discussed before: transnational influence and leadership. These factors are conspicuously absent in the literature, even when it is stressed that an actor perspective is important and that the nation is not a closed entity (Barth, 1968; Roosens, 1998; Cornell & Hartman, 1998).

It is, therefore, highly unlikely that the social cohesion of the plural society was generated by economic forces as Furnivall would like to have it. These forces were practically absent in the case study discussed: there was hardly trade between the British Indians and black creoles and there was hardly competition between them. Nor were British Indians living “side by side without mingling.” Furnivall’s formulation suggests that the groups not only were living side by side, but that they left each other alone. As outlined, while the contacts between the two mentioned groups diminished early in their history, there was no indifference. If there was a need to forge any degree of social cohesion, it was political in nature. That was not achieved by regulating the economic traffic between the ethnic groups or regulating competition. Rather, it was by widening the economic opportunities for the different groups.

According to Furnivall, the plural society is devoid of a common will. This proposition presupposes a collective unity that might have reflected an ideal type of Western society. However, it has never been close to reality at whatever point in history, a point made in the literature about nationalism (Weber, 1976; Conversi, 2004; Baycroft&Hewitson, 2006). Bypassing that Furnivall’s homogenous society is a distortion of the image of Western society (cf. van de Muizenberg, 1966), it can be argued that the state (including the colonial state), always represents the common will. The implementation of the collective will presupposes that the authority of the colonial state is largely uncontested. It is therefore most probable that the cohesion of the colonial society was not forged, but brought about by the acceptance of the authority of the colonial state. On this element, the relationship between social cohesion and coloniality, the Caribbean requires more research.

## ANNEX 1: FEMALE IMMIGRANTS 1881–1916

<i>Year</i>	<i>Immigrants (1)</i>	<i>Of which</i>		<i>2 as % of 1</i>
		<i>Women (2)</i>	<i>Married women</i>	
1881	496	156	28	31
1882	754	117	24	16
1883	1304	374	68	29
1884	1476	429	193	29
1885	nb	nb	nb	nb
1886	305	88	59	29
1887	nb	nb	nb	nb
1888	429	123	60	29
1889	1013	290	158	29
1890	1067	307	134	29
1891	511	148	51	29
1892	1067	304	119	28
1893	1665	520	173	31
1894	1086	304	123	28
1895	1411	416	142	29
1896	1067	304	88	28
1897	597	173	nb	nb
1898	562	163	44	29
1899	560	154	74	28
1900	nb	nb	nb	nb
1901	678	218	54	32
1902	1322	346	96	26
1903	nb	nb	nb	nb
1904	231	58	15	25
1905	171	44	13	26
1906	1270	320	98	25
1907	1019	265	104	26
1908	1833	486	212	27
1909	1906	503	171	26
1910	nb	nb	nb	nb
1911	nb	nb	nb	nb
1912	1216	309	100	25
1913	1773	461	138	26
1914	748	188	71	25
1915	nb	nb	nb	nb
1916	304	81	24	27
Total	27841	7649		

*Source:* Bhagwanbali, 1996, p. 96.

ANNEX 2: MONEY TRANSFERS AND CORRESPONDENCE BETWEEN  
SURINAME AND BRITISH INDIA

<i>Year</i>	<i>Number of immigrants</i>	<i>Amount of money in guilders</i>	<i>Letters from Suriname to India</i>	<i>Letters to Suriname (mainly) from India</i>
1895	64	2300	Nb	Nb
1896	111	3946	Nb	Nb
1897	205	7830	N	Nb
1898	187	8644	Nb	Nb
1899	205	9463	820	653
1900	135	4197	545	404
1901	126	6083	596	433
1902	155	5494	498	351
1903	112	7014	514	366
1904	122	4394	471	381
1905	96	3866	264	242
1906	106	4970	397	331
1907	108	5994	516	466
1908	148	4342	701	535
1909	187	5616	1053	849
1910	217	7834	1244	1011
1911	146	6448	901	882
1912	102	5710	851	791
1913	80	4472	671	528
1914	65	4149	512	380
1915	38	1034	377	220
1916	60	2294	311	200
1917	29	2024	93	80
1918	18	1002	64	40
1919	27	1262	260	140
1920	44	2933	211	160
1921	25	1780	135	100
1922	40	1880	1662	135
1923	13	2305	75	161
1924	5	980	1	Nb
1927	78	1641	Nb	Nb
1929	100	3389	Nb	Nb
1930	Nb	8382	Nb	Nb
1935	180	3255	Nb	Nb
1936	129	1730	Nb	Nb
1937	113	2583	Nb	Nb
1938	116	3981	Nb	Nb
1939	74	1324	Nb	Nb

*Source:* Colonial Reports and SurinaamschVerslag

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