''Hamar larkan ke ka hoi, hamar bitia ke ka hoi?'' The Influence of Migration History on the Identity of Hindostani in The Netherlands.

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“Hamar larkan ke ka hoi, hamar bitia ke ka hoi?” The Influence of Migration History on the Identity of Hindostani in the Netherlands.

Master Thesis
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Abstract

In this interdisciplinary thesis, I use history and anthropology to research the influence of migration history on the identity construct of Hindostani people in the Netherlands. The work is anthropological because I created data by interviewing 23 participants about their lives and experiences, and historical because I used a framework of scholars who have researched the complex fields of identity, colonialism, migration, and transnational history or have specifically researched Hindostani people and their history. Combining these datasets, I present a case study that goes in depth to find out what the influence of colonial migration is on Hindostani people in a 'postcolonial' society such as the Netherlands. The conclusion is a careful but meaningful one, as it offers insights into both the people I interviewed and the society in which they live. This study shows that identity is so complex and personal that migration history has divergent meaning and effect on the lives of individual Hindostanis, so that even pointers such as age and gender cannot indicate the importance of that history to a Hindostani person. The only exception to this was religion, as religious participants ascribed more meaning to their migration history. Their history played a large part in the constructing of their identity and in the raising of their children. Lastly, I argue that both interdisciplinary and microhistory, even though small-scale, are key to historical research, especially of colonial history, by creating data and writing *with* the people who are the embodiment of that history.

Keywords: Hindostani, case study, the Netherlands, Suriname, India, colonial history, migration, identity, transnationalism, anthropology, microhistory.

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Word of Thanks

Before introducing my topic, I want to thank everyone who has assisted in any way during the research and writing of this thesis. Finding participants for my interviews was relatively easy, that started by asking my partner if he could ask some family members if they would be willing to be interviewed by me. That was the only question I had to ask. A few family members then connected me to their friends and (distant) family, resulting in too many options, and I had the luxury of selecting from many people so that I would have a diverse study group. In the interviews, the participants shared many of their personal stories and experiences, so that I could conduct my research. Many, many thanks to everyone who has been willing to do this—some of whom even (in a COVID-19-friendly way) invited me into their homes and cooked me a meal. The writing of this thesis would have been impossible without your participation. It also would have been impossible without my partner; thank you for standing by me during hard times.

I want to thank my thesis supervisor, Dr. Peter Meel, who helped me get started and who has been very patient throughout the process, providing me with helpful feedback. Dr. Meel has been very understanding and flexible during these times, which I have appreciated highly. I have noticed that the pandemic and online teaching has been stressful for students and teachers alike, and I am proud of how resilient everyone has been. Lastly, I want to thank dr. Alicia Schrikker for being the second reader of this thesis. Her workshop on Microhistory inspired me to dare to really zoom in and focus on one topic, and to invite multiple disciplinaries into my research.

Introduction

Hindostani in the Netherlands have repeatedly been described as well-integrated, being relatively high educated and having low criminality numbers. In various newspaper and online articles, they have received the label of being 'invisible' in Dutch society. [1] Chan Choenni, perhaps the most well-known expert in Hindostani history and integration, argues that this invisibility is partly due to the Hindostani themselves. He states that they are not integrated in all aspects of Dutch society and underrepresented in the public sector (Choenni, 2014: 284).

While reading those articles and Choenni's work, I thought of the Hindostani people I know and wondered what their opinion on this would be. While asking around, they started telling me about their experiences with their migration history. It made me consider how three to four generations of Hindostanis have lived on three different continents and I wondered about the effects that this migratory past might have on their present and their future. I was particularly interested in whether and how migration history affects the construction of their identities: are transnational links affecting their daily lives, and if yes, how?

I have chosen to conduct an anthropological-historical case study to answer these questions. I am aware that I will be unable to draw conclusions about 'the' Hindostani identity. I simply cannot interview enough people, and even if I could, it would still be impossible to derive a conclusion from the sum of them. What I do hope to deliver is insight into Hindostani identity in the Netherlands, how diverse this can be, and *why*. The *why* in this is crucial: What makes some Hindostani people cling to their heritage while others (partly) let it go? Additionally, this thesis is inductive as it tries to derive careful conclusions about the postcolonial society of the Netherlands and the effects that its history of colonization has had and continue to have on Hindostani people in the Netherlands.

This case study specifically concerns Hindostani people in the Netherlands, but it can provide insights into how colonial history can impact societies. It can shed light on invisible

[1] Examples of articles that discuss the invisibility of Hindostani in the Netherlands:
Trouw, 18 June 2011: 'Hindostanen integreren geruisloos'
Nrc, 7 September 2021: 'De Hindosttaanse Surianmer is weinig zichtbaar: 'we moeten harder durven roepen'.

links, social relationships and dynamics that would otherwise be overlooked or accepted as normal or static, not taking history into regard.

Before I start discussing the interviews and different topics, it is essential to provide some context on colonial history. When I write about Hindostani people, I am referring to the people who lived in British India and then migrated to Suriname as contract workers. They were recruited by the Dutch government after the formal abolition of slavery in Suriname in 1863—a deceitful formality since slavery went on for another ten years. Dutch plantation keepers realised they needed new workforces to keep their plantations profitable, so a contract with the British was established (Choenni, 2014: 28). Recruiters began gathering British-Indians who were willing to travel to Suriname for the promise of mountains of gold. The number of contract workers who left India between 1873 and 1916 is estimated by Choenni to be 34,000. Surinamist Michiel van Kempen rightly mentions in his reading on 150 years of Hindostani history that even before 1873, in 1868, a group of 99 migrants travelled overseas to Suriname (Van Kempen, 2018: 27). Most of the migrants stayed in Suriname after their five-year contract; around 30 percent of them would return to India (Choenni, 2014: 28). Those who stayed would form the largest ethnic group in Suriname, consisting of approximately 150,000 people in 2016 (Choenni, 2011: 3). Below is a picture of the Lalla Rookh, the first ship with Hindostanis that arrived in Paramaribo.

Image 1: British-Indians arriving in Paramaribo after a long journey on the Lalla Rook ship.[2]

Here, the Hindostanis worked on the plantations under tough conditions. People lived in former slave huts, and from the outset, almost a fifth of the contract workers died because of the labour conditions (Choenni, 2020: 13). Later, conditions improved, and even after the

[2] Hindostanis on the Lalla Rookh ship, via www.lallarookh.nl

contract period ended in 1920, most British-Indians would stay and become known as Hindostanis (Now, they were no longer considered British migrants, but their own ethnic group (Choenni, 2020: 32). In 1954, the Hindostani obtained Dutch nationality, which made it possible for Surinamese people to migrate to the Netherlands around 20 years later.

This migration happened mostly in the period around the independence of Suriname in 1975. It had multiple causes but was mostly influenced by the uncertainty of what would happen to Suriname as a nation. The people arriving in the Netherlands were brought to shelters all over the country before they were addressed permanent housing. Below, the arrival at Amsterdam Airport Schiphol is pictured; this was the second migration.

Image 2: Hindostani parents and their children arrive at Amsterdam Schiphol, November 10, 1975.[3]

Most Hindostanis settled in The Hague, Amsterdam, Rotterdam and Utrecht (Gowricharn, 2017: 1624). Today, it has been almost 50 years since they arrived in the Netherlands and almost 150 years since they left India. A strong emphasis on schooling and integration has made them the highest educated ethnic minority in the Netherlands, only slightly lower than the white Dutch population (Gowricharn, 2017: 1625).

This is a short version of the migration history of the Hindostani people I speak with and write about in this case study. To be abundantly clear: I do not mean the followers of Hinduism (Hindus), as not every Hindostani person is religious and not every religious Hindostani person believes in Hinduism. I also do not mean the Persian name for India

[3] 'Hindostanen en kinderen arriveren op Schiphol', 10 november 1975. From the National (Dutch) Archive [Nationaal Archief, collectie Algemeen Nederlands Fotopersbureau].

(Hindustan). There is no geographical place bound to Hindostani people; they live all over the world, but, by far, most of them are situated in Suriname and the Netherlands.

This thesis provides context for the lives of Hindostanis in the Netherlands and gives an impression of what colonial history can mean in the present. This is one of the strong suits of learning and teaching history: to better understand the present through the past. There are more than 175,000 Hindostani people in the Netherlands (this number is from 2013 and has grown since then), making this study about slightly more than 1% of Dutch citizens (Choenni, 2014: 15).

This alone may have provided enough impetus to carry out this case study; however, the historical relevance is what has driven me. Studying colonial and global history, I have found that it is impossible not to connect history to the present. And though Suriname is well-known as a former colony of the Netherlands, it is mostly the creole people from Suriname who are recognized as Surinamese. Chinese, Hindostani, and Javanese people are often overlooked in Dutch colonial history.[4] I researched the postcolonial setting in the Netherlands to provide insights into why this is the case.

As a white woman from the Netherlands, I am aware of my outsider position in conducting this research. I cannot be completely objective, however hard I try; I have always lived in the Netherlands, and I am therefore blind to some aspects that can only be seen from outside the system I was born into. For this reason, throughout this research I mostly asked questions and the reader will primarily hear the voices of Hindostani people with whom I had conversations; I can spend years reading books on their history, but I do not have the lived experience of it.

My thesis question is: *How is the identity of Hindostani people in the Netherlands influenced by their migration history, and what is the role of Dutch society in the construction of this identity?*

My sub-questions are:

- How is Hindostani identity constructed?
- What are the lived experiences of Hindostani people regarding their migration history?

[4] 'Het onzichtbare succes van de Nederlandse hindoestanen'. 14 januari 2015, Ad Valvas.

- How is transnationalism experienced and how does it influence the participants' identity?
- How is the postcolonial climate in the Netherlands experienced in relation to Hindostani identity and what can this case study tell us about Dutch postcolonial society?
- What may identity constructing of Hindostani people in the Netherlands look like in the future?

My hypothesis was that religious and/or older (older than 65 years of age) Hindostani people living in the Netherlands are more prone to holding on to their migration history and cultural heritage than non-religious and/or younger Hindostani people. I expect that these participants let their migration history influence their identity more. This hypothesis was based on my own comprehension of and experience with religious and older people and their 'clinging' to cultural heritage. It was also based on the notion that new generations and younger people are more likely to assimilate to Dutch society because of their education and upbringing in the Netherlands, whereas their grandparents have grown up in either Suriname or India, closer to their ancestral roots. I presumed that both time and place were important factors in the intensity of holding on to cultural heritage, other factors may be gender, community, and personality. I expected the role of Dutch society on the construction of Hindostani identity in the Netherlands to be significant, as I was aware of the silencing of Dutch colonial history, prior to this research. I was unsure about what to expect regarding the experience of the participants with Dutch society.

Methods

Subtopics

I applied the following research methods to (partly) prove or disprove my hypothesis. In this thesis, I focused on the participants' experiences with their migration history and how it shapes their lives in the present. I considered including a different chapter for the literature; however, I chose a more incorporated approach of combining the history and interviews wherever that seemed of added value. I used the following subtopics to work out the interviews and data together:

- The construct of Hindostani identity
- Migration history
- Transnationalism and belonging
- 'Postcolonial' Netherlands
- Building the future
- (Hi)stories

These subtopics provided a body to my thesis that made it possible to answer my research question and sub-questions. They are mostly intertwined topics that overlap, but I will discuss them separately to try to obtain more specific and conclusive knowledge. Abstract concepts such as 'identity', 'transnationalism' and 'postcolonial' will be further explained and discussed in the relevant chapters.

The Interviews

I selected 23 participants with criteria that aimed to create a study group as diverse as possible. I considered age (18 or older), gender (male, female or other), religion (non-religious, Hindu or other), and place of residence (within the Netherlands). I deliberately did not ask the participants for their educational background. I did ask the first few participants at the start of the interview about their level of education, but I felt uncomfortable doing this after just having explained to them that I was studying at the university with the interviewee as my 'subject' of research. I also experienced some defensiveness when I asked

this question; the two participants I did ask started to explain how and why they had not studied more. I stopped asking for this information as I did not want to take a chance that the participant would feel judged. I do, however, realise that different levels of education may influence identity since it can influence the social and economic situation of the participants.

The recruiting of participants happened mostly through the snowball effect, where I asked participants if they knew anyone who would be willing to participate. I was worried that this would result in too many participants from only Amsterdam and The Hague, but luckily this was not the case. There was also a variety in age and gender (slightly more female than male participants). It was difficult to find people older than the age of 70, since most interviews had to be held over the phone or video calls due to COVID-19 restrictions and being extra careful, which was not technologically possible for everyone.

The interviews were semi-structured, meaning that I had a set of the same questions that I could ask every participant, but it was not my intention to be strict about this. It happened that some participants touched upon a subject or question themselves, meaning I did not have to explicitly ask. Some spoke (compared to others) so much about one subject that these questions took up more space than other questions. When possible, I would let the participant take the lead. That way, they would showcase what is of great importance to them, resulting in passionate and personal insights and stories about artefacts in their home, family members, experiences, and feelings. The exception is that in the first five interviews, I asked two questions that did not turn out to be relevant for my research after all. I stopped asking those two questions and did not transcribe the corresponding answers from the first five interviews. The interview questions that I did ask every participant are listed below.

All participants remain anonymous. Therefore, in this thesis, there are only references to numbers, such as ‘Interview 19’. More information about the participants can be found in the transcriptions. All recordings were deleted after having transcribed the recordings. All interviews were conducted in Dutch. Thus, I had to translate the quotes that I wanted to include in the thesis into English. There is always the risk with translating that certain ways of saying things or implications within languages will get lost or misinterpreted. I have stayed as close as possible to the original recording when translating. I have not included my introductions or the post-interview conversations. During the introductions, I explained the topic of my thesis and what the participants could expect. After the

interviews, I thanked the participants and asked if they wanted to rephrase or correct anything. I stopped interviewing after the first 23 participants because I felt that my study group was diverse enough for this thesis.

The 15 Interview Questions

1. How would you describe your own identity? (When prompted, I would be more specific.)
2. Why would you describe it like this; how is or was your identity shaped? (For example: through upbringing, education, traditions, religion, values, community, or history)
3. How much do you know about the migration history of Hindostanis? How did you learn this?
4. How interesting do you find the migration history? Does it (somewhat) shape your identity?
5. What do you think the influence of the migration history (from India to Suriname and from Suriname to the Netherlands) is on Hindostani people?
6. What do you know or what have you experienced about views on Hindostani people in the Netherlands?
7. When and where do you feel most at home? Why?
8. Have you ever been to Suriname? If yes, how often? If no, would you like to visit?
9. Have you ever been to India? If yes, how often? If no, would you like to visit?
10. What do you think about how Dutch society and/or the Dutch government handles their colonial past?
14. What is your opinion on the supposition of Hindostani people in the Netherlands being so integrated that they are described as almost invisible in Dutch society?
15. What is your view on the newest generation of Hindostani in the Netherlands? What would you like to advise them? In the case of your own children or grandchildren, how would you raise them (culturally and identity wise)?

Literature

This thesis will not stand on interviews alone; I will use academic literature about colonial history, migration, identity, and societies to provide a framework for the data I gather from the interviews. I am not the first to write about Hindostani in the Netherlands. Authors such as Choenni and Ruben Gowricharn have intensively researched Hindostani and their lives in

Suriname and the Netherlands. The decades long dedication of Choenni in this has laid a foundation of work that other scholars have built from – or argued with. I will be using his studies as a literary framework for my research.

My addition to the field will mainly be that this thesis is based on a in-depth, small scaled case study. Choenni holds the most ground on the subject of Hindostani people in the Netherlands and has extensively researched this subject. Both large-scale semi-structured studies and case studies have been executed by him and his peers, but the case studies were still relatively large scaled. Meaning that in these studies, there was – in comparison to my thesis and other anthropological work – relatively little room for the voice of Hindostani. I am not trying to exclusively challenge Choenni's expert analysis and work on -what we can say is – 'his' field. I am nowhere near as involved and do not have as much expertise and experience as scholars like Choenni. I am merely intending to add a different, more zoomed in, perspective. However, the reader of this will find that I often question his findings by comparing his conclusions with what I have found in my case study. By using the framework of literature for my case study while staying critical of that framework, I hope to present not a definitive conclusion to my research question but a well-researched impression of Hindotani identity construction in Dutch society.

Graphs

Graphs are included to give an overview of responses. It is important to note that these are generalizations of answers according to my interpretation of them. No participant filled in a questionnaire, and these charts and graphs are only included in this thesis to give impressions and overviews of answers. That is why there are no numbers or percentages to be found with the graphs. I will derive no conclusions from them as this is not a quantitative study, meaning (as previously stated) I am not looking for conclusive answers on identity.

The Construct of (Hindostani) Identity

The purpose of this chapter is to gain an understanding of what identity *can* be without immediately taking migration history into consideration. The first question of the interview was very open and broad, perhaps even unclear. This was intentional, as I wanted to hear how the participants would answer such a complex and open-ended question before I would get more specific (when necessary). The question was, 'How would you describe your own identity?'

Answering this question is not a simple task. It was fascinating to get diverse answers on this and hear what the first things that came to mind were when participants described their identity. Some participants immediately countered the question by asking what I wanted to hear, to which I would respond that it was not about what I wanted to hear, but about what was important to them. Some reactions were: 'I am a progressive Hindostani woman,' 'I am Hindu,' or 'I am a citizen of the world.'

The complexity of the question was described by multiple participants when I asked them about their identity. One participant also mentioned that she was often asked about her nationality, but was not sure how to answer:

> Do they mean my ethnic background, the way I look? Do they mean where my parents and grandparents lived and where my accent is from (Suriname) and from where I have adopted many cultural traits? Or do they mean where I live now, and what's in my passport?[5]

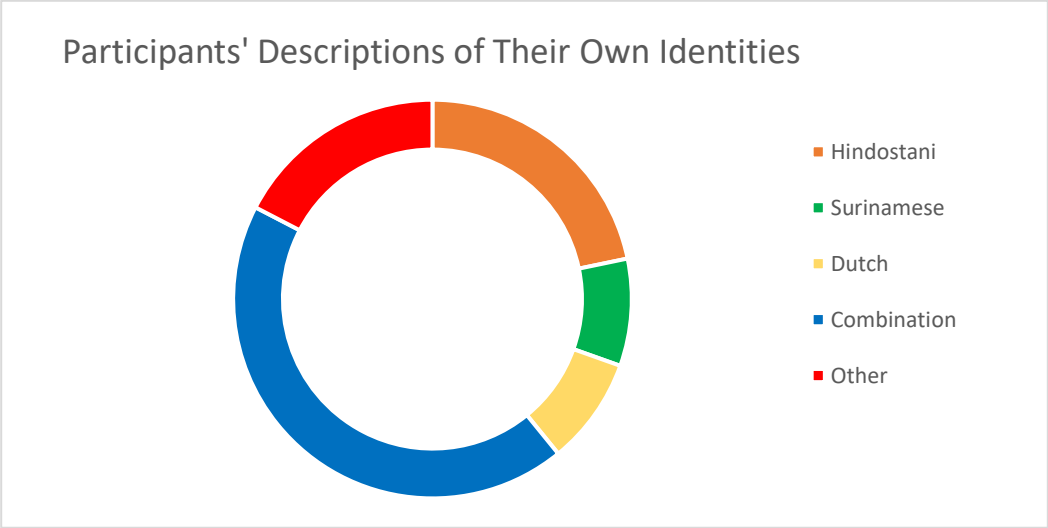
Another participant said that their identity depended on their surroundings:

> I think for me it has to do with that if I say I'm Dutch, Dutch people around me see things in me that they recognize as Dutch. When I'm in Suriname, I think some Surinamese people would look at me and say 'yes, that's what makes this man Surinamese.'[6]

One person took a pause of almost two minutes and then started to think out loud about how they perceived their own identity. It was a difficult question that was answered in

[5] Interview 1, female, 38 years old.
[6] Interview 17, male, 60 years old.

numerous ways, but it certainly encouraged the participants to dig deep into their idea of 'self.' I received more definitive answers to the closed-ended question of what their ethnic or national identities were. I asked whether they were Dutch, Hindostani, Surinamese, other or a combination. Pictured below is a graph giving an impression of the answers to this question.



Identity is a concept that is first constructed by the person themself. It is an imagination of the self, but not one that is completely random (Van Kempen, 2018: 16). It consists of considerations of a person's upbringing, surroundings, socio-economic factors, family and friends, occupation and so on (Kiang, 2014: 214). Identity is not a construct that is shaped completely by oneself, even if we like to think so. We are heavily influenced by the society we live in as well. I noticed a few gender-related influences on identity in the interviews that exemplify this. Except for one male participant, only female participants talked about gender. They all concluded that gender roles had changed, or rather that Hindostani females had emancipated in the Netherlands, working good jobs and having become equal to their husbands. Multiple female participants mentioned they had left 'traditional' Hindostani gender values behind, as did this participant:

> Yes.. the traditional thing about having to be married first before you have sex, all that, remaining within your own ethnic group… luckily I don't agree with that. I have not been brought up like that and I'm very pleased with that. I have a hard time with

the traditional.. I would be different if I were brought up strictly.[7]

The idea of a women's (and men's) place in society had changed when migrating from India to Suriname, and they changed again when migrating to the Netherlands, showcasing that society has influence on one's identity, for example when it comes to gender roles.

We are all born into a network of connections that play a vital role in making up who we are. This community we are born in is shaped by the idea that there is a group identity and that there are fundamental connections within this group (such as language or religion). We are 'we' and we are not 'them' because of these connections. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz explains this theory as primordialism; he argues that simply being born into a certain ethnic group is enough to feel connected to this community (Baçova, 1998: 31). For Hindostanis, these connections are harder to define because the construct of Hindostani identity is, as the graph shows, not tied to one specific nation or ethnicity. For the people I interviewed, their roots are in India, most of their known history took place in Suriname, and their actual lives are now in the Netherlands.

Choenni argues about this that the factor of being Hindostani is more present in identity building than other factors such as level of education or place of residency. He argues that the Hindostani identity is primordial (a given) and that this cultural heritage is something that Hindostani want to preserve, pass on and expand (2014: 47). On the basis of my research, I disagree; their cultural heritage or 'being' was not the first or most important factor of many of the interviewees in constructing their identity. I think Choenni's claim about this is too generalized.

Choenni's claim would have been fitting if it were just for the religious participants of my research. All religious people I interviewed found their religion to be of high importance for the forming of their identity, and most of the religious people thought of themselves as either Hindostani or a combination that included Hindostani. The importance of religion for the construction of identity was stressed by this participant, but was expressed similarly by all other religious participants:

[7] Interview 15, female, 47 years old.

> When it comes to religion... that belongs to you, you know? I had it in the past, and it still must be here for me [in the future]. (...) What we have in Hinduism—the festivities—that belongs to us. I can't say it any other way.[8]

Participants who are followers of Hinduism spoke more of the feeling of a Hindostani community than non-religious participants, although some of them practiced their religion individually and in their own homes. Being part of a Hindu community in the Netherlands influenced their sense of identity. There was no indication with any participant that there was a sense of an imagined community of Hindostani in the Netherlands altogether.

Another factor that had influence on identity construction were their children. People I interviewed who were older and who had children or grandchildren explained that to keep up with the Dutch society that highly affects and influences their children, they had to change too: 'The society is changing intensely and at high speed. If you do not keep up with your children, you will lose the connection.'[9] Most participants with children were aware of the impact of Dutch society on their children and thus felt the need to adapt to them.

The 'other' category in the graph above consists of people who either did not want to give their identity an ethnic or national label, or people who viewed themselves as citizens of the world and did not recognize themselves in just one or a combination of these labels. This category is exemplary of identity being imagined and full of agency, as this participant explained:

> I do not think of myself as an individual, but as an inhabitant of the planet. I do not see myself as someone 'from' a city, a country, a continent; those are labels that do not mean much to me. If I think about my identity, I think of how I treat family and loved ones. I think about my hobbies and food, although my culture is very much rooted in what I eat; it's important to me. Those are elements of my identity.[10]

[8] Interview 4, male, 66 years old.
[9] Interview 10, female, 53 years old.
[10] Interview 2, male, 38 years old.

This ‘worldly’ view on their own identity was mentioned several times. I wondered if this view was perhaps the result of a migration history rich of encountering different cultures and societies, creating a more cosmopolite sense of identity rather than connecting identity to one place or culture. They are able to build a home and settle everywhere. One participant touched upon that beautifully, saying that a Hindostani person can make a home out of every house, wherever they are.[11]

Some participants described themselves as Hindostani, as they connected their identity to their roots. Others described themselves as Surinamese, as it was where they were born or where they had lived most of their lives. Some described themselves as Dutch, as their identity was largely based on where they were living their life and where they would stay for the rest of it. The largest group however, thought their identity was best described as a combination of two or three of the above. The people who felt none of the options were suitable and thought of themselves as without labels, often spoke of a grown global awareness and not being bound to one place.

[11] Interview 10, female, 53 years old.

From Calcutta to Cappellen aan den Ijssel: Migration History

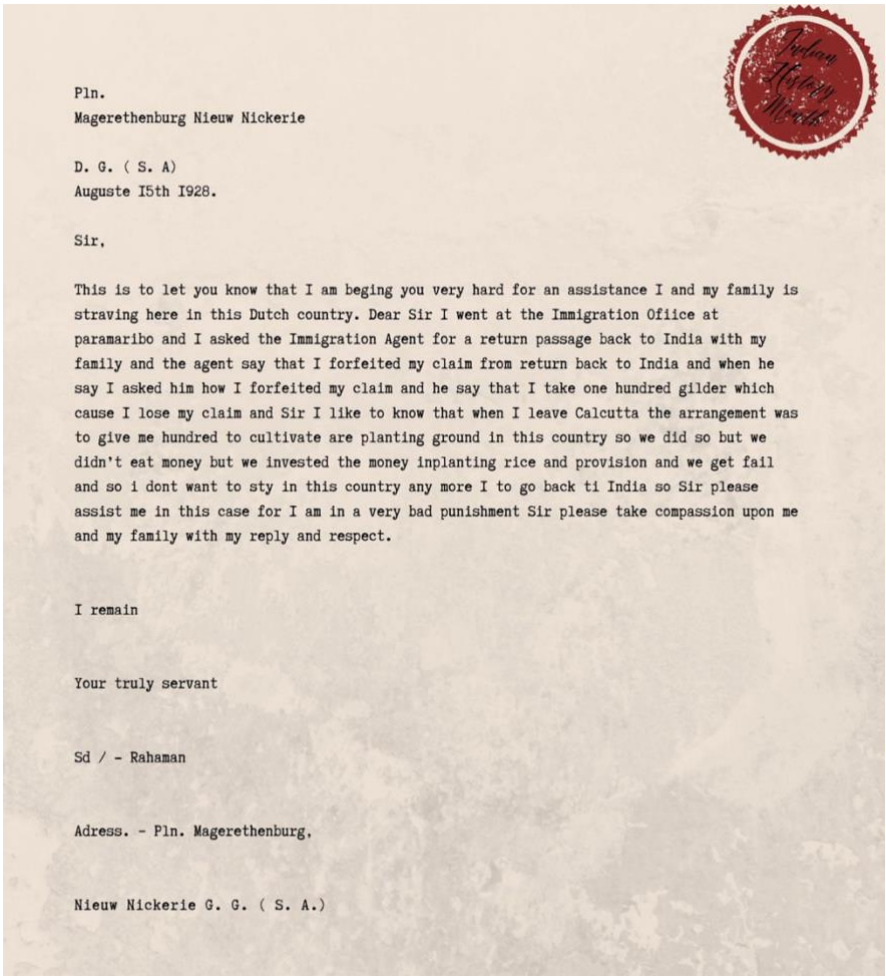
Now that we have an idea of the aspects of Hindostani identity construction, we will discuss the effects of migration history on that identity. A shared history is important for the formation of identity and the idea of a community. As Baçová (1998) said, it is who we are - a 'historically developed givenness'. This foundation consists of both historical collective experiences and personal histories. All participants knew, to different levels, about why and how their ancestors migrated from India to Suriname. No one mentioned the life of their ancestors in India before the migration, only in relation to why they might have migrated. The history of the Hindostani participants therefore starts and is grounded in migration.

In addition to this, there are personal histories or 'deep stories.' These are family histories mostly consisting of oral history or memoirs. Collective and personal histories are intertwined, and both are important for the construction of one's identity (Nowicka, 2020: 7). One participant contributed the following deep story:

> One day, the 14-year-old son of a family ate twice the amount of rice pudding that he was allowed, endangering the food supply for his family members that day. They were very poor, you see. His mother got so mad at him that he ran away from the house. This is where he met a recruiter who promised him riches and gold in Suriname. And he went; he just went! He never looked back, leaving his family behind and starting a new family in Suriname. Such a trivial event changed the course of his life.[12]

People were promised mountains of gold and were told that they would return from this paradise land (Suriname) as rich people (Choenni, 2020: 11). But most did not return, leaving families and entire communities permanently disrupted. Apart from letters that took long to arrive (if they did at all), there was no contact. An archive of the so-called 'Calcuttabrieven' (Calcutta letters) has been discovered in Suriname. In this or the upcoming year, researchers from Het Sarnámihuis are publishing a book with these letters and contexts. Pictured below is one such letter.

[12] Interview 10, female, 53 years old.



Pln.
Magerethenburg Nieuw Nickerie

D. G. (S. A)
Auguste I5th I928.

Sir,

This is to let you know that I am beging you very hard for an assistance I and my family is straving here in this Dutch country. Dear Sir I went at the Immigration Ofiice at paramaribo and I asked the Immigration Agent for a return passage back to India with my family and the agent say that I forfeited my claim from return back to India and when he say I asked him how I forfeited my claim and he say that I take one hundred gilder which cause I lose my claim and Sir I like to know that when I leave Calcutta the arrangement was to give me hundred to cultivate are planting ground in this country so we did so but we didn't eat money but we invested the money inplanting rice and provision and we get fail and so i dont want to sty in this country any more I to go back ti India so Sir please assist me in this case for I am in a very bad punishment Sir please take compassion upon me and my family with my reply and respect.

I remain

Your truly servant

Sd / - Rahaman

Adress. - Pln. Magerethenburg,

Nieuw Nickerie G. G. (S. A.)

Figure 4. Example of a 'Calcutta Letter'. [13]

This is a letter from contract worker Ramahan asking for a return to India. I included this letter as a primary source to illustrate the disruption. The sentiment of deeply missing what the left behind was also mentioned by this participant:

> My grandmother's mother, according to the stories of my grandmother, was always pretty upset and went to sit by the water where the ship [from India] arrived. She missed her family, her home; she had a tough time. That's when I notice that there was already a gap between generations [between India and Suriname] and now with the third generation who has come to the Netherlands, another gap was created. (...) A lot of people who are close to you are on a different continent. Of course, you can remain in touch through social media, but it is not the same. For example, my

[13] 14-06-2020, from the Facebook page of the Sarnámihuis foundation. Some of many letters were uploaded here as an example of what can be expected from the to be published bundle of 'Calcuttabrieven'.

parents chose to stay in Suriname, thus I see them a lot less... and this has happened twice now.[14]

The term 'recruitment' is not applicable in every case, as Margriet Fokken points out in her dissertation on Hindostani identities in Suriname. She highlights the agency of Hindostanis during the process of migration (Fokken, 2018: 62). She disagrees with historian Piet Emmer's work, who has researched the Hindostani migration to Suriname which concluded that the recruitment was fair and that the British-Indians made their own decision to leave. However, Emmer's research is older and based on data provided by the Dutch government (Fokken, 2018: 29). What truly happened and *how* is relevant, but for this study I was particularly interested in the participants' views on what they had learned about why the migrants came to Suriname. Views varied; some thought that the people must have been very poor,[15] but some noted that 'pandits [priests] also got on board, and they were wealthy because they were supported by the people's substantial gifts. And still they came along to bring wisdom and religion.'[16] I think that the discussion on this, both in literature and among the participants, suggests that *why* and *how* the migrants left India is of great importance, especially since this is where the history of Hindostani people usually starts. Was it because they were taken against their will? Or was it a choice to migrate and work for a better future for their children, lending more agency to the migrants and less to the Dutch-British arrangement of recruiting contract workers?

Many expressed gratitude for how their grandparents made the choice (so the agency is ascribed to the ancestors) and how that has been of great meaning and benefit to their children and grandchildren.

Not every participant expressed gratefulness to their ancestors; some did not feel like that personal history impacted their daily lives, and some made the conscious decision to not let it:

I have never really researched it and the last few years I have not been thinking about it at

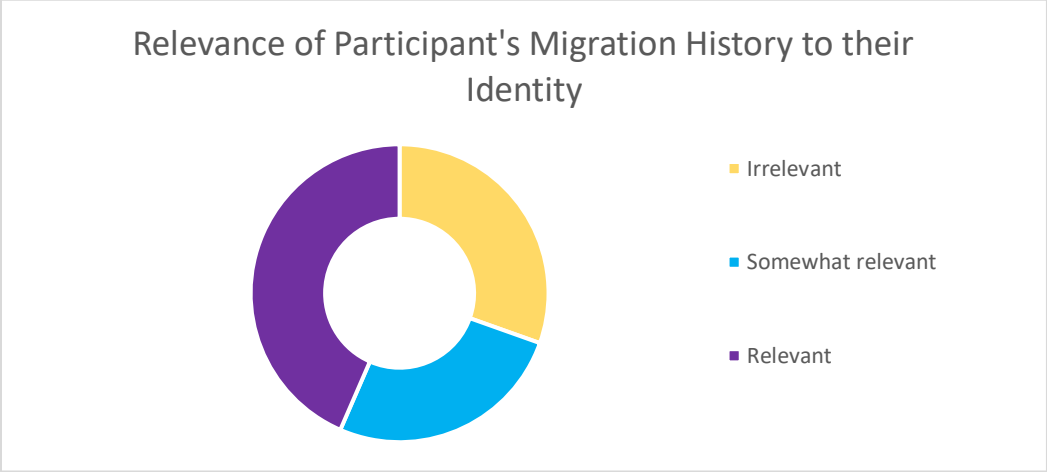
[14] Interview 11, male, 24 years old.
[15] Interview 14, female, 62 years old.
[16] Interview 10, female, 53 years old.

all, knowing where I come from. I think it's interesting, but I don't think I need it to determine how I'm living my life, or to construct my identity.[17]

Apart from participants explaining that they did not need to be in touch with their migration history to construct their identity, there were many participants, both young and old, male and female, who thought that to feel at home in the Netherlands, they should not be involved with their migration past too much:

> You know, if you are so deepened in it [your migration history], you will feel displaced everywhere. That is why I have let go of it at a certain moment. You are living in the Netherlands; you are somewhat happy and then you have to try to generate happiness here. Thinking about 'what ifs', you will drive yourself mad. You have to ground yourself somewhere.[18]

Pictured below is a graphical overview of the varying importance of migration history to the participants' identity, based on the conclusions of the statements of the participants.



These categories are very broad, yet they show how diverse the impact is and how many participants did not think that their migration history was relevant to their present lives. One might expect this latter category to be the younger generation, but this was not the case. I noticed that thoughts on this varied within all factors (age, gender, place of residency) except for religion. All religious participants thought migration history was important for

[17] Interview 15, female, 47 years old.
[18] Interview 11, male, 24 years old.

their identity today. People who were born in Suriname seemed to link their history particularly to the migration from Suriname to the Netherlands and associated this with their identity as opposed of their Indian roots. As an example of this strong association, one interviewee explained; 'I do find it important to know where I come from. But I was born in Suriname, so I know where I'm from.'[19] These quotes from various participants show the contrasting answers I received:

> Yes [it determines who I am], because it's an extension of every generation, from my ancestors to their children to their children.[20]

> I find it interesting, but I'm not actively thinking about it. I live now and not then. I know what happened, and I have read and heard about it. (…) I just don't find it important enough to keep thinking about it. I know how it was for them, and that's good enough.[21]

> Yes, in any case. Because if it [the migration] did not happen then, perhaps I would be a totally different person. Then I would have grown up in India. So yes.[22]

> It makes you think; you are originally from there [India], the link is there somewhere but you don't exactly know how or what. But if you think about it, 120 years is not even that long ago, so there have to be people there, family, your blood is still there. So that makes you think, I do have that connection, but not in a way of feeling connected to India, because I have never been there; I don't know it.[23]

> No [it does not define who I am], I was just curious. Most people come from a certain area in India, so I was just curious. I will be honest with you that I have no connection with India; it doesn't pull me. I never had a connection, so it was just curiosity.

[19] Interview 6, female, 51 years old.
[20] Interview 8, female, 57 years old.
[21] Interview 18, male, 60 years old.
[22] Interview 19, male, 20 years old.
[23] Interview 9, female, 57 years old.

It became clear throughout the interviews that even if people were interested in India as a country, they did not see any connection between their identity and India. The history of Hindostani, at least for the people I spoke with, starts with the migration and not with the centuries-old civilization of Indians who are their ancestors. The migration history has taken up all the space in their collective memories and history. There were many participants who did not have any personal family history or information leading back to India, making it harder to associate with it on a personal level. This was described as a missing piece by one participant, who said:

> For example, when I think about my father, then I think about how my father had parents, I would really like to know everything about them, but there is nobody that can tell me something. I have been searching, but nothing. Then I have to say, okay, this is it, I can't find anything.[24]

Missing information in the family history (or there not being one at all) is difficult for the construction of an individual's identity, since we look at those who came before us, our family tree, to find answers about who we are and why (Bottero, 2015: 539). I can imagine that this feeling is even stronger when you know (through collective history) that your ancestors migrated to a different continent and had to build a life from almost nothing. In that case, a family history can also be inspirational for one's identity. Tanja Jadnanansing, a former member of Dutch parliament, reflected on this in an interview:

> If you ask yourself the question, "Who am I?," you have to look at your past, to my grandmother and grandfather and much further down the line. Those who came from India, and you try to retrace what their history was, what their drive was, their ambition, and to what extent can I connect to that?

This search for connection to ancestors was mentioned by some participants, but most stated that they had let that go. By far the most participants found this connection interesting but had taken no action in pursuing this connection. Religious participants stood out in this, as most of them actively searched for where their ancestors came from.

[24] Interview 4, female, 66 years old.

Transnationalism and Belonging

Being a Hindostani person can mean experiencing difficulties surrounding the idea of nationality. Their ancestors (in some cases, their grandparents, or great grandparents) are from India, their (grand)parents built their lives in Suriname, and now they live in the Netherlands—some born here and some who grew up in Suriname. This can cause difficulty in shaping one's identity. Where do they belong? What does it mean for them that their people have lived in different places, and (how) does their migration history impact their identity? Some participants actively struggled with these questions when asked about their identity; others strongly felt like they were either Hindostani, Surinamese or Dutch.

Being (or feeling) connected to multiple nations in the way that many Dutch Hindostani people are, can mean that the physical borders of nations become less important. The feeling of belonging in multiple social spaces has a great impact on the construct of identity (Oostindie, 2010: 163). However, transnationalism does not *just* mean the physical transmission of people, goods and ideas. Most Hindostanis do not physically go to India, but are in touch with the culture through their religion, interests or habits. In her work on identity, Magdalena Nowicka argues that having ties of migration history to a nation does not necessarily have to lead to solidarity with or concern for people who 'stayed behind' (2020: 3). Nowicka rightly advocates for a more dynamic view of transnationalism that cannot be reduced to connectivity only. To understand transnationalism, we have to take into consideration the deep stories of migrants that are always changing: transnationalism is not a given but an ongoing project that varies from person to person.

Nowicka is criticizing the more conventional works on transnationalism that were initially explained in the literature as the resulting connectivity of people or communities who had lived in two places. However, it can also be more than two, or even a single place. Even if people have not physically lived in another place, such as Suriname or India, they can have cultural and mental connections to it. Both are clearly present in the interview data; many Hindostani people who I interviewed lived in the Netherlands and Suriname but also lived in the 'migrant cultural context' of India (Gowricharn, 2009: 1621).

An example of this mental connection was described by anthropologist Siela Ardjosemito while participating in a discussion about the Calcuttabrieven that was organised

by Het Sarnámihuis. She explained how, in her youth, she and her family made care packages with clothes and other things to send to people they did not know in Suriname. She felt a connection with people there; she had an imagined extension of her community.[25]

These mental connections to an imagined community in India were not mentioned often. Most participants did not feel like they belonged in India; some were also not curious enough to visit the country. There were, however, descriptions of feeling a connection to the people there or connections with Indian music. One can also belong to the *idea* of a culture; for instance, one can feel at home watching Bollywood movies, visiting Hindu temples, bringing Indian elements into one's home, or listening to Indian music. Anthropologist Arjun Appadurai describes this as the mediascape (Gowricharn, 2009: 1624). A participant mentioned, 'I see certain images [of India] on television, I would like to them in real life some time (...) but not because I want to see where my ancestors come from, that is not necessary to me.'[26]

An individual can talk to family members or friends across the seas within seconds, stay up to date with events, and watch movies or even religious ceremonies online. But transnationalism does not have to be in connection to someone or something; it can be as personal as a dream. One young participant who was not very talkative about feelings surrounding their identity during the rest of the interview did have a strong reaction to the question, 'Do you miss Suriname?,' answering:

> I often dream about Suriname. In my dream I get up from my bed and I'm in Suriname and I can just drive away for a little while. I keep having that dream, so that is probably because I feel better there, otherwise I would not get that dream all the time.[27]

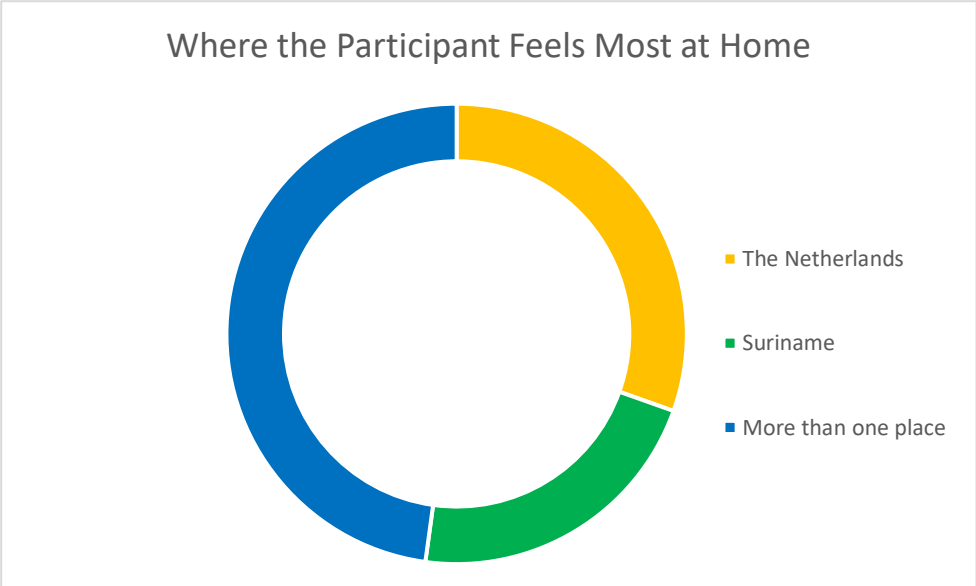
This showcases that transnationalism is rarely visible and that it can be private. When viewing transnationalism in the 'old' way of thinking, we are unable to see constants in people's behaviour that are actually forms of transnationalism. It does not have to be someone picking up the phone to call up a person—it can be as private as a dream. It is part

[25] Pakhuis de Zwijger in collaboration with Het Sarnámihuis: 'Emancipating History: Contractarbeid en Hindostaanse Strijd.' Video uploaded on November 24, 2020.
[26] Interview 23, male, 61 years old.
[27] Interview 29, man, 20 years old.

of someone's identity; it can be very present or barely there. Transnationalism can also be very confusing for one's identity, as this participant describes:

> I find that hard to say, as I am often qualified in the Netherlands as Surinamese, because I have lived there for 15 years, and I grew up there. And because people often recognize my appearance as Hindostani, and they link that to Suriname. But when I'm in Suriname, people often say I'm Dutch because I live here, but also because I have a Dutch passport. So, I find it hard to qualify myself as belonging to one of the countries.[28]

He was not alone in this; below is the graphical display of the answers to the question where the participants felt most at home.



The blue section—more than one place—mostly indicated the Netherlands and Suriname, but in three cases, the participants described that they also felt at home in India, one describing it as 'a warm bath.'[29] A reason that India was not described as the sole place of belonging by any participant (which is also why I did not incorporate it into the graph) could be that India is, for most participants, a vague concept. For most participants, it was still unknown where in India their families originated and where they should go if they were to look for their roots. The ships left from Calcutta, but people were gathered from a large area. There is often no tangible or concrete idea or knowledge of the region of origin, which

[28] Interview 11, man, 24 years old.
[29] Interview 10, female, 52 years old.

makes it hard to belong to this abstract idea. Whereas in Suriname, as one participant pointed out, every street and every corner can be named even when one has not visited there in years.[30]

Feelings of transnationalism are not necessarily negative, as a person can also take the best from both (or more) worlds, but often the reality is that places or especially people are deeply missed. Some examples of this from the interviews:

> People could not stay with their children, and children could not stay with their mothers. I thought: Will I ever see my children again? Every day I cried, asking when my children would come back. And I can't write a letter; I can't read a letter—do you understand how hard it was for me?[31]

> The most fun part of my life, I lived in Suriname. So when I go there I say; this is my home. (...) When the plane opens, when the door opens, I feel like 'Oh God, look at that![32]

> I feel at home in Suriname. I feel drawn to Suriname. But I also feel really good in the Netherlands, and I also feel drawn to the Netherlands. I feel good in both places, and there are pieces of me in both countries. That's what makes it so hard.[33]

> But the religion from here [the Netherlands], I… What I do is I participate a bit with festivities like Christmas and such, but it is not truly something that is mine, I just feel it. What we have in our Hinduism, the festivities, that belongs to us.[34]

The feeling of belonging (and transnationalism) can also change over time, subtly or drastically. This can be because of changing relationships with people, as evidenced by this story from a study participant:

[30] Interview 17, man, 60 years old.
[31] Interview 16, female, 85 years old.
[32] Interview 21, female, 54 years old.
[33] Interview 11, male, 24 years old.
[34] Interview 4, male, 66 years old.

> Now, both my parents have passed away. For me, they were the only reason to travel [to Suriname], to see them. Since they both passed away, I don't think there's a chance I will ever go back. (...) When they were still alive, I really felt like coming home, especially when my mother was still alive. But when she passed away, I realised it was not the house, not Suriname; it was just her presence.[35]

Or the change can be due to a fundamental development in society. One participant described how she felt at home in the Netherlands until *de Toeslagenaffaire*, the child benefits scandal, took place: 'Until suddenly something happens, that I had never expected in my lifetime. That it weighs on me this heavily that it made me think: "What is happening?" and "Where do I belong now?"' (Oostindie, 2010: 186).

Gert Oostindie argues that transnational feelings can indeed change, and on a larger scale than just the personal when the concept of a nation fades and the concept of ethnicity grows (2010: 186). For Hindostanis, that would suggest that Suriname might become less and less important in the triangle of belonging, especially since family ties in the future will become less prevalent as new generations are born and grow up in the Netherlands, as did their parents. The spiritual ties to India may persist through culture and religion from the country of origin. Appadurai's mediascape can play a substantial role in this, as it keeps the culture tangible through media and internet connections. In my interviews, only people older than approximately 40 longed for Suriname and felt most at home there (except for one younger participant who had lived his youth in Suriname).

Choenni describes transnational identity as something that all Hindostani instinctively have. I disagree, as this was not the case for many participants. Most of the participants of the third generation felt like they only belonged in the Netherlands. One younger participant described that he had absolutely no feeling of belonging in Suriname or India. As Nowicka has argued and as I can conclude; transnationalism is deeply personal and not something you automatically have because of the migration history of your (grand)parents.

[35] Interview 15, female, 47 years old.

Postcolonial Netherlands

Now, the focus shifts to the Netherlands, where after 150 years of Hindostani migration and settlement, most Hindostani people are now living (Choenni, 2014: 51). This is where my thesis becomes inductive: By zooming in on Hindostani people at a micro-level, I expected to derive an idea of the postcolonial setting in Dutch society. After the Second World War, the Netherlands opened its doors to migrants from Indonesia (after losing the decolonization war there) and guest workers from multiple countries, including Morocco and Turkey. Since the start of this incoming flow of migrants around seventy years ago, there has been an ongoing debate in the Netherlands about the effects this has had on 'Dutch identity' (Oostindie 2010: 215). The population doubled in size in just 65 years, and the Netherlands quickly became a multicultural society. What this society had (and has) to look like and what the attitude towards migrants should be has been an ongoing debate.

Shortly before and years after Suriname gained its independence in 1975, a total of 80,000 Surinamese people migrated to the Netherlands. The reasons for the migration can be found in the uncertain climate of Suriname at the time and the fear of losing Dutch citizenship. Hindostani – and other ethnic groups – were unsure who would seize power and what that would mean for the livelihood and acceptance of Hindostanis in Suriname. Migrating to the Netherlands meant more security and a better chance for higher education and welfare (Van Amersfoort and van Niekerk, 2009: 335). This was mentioned as highly important in the interviews; the welfare state gave hope for the future of migrants, and above all, it meant a better future for their children. As mentioned before, most Hindostanis moved to the four big cities (The Hague, Rotterdam, Utrecht, Amsterdam). When I speak of Hindostani people in Dutch society, the detail of them mostly (but not exclusively) living in de Randstad [the rural area surrounding the beforementioned large cities] is important. They are not spread out evenly and are not incorporated in every city and town, but are mostly concentrated in the big cities, as pictured below.

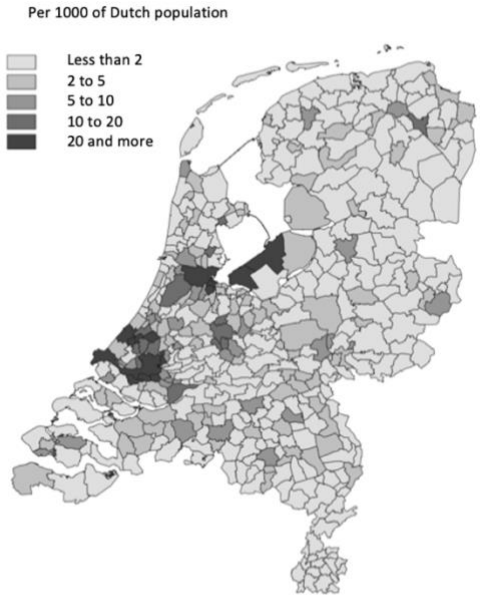


Image 3. The concentration of Hindostani people in the Netherlands.[36]

This concentration of Hindostani people in certain areas in the Netherlands would suggest that, mainly in and around these urban areas, the Hindostani are a well-represented part of society. It became clear during the interviews that participants who lived in smaller towns with lesser concentrations of Hindostani residents, however, experienced no difference in how they fit into their surroundings or how they were treated in the past.

More than half the Hindostani people I interviewed expressed that they would appreciate it if more of their history—and thus Dutch colonial history—would be taught in schools and would thus become part of the collective memory of the Netherlands. Multiple participants told me that they were irritated or upset about living in a country where people do not understand the colonial roots of Hindostani people:

> They [white Dutch people] do not know about the history [of Dutch Hindostani people]. When they are mad, all they can say is, "Fuck off to your own country. What are you doing here?!" They do not realise we have every right to be here. They do not know what happened, why we are here. They do not know how we got our names. To give an example, my grandmother and her six sisters are all called "Truus"

[36] Image from Oudhof, K. et al. (2011), p. 100.

> or "Betsie," and such. How do they have such Dutch names? Even their identity was taken from them.[37]

Why do Hindostanis not go out on the street to protest the lack of this awareness, or actively demand more education on their history and its part in Dutch history? After considering this question, some participants proposed answers. Some suggested that it is better to look at the future than at the past and that moving forward is more important than holding grudges that will not get you anywhere. Others posited that while what was done to Hindostanis in Suriname was horrible, but not as terrible and/or large-scale as what Dutch people had done to black people in Suriname. Contract workers were not treated the same as enslaved people, I was told multiple times—most explicitly by this participant:

> I think it has to do with the degrees of what is done to someone. So if you talk about slavery, that is horrible, because they were truly treated like animals. While as contract workers, your circumstances weren't optimal either, but you did get a piece of land or some money. So, I think that's why it is not discussed much and why it is not in the history books in schools. I think it has to do with the Hindostani community itself that is like, alright, we had it a little better so we shouldn't complain.[38]

Choenni (2014) rightly concludes that the Dutch colonial past has been silenced. There are numerous examples (such as Srebrenica and Indonesia) of silencing the past. The attitude towards slavery has been changing, which is visible in Dutch museums for example, presenting more information on the Dutch role in slave trade and the consequences of it.[39] This change has been due for a long time, as it is for many other European countries and their colonial past. Information about Dutch Hindostani and their migration history has stayed behind and little has come up about it in public debate. This may be due to the mentality of Dutch Hindostani that was described by the participant above.

However, a new generation is growing up and going to school in the Netherlands. The Hindu schools are much more well-received in Dutch society than the Islamic schools in the Netherlands. This has to do with the above-average performance of the Hindu school students in comparison to Islamic schools (Driessen and Merry, 2010: 26). Affirming and

[37] Interview 10, female, 53 years old.
[38] Interview 1, female, 38 years old.
[39] I am basing this on research from my previous MA thesis I wrote at the University of Amsterdam, named: 'Verguld verleden' (2020). It compares three museums in Amsterdam and their approach to Dutch colonial history of the seventeenth century.

securing the socio-economic position of Hindostani people, as higher education usually means higher income and status. The success of Hindostani students is partly caused by their knowledge of the Dutch language; parents can help with homework and find education to be of such great importance that they are very motivated to help and push their children. Driessen and Merry argue in their research that Dutch-speaking parents, a goal-orientated mindset, and an orientation towards Dutch society and culture are all part of a recipe for success in Dutch schools (Driessen and Merry, 2010: 28).

These are examples of what Oostindie argues are postcolonial bonuses. These postcolonial bonuses are a combination of advantages that the Hindostani had when they migrated to the Netherlands. Speaking the Dutch language was perhaps the most important advantage, as it made integration much more achievable. It was not just the Dutch language that was a bonus for Surinamese migrants; in some cases, it was also knowledge about Dutch society that Hindostanis already possessed, for example, because it was taught in Surinamese schools. This is vividly showcased by the following memory of a participant who grew up in Suriname:

> We had all the Dutch books in Suriname: *Loes en Mama*, books about snowballs, snow globes. We learned about Hengelo, Boekelo, all the governors we could recite—that's what we learned. We never knew where the Saramacca River was or where Brokopondo was. There was no Surinamese history, no geography, nothing about Suriname (…) and everything about the Netherlands.[40]

This was, however, dependent on which school you attended, and not all Hindostani (or Surinamese) people possessed this knowledge. But most Hindostani migrants had at least an idea of the Netherlands. They had heard about it or perhaps they had seen television programmes (which they could understand because they spoke the language). And, Hindostani people also migrated to the Netherlands before the large-scale migration in the seventies, particularly for education.

Perhaps the most significant 'bonus' the Hindostani brought with them was their intention to quickly adapt to society and to thrive. The migrants arrived during an economic

[40] Interview 5, female, 75 years old.

crisis with high rates of unemployment—not a situation wherein migrants are welcomed with open arms (Van Amersfoort and van Niekerk, 2009: 336). However, the Hindostani people worked their way up through prioritising their education and careers and improved their socio-economic position. Adjusting to Dutch society was (and is) deemed so important that it was named as the reason for practicing their religion and culture behind closed doors:

> If you want to become something in society, you have to learn to play the game of that society. You must know what the pitfalls are; you have to know how to fight to get further. Let me put it this way: At home you are Hindostani, outside you are in Holland. You should not forget your roots; that's your base and from that base you have to keep building, but if you are outside, you are simply Dutch, because you have to play the same game as your white friends.[41]

That Hindostani religion and culture should remain private was mentioned several times. The explanation for this that was mentioned by multiple participants was that the Netherlands is a more individualistic society than Suriname. One participant explained: ''The Hindostani are much more traditional because they didn't have to adjust to a different climate. Suriname is much more a society where cultures can live together, and it has always been like that. The festivities here [the Netherlands] are more adjusted and are only held at home, and even that is declining.'[42]

When the individuals I interviewed talked about the services (mandirs) or festivities that were held at home, I sensed a lot of joy and passion in their voices and faces. They described the festivities such as Diwali, birthdays, or wedding ceremonies as what brought them together:

> Hindostanis are sort of a big family. The gatherings are sort of a family culture. That's what I like; if you go to a marriage or festivity, you see people that you haven't seen in a while; people come together. That I find most beautiful, when people come together (…) as a unity, a family feeling.[43]

[41] Interview 17, male, 60 years old.
[42] Interview 18, male, 60 years old.
[43] Interview 23, male, 61 years old.

The prejudices surrounding the invisibility of Hindostanen in Dutch society are partly what motivated me to conduct this research. In the interviews, I asked the participants about what they thought of the statement that Hindostanis are so well integrated that they have become invisible in Dutch society. Surprisingly, many participants indicated this was a positive thing. Often, they replied to my question with, 'Yes, that is good right?' or 'Yes, I find that very perfect.'[44] Only a few thought the statement on Hindostani being invisible in society was a negative one that needed to be rephrased. They agreed that Hindostani people often keep to themselves, are modest or that they are very well integrated into Dutch society but thought 'invisible' went too far. One argued:

> I do not understand what is meant by that. That you are so well integrated that they don't stand out anymore, but you still have your own religion, your own customs, you still cook your own food, so then I think... what do you mean? From an economic point of view, I can imagine that this group does well. I can imagine that language-wise they do well. (...) But they don't disappear, and they are still part of society.[45]

This participant raises an essential question that Gowricharn asks his readers as well: What exactly do we mean when we call Hindostani people invisible?[46] Do we mean that they are invisible to white Dutch people? Apparently, being less visible than for example Dutch Moroccans or Dutch Turkish people in terms of practicing religion and culture is more compatible with Dutch society. This, Oostindie argues, is due to the lack of connection between the Dutch people and their colonial past (2010: 235).

Choenni has received quite some critique - not in the last place from Gowricharn - on his findings on invisibility. He argues that Hindostani are less visible than other, smaller, immigrant groups because of their lack of representation in the public sector. In addition, he says that their invisibility is also caused by them being less associated with criminality than other immigrant groups (Choenni, 2014: 284). I must agree with Choenni that – from what I have learned from my participants – stepping into the spotlight (of society) is not a trait that belongs to Hindostani cultural per se. However, especially participants that have kids

[44] Interview 3, female, 66 years old.
[45] Interview 2, male, 38 years old.
[46] Gowricharn, R. 30 Januari 2016. Hindostaanse zichtbaarheid. Column in: Sarnamihuis.nl

mentioned that they would prefer the next generation to stand out more and let their voices be heard.

I argue that Hindostani people in the Netherlands do not confront that past as much as, for example, Dutch-Indonesian people, as there is a more present history of conflict and a better-known history of colonial involvement in Indonesia for a few decades. Perhaps the Hindostani mentality of looking ahead is right in the comfort zone of Dutch society. The discussed invisibility is therefore only relevant in comparison to other non-white Dutch citizens. Not standing out as a postcolonial migrant group made Hindostani people stand out as 'invisible'.

Building the Future

The last question that I asked every participant was: What is your view on the newest generation of Hindostani people in the Netherlands? If you have (grand)children or can imagine having them, how would you like them to be raised regarding your cultural heritage? Here, too, the answers were widely diverse. From 'it does not really matter to me, as long as they are happy' and 'as long as they do well in life, this is not bound to a culture' to 'I will try my utter best to pass on my tradition and religion to my children, hoping they will implement it in their own lives' and 'I would prefer the next generations of my family to find a partner who is Hindostani as well.' Most religious participants had stronger wishes for the preservation and continuation of their cultural heritage than non-religious participants. There were, however, several cases in which the participant was religious but did either not raise their children religious or they did, but with the intention of letting them make their own choice and with no expectations for the future. Here are two examples, the first from the oldest participant and the second from one of the younger ones:

> Look, I'm honest, I will try to teach my grandchildren to not forget about their religion; you always have to know your religion. When one will tell me "nani [grandma], I believe these things," then I will be... it will bring me much joy.[47]

> I will teach him [my son] as much as possible. Eventually the choice is his; there is no pressure on that. But from my side, I will teach him [Hindostani culture and religion] as good and clear as possible. What he will do with it is his decision. Then I will have the feeling that I have done my duty.[48]

Two younger participants who were born in the Netherlands thought it was completely up to the next generation to decide what aspects of their cultural heritage they wanted to incorporate into their lives. The rest of the participants all expressed that they would either like or want the next generation to be mindful of their cultural heritage. Some

[47] Interview 16, female, 85 years old.
[48] Interview 12, male, 29 years old.

were pessimistic (or realistic) about this, saying. 'Oh, that will be decreasing. I really think it will decrease; when I look at children who are very Dutch already, then I don't think that they will be researching where their ancestors came from.' When I asked the same participant if she would appreciate it if they did show interest in it, she said, 'Of course, of course that would be nice. You never know, maybe something will happen and… because you see it in those television programmes that the children start looking for their roots.' I concluded that, by far, most participants would appreciate it if their cultural heritage lived on in the next generation(s); however, the religious and older participants found it most important.

Apart from their wishes for preservation of cultural heritage and/or religion, the participants who already had children and/or grandchildren all expressed how they would want their children to be successful. They emphasized the importance of their education, many explaining that their parents did the same with them. Younger participants underscored the importance of the happiness of their child. This is not to say that the older participants did/do not want their children to be happy, but they viewed education as the most essential key to that happiness. As one participant explained:

> I think the Hindostani people are a people that strive for their children to learn well; they always need to obtain a degree. (...) Only if you learn well and have a good job [will] you belong to the elite, and that is the goal of every parent. And from my point of view, we have to steer the children to become good citizens of the Netherlands (…) and make sure that they are happy." [49]

This shift in focus may well be caused by the difference in living conditions between each generation. When the contract workers from India arrived in Suriname, they had to literally build their lives from the ground. That they wanted their children to have a better life can be read in this quote from an 85-year-old participant:

> I couldn't read; that is why I told my children to go to school. I never hit my children, but if they would come home with a bad report card, that day I would have hit them. They have to learn because I couldn't, and I regret that. And if my children don't learn, *hamar larkan ke ka hoi, hamar bitia ke ka hoi*? [what will become of them?]?[50]

[49] Interview 14, female, 62 years old.
[50] Interview 16, female, 85 years old.

This woman had worked in the fields of Saramacca (region in Suriname) for a large part of her life. The generations after her acquired more and more, generating more progress than any other ethnic group in Suriname. (Choenni, 2020: 29). Their relatively high wealth and well-being were earned by the mentality of the generation(s) before them. I am generalizing here, as of course there are exceptions, and it varies with every family, but this work ethic and discipline may have become embedded in Hindostani culture and passed on to future generations. Borrowing from Clifford Geertz' work, Choenni describes this as *ethos*, which is 'the tone, character and quality of their life, its moral and aesthetic style and mood, it is the underlying attitude towards themselves and their world that life reflects.' The collective attitude of the Hindostani people is often described as one centred on a strong work ethic, a desire to strive and get on in life, being frugal, being modest, and the need to live harmoniously with their surroundings (Choenni, 2011: 24).

This ethos was touched upon in almost every interview, without me asking about 'the' Hindostani mentality specifically. It captures the striving mentality and forward thinking of Hindostani people that I witnessed repeatedly throughout my research. Their drive created their 'third homeland,' as Peter Meel called it in his work about Javanese Surinamese migrants (Meel, 2017: 224). After a tough start in 1873 in Suriname (their second homeland), their future was literally built out of clay into an ethos that has lingered into next generations. Perhaps this is the reason there is little to no return migration to India; as I mentioned in a previous chapter: the Netherlands is not merely a place where Hindostani settled, while being tied to either Suriname or India, this really is their homeland now.

Deciding what elements of migration history, culture, and religion are brought along to the future is up to the individual. However, some changes have been taking place with the new generation of Hindostani in the Netherlands. An example of this is given by Choenni in his study of Hindostani elders in the Netherlands. Where fifty years ago it was shameful for (grand)children not to live with their (grand)parents, this is now widely accepted. Elderly homes and professional care are accepted, whereas before this was considered the responsibility of the children (Choenni, 2013: 45).

Another example is the closing gap of level of education between male and female among Dutch Hindostani. In the last century, Hindostani women have become more (highly) educated and have recently surpassed the percentage of Hindostani men (Choenni, 2014:

305). Choenni argues that this change has taken place due to the chances that Hindostani women did not have in Suriname and do have in the Netherlands. I argue that these chances are mostly caused by the change in mindset of emancipation by the newer generations and less so by whether they live(d) in Suriname or the Netherlands. Emancipation has taken place in Suriname as well.

A topic that was not brought up in the interviews, and which is barely researched – is homosexuality, bisexuality, trans- genderism, or sexuality, and being non-binary among Hindostani in the Netherlands. Choenni has researched this topic and has included a subchapter in his book on Hindostani in the Netherlands. Although he oddly sums all these people up under 'the third sex' and thinks that transgenders and cross-dressers are the same (2014: 328), he does give an interesting analysis on tolerance and acceptance (Choenni, 2014: 327). He explains how most people that deviated from cis heteronormativity were widely accepted in Vedic Indian history, especially transgender people. In Suriname, this acceptance faded in the multicultural society as the functionality of these people in public rituals disappeared. In the Netherlands, the climate is overall more tolerant and open-minded regarding the LGBTQI-community, however, in research from 2011, almost half the participants indicated that they would find it problematic if their children would be in a homosexual relationship (Choenni, 2014: 330). The shame surrounding the topic among Hindostani in the Netherlands seems to be cultural. That is why non-religious Hindostani too, mostly do not openly 'come out' or live their identity. New research is needed to see how Dutch society has changed this cultural covertness towards, for example, homo- or transsexuality.

Whether the link to India may become stronger, at the cost of the link to Surinam, is uncertain. From my research I conclude that this may be the case, at least for religious participants. They are determined to pass on their Hinduism to their children and find it important that their religion, accompanied by the Hindostani culture, is kept alive. Non-religious participants were open-minded about this, leaving it up to their children whether they would adopt cultural or religious aspects into their lives. As religion will then probably become less and less present among Hindostani in the Netherlands, it can be expected that their culture will adapt to Dutch society more and more with the upcoming generations.

(Hi)stories

In addition to using archival sources (such as the Calcuttabrieven) and academic work from experts in the colonial and postcolonial fields, there are additional sources (e.g., oral histories) that I have built this thesis on. Another example of this, is the semi-fictional historical novel by Ruben Gowricharn, entitled *De Prijs van Geluk* (*The Price of Happiness)*. This book talks about a Hindostani family who migrated to the Netherlands in the 1970s, describing their life in Suriname, arrival in the Netherlands. Mostly it provides insight into the day-to-day life of people who go through the process of setting up their lives in a new society. The book brings postcolonial history to life for its readers, by encouraging the reader to relate to the characters, and help understand the difficulty of migrating into a new society. Not in the last places, the story engages the reader, much like a good historic documentary would. Published research is less likely to be picked up by the public and less likely to be as engaging.

I am aware of historians often being sceptical of semi-fictional books or documentaries on television (and not all are of high quality, indeed), but the power they have to spread historical awareness and knowledge in society is greater than the chance that people will do their own research using academic articles or dissertations. Apart from sparking the interest of non-academics, historians (and researchers from other disciplinaries) can gather a wider view on (for instance) colonial history. These alternatives to archival sources can be used as a window to the past, an impression of what life was like for migrants such as Hindostanis.

One might wonder whether we are then still performing factual historical research. Well, we cannot base research on novels or movies that were not created by experts, and we must be careful with making these selections. However, it would also be wrong to think of archives as places of pure fact and knowledge. I am not arguing that the primary sources that can be found there are faulty, but I am arguing that the archives were (and are) still a selection of sources—meaning that these sources had to be accessible to and selected by the archivists. History is always a construct and never one truth; there must be space for additional sources from different perspectives.

As Michel-Rolph Trouillot has argued, history is always a narrative of supposed facts, and there is a difference between what happened and that which is said to have happened (Trouillot, 1995: 2). This is similar to a historical museum visit, perhaps. What is presented in a museum can also not merely be accepted as 'the truth'; conservators and educators carefully construct an exhibition to tell the visitor a story. From the objects, paintings or sources that are available to the conservators or not to what is selected from that array to be in the museum's archives to what is chosen out of the archives to be displayed and how it is displayed—this is all selective work that is actively creating history.

One participant pointed out during the interview, 'I know history is written by the winners. Especially with colonial history.[51] So then the question becomes: What narratives do we accept as our history? From the interviews I held, it became clear that the participants who find their migration history of (some) importance placed great value on oral history and family history. This is the reason I did not ask the participants to state facts about what they knew about Hindostani history, but rather asked about what they had learned and what they found interesting. Some participants shared stories that were passed on from generation to generation and even showed me pictures of family heirlooms. Pictured below is a tea furniture set that the participant said was brought from India by her family to Suriname when they arrived as contract workers. She proudly displays the set in her home.

Image 4. A tea set in the home of a participant. [52]

[51] Interview 2, male, 38 years old.
[52] Image and information from interview 10.

Another example of sources is the memoir *Uit de Klei van Saramacca*, which is about family history and is an example of oral history that is written down. A passage from the book:

> Now, after postponing for a long time, they had made the most difficult decision of their lives and left [Suriname]. They were Dutch from birth. The misery that they—and with them many peers—had to go through in the Netherlands to retrieve their nationality was an inhumane drama on top of it. They did not tell their father that they were emigrating, but he understood what was happening. This way, it was more bearable for everyone. (Sing, 2019: 210).

Unlike most academic texts, these stories can touch the reader and leave an impression that makes the reader feel. I hope to have shown throughout this thesis that personal stories are of great value to both the public and the academic world around historical research. Personal stories are part of how generations are connected to one another, encouraging a feeling of belonging and helping to construct an identity that is (partly) based on family history (Bottero, 2015: 537). This agency and humanity in memoirs, semi-fictional novels and oral history is only revealed when we look for it, when we *read along the archival grain* as Ann Stoler (2008) has argued. Incorporating microhistories to the historical field in the shape of novels or memoirs, through participant observation or in-depth interviewing, I argue, will enrich historical research.

Conclusion

As stated at the start of this thesis, i will not be making any conclusions on Hindostani identity in general. Even if I spoke to every Hindostani person in the Netherlands, I would not be able to derive one conclusive claim on identity from the sum of those interviews. Considering I only spoke to 23 persons, I, and the non-Hindostani readers of this thesis, have only obtained an impression of what Hindostani identity *can* look like when we zoom in on their migration history and their experience of belonging. In my experience, academics are often too drawn to provide a conclusive answer to their hypotheses, which makes sense after spending time and effort researching a topic—but it is not always desirable. A conclusion can also be a well-researched impression, or it can be multiple conclusions combined, offering the reader insights into, in this case, a cultural history that would remain behind closed doors if not for case studies. I will now present my conclusions per discussed chapter.

Identity is a complex construct that is shaped by the Hindostani people themselves, as well as by others who come across their paths. The participants I interviewed had varying views on their ethnicities (Dutch, Surinamese, Hindostani, a combination or other), and more than half of the participants described their identity as a combination. Different aspects that shaped their identities were brought up, such as surroundings (community or society), time, religion, and upbringing. The presence or combination of these aspects are different, ever-changing systems for every individual, as came to light in the interviews. Religious participants stood out in this, as almost all of them described their identity as 'Hindu'.

The amount of influence from migration history on the identity of the participants was highly divergent. The participants all knew their story of origin but to different extents, and they placed different values on those histories. While some said that they thought about an alternative life if they had been born in India almost daily, others never thought about it. The most mentioned reason for this was that people did not feel a strong connection to India, as they had never lived there. They either found that their roots were in Suriname, the Netherlands, or they explained that they were citizens of the world and not of a nation. Some explained that they do not live in the past and want to focus on the present; their migration history does not define their identity today. The effects of migration history on

their identity are subject to change, too. There were multiple examples of participants who used to care about their ethnic roots and later in life did not anymore—or the other way around: participants who started searching for their roots at a later stage in life. For many, especially older participants who had lived in Suriname, there was a thankfulness towards their ancestors who had started from nothing. That mentality, I noticed, is still present in the participants' lives in the form of inspiration to work hard and look ahead.

The cultural connection of Hindostanis in the Netherlands to India is not merely symbolic. It is true that most participants were only curious enough to visit India once or not at all and did not feel the need to connect on deeper levels than that. For them, connections with India are present in other ways, including food, culture, music and Bollywood movies, but in most cases by celebrating and coming together with family; especially during Holi and Diwali. These festivities are both cultural and religious and are not reserved only for followers of Hinduism. Some religious participants had been to India multiple times for religious purposes, and this connection was visible in their daily lives. Their spiritual and religious connections (praying, singing, making or listening to music, the gathering of communities) make their migration history present every day. The religious participants of my case study wanted to raise their children religious as well, suggesting more active continuation of the ties to India among religious participants than with non-religious ones.

I noticed during the interviews that with most participants, unlike their descriptions of their identity construction, it was clear to them where they belonged. Some participants felt more at home in Suriname, but no participant felt most at home in India or wanted to live there. This is because the ties with India are less tangible than the ties with Suriname. The idea of transnationalism fading among new generations of Hindostani in the Netherlands is too blunt. A large part of known Hindostani history is in the soil of Suriname and therefore will not easily fade out. Little is known about ancestors in India, making it harder to connect with the idea of India.

This explains my findings of transnational feelings being mostly present in participants who grew up in Surinam. They really missed Suriname and either felt most at home there or in Suriname and the Netherlands equally. Participants who are followers of Hinduism had spiritual transnational ties to India, whereas this was absent in non-followers of Hinduism that I interviewed. For this chapter I can also conclude that the generation that grew up in the Netherlands mostly felt at home in the Netherlands and saw Suriname more

as a holiday destination than a as a second home. India was viewed as place to visit out of curiosity, but not to find answers about identity. Again, religious interviewees stood out in this as they were more interested in India and some had travelled there for religious purposes.

The combination of the Hindostani mentality of adaptation to the society they migrate to, and their focus on their children's success and wellbeing already make a good base for successful integration in the Netherlands. The postcolonial bonuses consisting of language, knowledge, and citizenship, are benefits that Hindostani people possessed when arriving at the Amsterdam airport in the seventies. This gave them a better starting point—one from which the effects are still visible today. These bonuses meant that they integrated quickly and secured good socio-economic positions in Dutch society. The title of this thesis showcases the main reason the Hindostani mentality is what it is: They have always thought about what will happen to their children. Hindostani people in the Netherlands have been incredibly future-oriented.

It is untrue that Hindostani culture is disappearing in the Netherlands. It will, however, take a different shape with the new generations to come. This seems natural and, as participants pointed out, positive. It is not a process of losing identity and community, but of adapting the existing one to be better functioning in society, as was done in Suriname when the British-Indian immigrants from 1873 onwards built their lives and the lives of many generations to come. The *ethos* of working hard for the best future for your children is still very present in the younger participants' mindsets; this has, however, changed from 'survival mode' with an emphasis on education to an emphasis on happiness and good citizenship, while noting that education is still key to the new generation as well.

Lastly, I established the importance of oral history and storytelling for both the Hindostani as an ethnic group and for historical research at large. It is not possible for academics to include case studies every time they want to publish an article on migration history, but I do think the actual people that are written about need to be given a voice. Not only talk about but also speak with. This is also possible through, for example, using photos of family histories and collecting diaries and memoirs to do research.

By zooming in on a relatively small group of Hindostani people, we have found the differences between how Hindostani people who participated in this study experienced the importance of their migration history. These differences were caused by many aspects,

including religion, age, and interests. From this case study, I draw the conclusion that migration history still has a significant influence on Dutch Hindostani people living in the Netherlands. Most participants do not think actively about their ancestors or migration history daily, but they did think that their origin was part of who they were. Participants who were born in Suriname or those who lived there during their youth, ascribed more meaning to their migration history as they themselves migrated to the Netherlands, making that a big part of their own experiences and identity. Religious participants had a stronger connection to their migration history as well and this influences their identity on a daily basis.

My hypothesis was partly right; it is true that older and older people overall found their migration history most important for their identity. Looking at age, this was but just the majority: some older interviewees did not hold any meaning to their migration history and most only up to a certain level. *Why* some experienced it as important and others not, is up to personal preferences, community but not at the least, knowledge of the migration history. Not having knowledge of who the ancestors were or which region in India they came from made it harder for the participants to connect to their history. Seeing the differences within these groups instead of just looking at percentages of gathered data about this group, is what has made this research worthwhile.

As the nation's past was for a large part silenced, white Dutch people were, and are mostly, not in touch with Dutch colonial history in a way that would create space for understanding the postcolonial migrants when they arrived in the Netherlands. The participants mostly expressed to be content with how they were received as a migrant group in Dutch society. Some participants wondered about why Hindostani migration history was underexposed in comparison to Dutch influences in Creole history. Interviewees of every age, gender and religion expressed that it is not in the earth of Hindostani to speak up about this. I am therefore concluding that the 'work hard and keep culture and religion behind closed doors' mentality fits amazingly well in Dutch society. This presents a mirror to the 'multicultural' society of the Netherlands and its attitude towards the Dutch colonial past.

My addition to the field of research about Hindostani in the Netherlands or broader, to the field of migration studies and (post)colonial studies has been that I have shown the strength of a zoomed in case study. The books of Choenni have laid groundwork but are sometimes ascribing and generalizing to Hindostani identity. Looking at the index of his book 'Hindostaanse Surinamers in Nederland' for example, it almost seems like the entire lives of

Hindostani, and their history is chopped up into a dictionary, which the reader can use to find facts about the Hindostani. Although Choenni has done case studies, for example on elderly Hindostani in the Netherlands, the fixation on percentages and data collecting makes that he too often speaks on behalf of 'the Hindostani'. I am not disregarding his work, as it provides a helpful and necessary overview, however, this anthropological-historical thesis has hopefully provided more agency and humanity to accompany those facts.

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www.hindorama.com
www.lallarookh.nl

Appendix

Please consult the PDF file attached to my e-mail or upload for all the transcripts of the interviews.