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## 'Let us Live as Hindus': Narrating Hindu Identity Through Temple Building Processes in Amsterdam Zuidoost (1988-2015)

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## CHAPTER 2: PRODUCING A HINDU LOCALITY IN AMSTERDAM ZUIDOOST

Playing upon Nugteren's (2014, 334) label of Wijchen, a city in the South of the Netherlands as a 'centre off-centre' for Hindus, I view Amsterdam Zuidoost as an 'off-centre centre'. While it is indeed in a major urban area within the Randstad where there is a large concentration of Hindus, Hindus themselves in the area feel that their presence is muted, especially in relation to Afro-Surinamese and recent African migrants. This section therefore turns to the ways in which the Hindu community in Amsterdam Zuidoost has struggled to foster a sense of belonging, articulated most often from their experiences and anxieties of life as Hindus from Paramaribo.

In order to contextualise the intersection of belonging and space among Hindus in Amsterdam Zuidoost, I introduce here Appadurai's (1996) two interconnected concepts: locality as a structure of feeling that is intentionally produced and practiced (182), and neighbourhoods as the actually existing social forms wherein locality is realised (179). In turn, locality and neighbourhood are both produced and reproduced through local subjects who 'properly belong to a situated neighbourhood' (*ibid*). Producing locality is often a struggle; Appadurai is particularly concerned with the techniques of nationalising space that are mobilised by the nation-state (189). However, in my research, the production of locality is tied to the work of re-creating conditions of a Hindu diaspora: rather than the nationalisation of space, producing locality is a case of 'Hinduising' public space in an ethnically and religiously diverse neighbourhood. While there has been much attention paid to how diasporic Hindu space becomes 'sacralised' (Narayanan 2006, Kurien 2007, 49), I contest that this is simply a matter of 'sacralising' ground and re-creating Hinduism outside of India: it is instead tied to the rights of Hindus as citizens to stake a public claim in this particular neighbourhood as other groups have done.

I argue here that the competing narratives throughout the history of Amsterdam Zuidoost, even before the days of significant waves of Hindu migration into the area, represent the continuing failure to produce and re-produce various narratives of locality that policy makers, urban designers and government officials wish to project. The reality of the situation is that the quickly changing demographics of the neighbourhood since 1976 meant that producing and reproducing a locality alongside community praxis and a shared history have ultimately failed. As Appadurai notes:

Without reliably local subjects, the construction of a local terrain of habitation, production and moral security would have no interests attached to it. By the same token, without such a known, named and negotiable terrain already available, the ritual techniques for creating local subjects would be abstract, thus sterile. The long-term reproduction of a neighbourhood that is simultaneously practical, valued and taken-

for-granted depends on the seamless interaction with localised spaces and times with local subjects possessed of the knowledge to produce locality' (1996, 181).

Already in 1987, Verhagen had observed that while Muslims established the Taibah mosque, and winti rituals were practiced throughout the neighbourhood, the Hindus were still trying to build their own temple (72). I suggest here that this ongoing struggle to 'produce' a sense of belonging in Amsterdam Zuidoost is not only a matter of coming to terms with the reality of migration, but is deeply influenced by the Amsterdam Zuidoost's unique spatial layout that forced a new way of life onto those who chose to live in the neighbourhood. The neighbourhood's reputation has fluctuated since 1976, when it was first built up to symbolise futuristic visions of socio-spatial relations among neighbours, but instead quickly became associated with crime, migration, and social alienation.

### **Producing Amsterdam Zuidoost as the City of the Future**

The earliest records of Amsterdam Zuidoost date to the seventeenth century, when Amsterdam merchants briefly embarked upon a project to drain the Bijlmermeerpolder that lay outside of the city limits in order to build up a stately home known as 'Bijlmerlust' (Verhagen 1987, 6).

Although merchants were able to drain most of the land, there was a constant problem of flooding in the area. The land was virtually uninhabitable; it lay abandoned on the outskirts of Amsterdam well into the twentieth century. In Amsterdam city centre, there was a housing shortage, and planners and policy makers decided that expanding the boundaries of Amsterdam would be an efficient way to accommodate such a shortage. Therefore, as of 1968, Amsterdam Zuidoost (more commonly known as the Bijlmermeer or simply the Bijlmer) became a part of Amsterdam, and is currently broken into four neighbourhoods: Bijlmermeer, Venserpolder, Gaasperdam, Driemond and Bullewijk. Today, the Bijlmermeer is the biggest and most notorious neighbourhood in the district and draws in an international group of visitors with its Bijlmer ArenA concert venue, IMAX theatre and the Ajax football pitch.

In postwar European cities, the high-rise apartment came to symbolise a new, modern way of life (Mentzel 1990, Blair and Hulsbergen 1993, Paalman 2002, Wassenberg 2011, Helleman and Wassenberg 2003). The Bijlmermeer project was the epitome of such discourse, developed by designers who were sympathetic to the *Congres Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne* (CIAM) architecture movement that was led by Swiss-French architect le Corbusier (Mentzel 1990, Blair and Hulsbergen 1993, Helleman and Wassenberg 2003). In the 1920s, CIAM and Le Corbusier<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> For more on Le Corbusier's architectural work in relation to modernism, see Benton (2009), Cohen (2012), Le Corbusier (2004), Pandovan (2002) and Donald (1999). For more on the CIAM

developed the idea that the high rise would foster a new social organisation: the 'new, modern family' would be more inclined to live in this communal space that promoted social and spatial equality (Helleman and Wassenberg 2003, 3-4). The high-rise dwelling would be characterised by its isolation from roads and highways (motorways would be elevated at least three meters above ground) allowing for residents to stroll freely through green space. The community atmosphere would be fostered not only through the highrise, but through parking garages and alleys between buildings that would function as public meeting spaces. Design principles such as simplicity, repetition, straight lines, open spaces and uniformity drove these modern ideas of architecture (Mentzel 1990), along with the idea of quick-paced development: the establishment of housing blocks would emulate the production of cars in the Ford plant (Helleman and Wassenberg 2003, 4).

In the Netherlands, the ideas developed by the CIAM movement and le Corbusier were eagerly adopted by a small group of architects and policy makers in the Netherlands. G.T. Rietveld, one of the most prominent architects of contemporary Dutch design, and influential geographer G.J. van Berg were both strong advocates of high-rise dwellings (Mentzel 1990, 365). The idea was to develop these housing blocks exclusively for middle and lower-middle class

families who may find it difficult to find appropriate housing in the city centre of Amsterdam.



4. Honeycomb style apartment building (Author's image)

However, the idea of high rise dwelling remained the vision of elite designers and policy makers: there was little evidence that suggested middle class home owners actually wanted to live in communally designed apartments (Mentzel 1990, Blair and Hulsbergen 1993, Helleman and Wassenberg 2003, Salewski 2012). What is more, the idea of large parking garages would mean that families would begin to commute by car, although the numbers of families interested in owning cars were quite low. After the war, the middle classes in Amsterdam instead demonstrated a renewed interest in an individualised social dwelling that housed a family. The increase in leisure time and disposable income also meant that people were more inclined to spend money and time in the centre of town, rather than in an apartment complex (Mentzel 1990, Blair and Hulsbergen 1993, Helleman and Wassenberg 2003).

Local politicians had very few public opinions of the plans, so designers and city planners were relatively free to build according to their vision. Despite the overwhelming evidence that Amsterdam's middle-class did not want the lifestyle that high-rise dwelling was supposed to encompass (Blair and Hulsbergen 1993), in 1960-66 the plans for the Bijlmermeer development



went ahead with large-scale, honeycomb style apartment blocks (Some of them containing 300-400 housing units), large open spaces, garages, and elevated roads. Although many of the housing units were (and still are) in the social-housing sector, they were built in a relatively luxurious fashion: storage space, spacious rooms and bathrooms and central heating set these dwellings apart from other social housing blocks in Amsterdam (Blair and Hulsbergen 1993, 5).

Finding occupants for these buildings was a continuous struggle as supply greatly outweighed the demand (Blair and Hulsbergen 1993, 6). Amsterdam's middle class families opted instead to move to surrounding towns where single, detached homes with private gardens were available. Technical glitches with automated parking garages and intercom locking systems proved to be a great expenditure, and it took much convincing from developers and planners for the local government to fund their repair (Helleman and Wassenberg 2003). At the same time, these parking garages remained mostly empty, as families who did move did not have a car. The metro system, originally thought to be running in the 1970s, took almost a decade longer to open.

The struggle to fill the homes in the Amsterdam Zuidoost resulted in a radical drop in rental price in the area. This suited people entering the housing market for the first time, particularly migrants from the Dutch Antilles and Suriname—especially those who had lived in Paramaribo and wished to continue living (affordably) in a city. Into the 1970s and 1980s, a large Surinamese population settled in Amsterdam Zuidoost, along with guest workers from Morocco and Turkey, and working class and working poor migrants from India, West Africa, Afghanistan, Eastern Europe, and Somalia.

Alongside this, there was a small but significant population of working class Dutch residents who moved into the neighbourhood as rental prices dropped, and more recent middle class residents who moved into the neighbourhood after renewal processes took effect in 1990s. As Balkenhol (2014) has observed, today there are areas of Zuidoost that are considered 'whiter' than others (72). For example, he details an area near the Ganzenhoef metro station, where white middle-class home owners more often live. These areas are either low-rise buildings, or high-rise buildings that are multi-functional and self-contained so that there is minimal contact with the

neighbourhood (*ibid*).



5: The Taibah Mosque, established in 1986 near the Kraaiernest Metro Station (Author's image)



6: The Kandelaar group of Ghanaian churches near Ganzenhoef metro station (Source: kandelaar.nu)

### **Breaking Sita's Rudra: The 'High-Rise' Narrative Among Hindu Migrants**

Already in the 1980s, the 'Bijlmermeer project' was treated as a failure, as the locality had come to be regarded as a 'single-income, single [low]-class, non-white enclave' (Blair and Hulsbergen 1993, 5). The alleyways and parking garages that were supposed to be the centre of community solidarity and congeniality became 'blind spots' that were occupied by homeless people, drug dealers and petty criminals (Blair and Hulsbergen 1993, 287). The local and national media



frequently sensationalised Amsterdam Zuidoost because of the steady migration flows into the area as a hotbed of illegal activity<sup>34</sup>.

Many of my respondents came first to settle in Amsterdam Zuidoost and continue to live there today. Unlike Choenni's (2015) respondents who mentioned the freedom of owning a home in remote parts of the Netherlands, my respondents were more comfortable moving directly to Amsterdam Zuidoost, as there was a small community of Hindus that met with each other. My respondents mentioned that Hindus from Suriname were 'good at connecting' with each other, and some even mentioned that there were also Indo-Guyanese people or Punjabi people in the neighbourhood to whom they could 'more or less' relate.

However, beyond the small community that could meet and relate, my respondents narrated their problems of spatial integration, as they struggled to make sense of a life lived in a high-rise apartment.

One of my respondents, a woman in her mid-forties named Sieta who had come to the Netherlands as a young girl from Paramaribo, made it clear to me that the first obstacle many Hindus from Suriname had to overcome was to begin to feel at home in the honeycomb style apartment complexes:

*'When they [Surinamers] came it was a mess...They didn't know how to live inside. Suriname people [sic] are people who live outside. You are closed up within four walls here. You don't have things to do outside...Everything was very strange for them...You live on the ground floor and then [suddenly] you are living on the tenth floor upstairs, I mean, even if you look outside [down from your window] you will get sick to your stomach...There were acclimatising differences...It was very difficult for us. It matters also if you came in the summer or the winter, things were so cold and you had to live with a heater [on]...Everything that we weren't used to. They didn't know how to survive and how to deal with a house like that. So the whole accommodation that was built for the upper class, it turned into [pauses] I'll say to you, like when Hanuman got the rudra from Sita, it was very meaningful for Sita but Hanuman broke it, and was looking for something else...This happened here as well...People didn't know how to behave with these kinds of houses. After a few years you could see it was a disaster...people say' People [in the Bijlmer] are throwing their garbage from the sixth floor or tenth floors, in the trees you see the*

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<sup>34</sup> Blair and Hulsbergen argue that the development of other parts Amsterdam, such as the Zeedijk, pushed drug dealers into Amsterdam Zuidoost (1993, 5).

*pampers [diapers] of the children<sup>35</sup>!’ It was very difficult, also for the landlords of these apartments because they could not teach us the manners of how to live here...’*

This reference to the mythology of Lord Ram <sup>36</sup> is very telling: like Hanuman, Lord Rama’s faithful servant who received a holy rudra from Sita without knowing how to treat it, he could only destroy it. The sudden influx of immigrant residents (not just Surinamese or Hindustanis) created a crisis for urban planners and policy makers who could not, as Sieta mentions, translate the value of such a living arrangement, much the same way that the supposed value of the neighbourhood could not be reproduced by its intended middle-class residents. The production of Amsterdam Zuidoost as a futuristic community therefore failed to produce its meaning and value in local subjects. The urban planners, designers and policy makers began to realise that their vision of the future was neither accepted nor valued by those who should ideally live in the neighbourhood (the Dutch middle classes) nor those currently living there, and plans to ‘renew’ the neighbourhood began to take shape.

#### **Problems of Inequality: ‘Black’ and Hindustani Relations in the Bijlmer**

Another reason why my Hindustani respondents felt it was ‘difficult’ to feel at home in the Bijlmer had to do with their relationship to the many Afro-Surinamese residents in the neighbourhood. Many people expressed to me that this reproduced feelings of ‘domination’ or ‘inequality’ that they experienced in Paramaribo.

As the neighbourhood was slowly being re-produced in the minds of those inside and outside of the locality as a low-class ‘black’ enclave, the visibility of Afro-Caribbeans came to define Amsterdam Zuidoost—both positively and negatively.

As Verhagen (1987) notes, many religious and cultural festivals in the area dedicated to Afro-Surinamese religion, *winti*<sup>37</sup>, and the neighbourhood became known as *blàkka foto*, or ‘Black city’ in Sranang Tongo (70-1). On the one hand, these ‘conscious moment[s] of making space into place’ (Appadurai 1996, 183) reinforce the ways in which these socially marginalised migrants manipulate and exercise power over space in order to produce locality out of a ‘hostile, recalcitrant’ (Appadurai 1996, 184) environment— in this case the looming honeycomb style apartment complexes—that they considered unfamiliar.

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<sup>35</sup> For more on the problems with everyday life such as garbage disposal in Amsterdam Zuidoost, see Verhagen (1987, 49).

<sup>36</sup> According to mythology, Sita presents Hanuman with a necklace of precious jewels to honour his valiance. Hanuman immediately takes the necklace apart, jewel by jewel, while others stand by horrified at his destruction and disrespect.

<sup>37</sup> For more on public *winti* performances, see van Wetering (2001).

On the other hand, these processes were articulated as 'alarming' for many Hindustanis in the area to which these moments represented a continuation of so-called 'Creole domination' (Choenni 2015, Nugteren 2014, 334) in a new locality. The very idea of calling the city 'black' or Suriname's second city (Verhagen 1987, 69) signalled to Hindustani migrants that their culture and interests would assume a background position.

The perceived tensions between Hindustani and Creole communities in Suriname and the Netherlands have been previously explored (Oostindie 2011, van Niekerk 2002, Hira 1988). Below, I sketch a brief outline of the factors that my respondents themselves felt contributed to feelings of domination. It is important to have an understanding of these factors in order to contextualise some of the (rather uncomfortable) comments that my Hindustanis respondents make about their generalised ideas of a monolithic Afro-Surinamese population. However, what is presented here is not to justify such animosity, but simply to direct attention to these articulations in light of the social history of pre-Independence Suriname.

Before 1945 in Paramaribo, Hindustanis and Creoles were relatively isolated from each other, with the majority of Hindustanis living in districts outside of the city, working in agriculture. There was a steady shift after 1945 as many Hindustanis moved into Paramaribo and expand their agricultural work in thriving businesses by arranging the transport and sale of their produce in Paramaribo. Still, because Creole presence was well established in the city, and there were statistically better educated, jobs in the civil service most often went to middle class educated Creole men.

As Hira (1988) notes, at a social and economic level in Suriname, ethnic tensions were not entirely present, although in the political field ethnic barriers built themselves up (203). Hira argues that the hierarchy of colour that existed in colonial times reinstated itself, where white and light-skinned Creoles occupied a higher status than Hindustanis and dark-skinned Creoles and Maroons (205). Such a racially defined hierarchy contributed to a growing gap between Hindustani and light-skinned Creole populations.

As the political situation in Suriname became more volatile leading up to the 1970s, tensions between ethnic groups continued to project such tensions. In particular, the policy of fraternisation, (*verbroedering*) was popularised and made many Hindustanis panic. At first, fraternisation was accepted as it only seemed to effect the political connection between Hindustanis and Creoles, but eventually it came to signify cultural and marital fraternisation as well. As Choenni (2015) notes, there was much panic among Hindustanis in the city as they felt their cultural and ethnic survival was in jeopardy. As he points out with ethnographic examples, many felt it was good to leave to the Netherlands and let the Creoles 'run the city' (32). However,

it is not my intention to reinforce this narrative of cultural domination, particularly because it is often articulated more ambivalently or reluctantly than Choenni's (2015) observations would lead one to believe. Often the cultural gaps between these two communities are perpetuated by the stereotypes and myths that circulate about them, rather than actual contact between these groups (van Niekerk 1995,118-9).

While the majority of my respondents had no direct fears of 'Creole domination' and spoke fondly of their lives in Paramaribo, I nevertheless recorded and observed that Hindustanis often made it a point to assert the 'uniqueness' of Hindustani identity. While many of my respondents proudly took part in festivals and activities organised by Creole groups, there were some whose anxieties over Creole domination turned them away from such activities.

As my middle aged male respondent Don told me, his experiences in Amsterdam Zuidoost after he arrived from Paramaribo in 1974 were largely positive, but he felt it was necessary to promote Hindustani and Indian culture in the neighbourhood as he had in Paramaribo. He had come to study and work in the Netherlands, where his sister had already settled. He had worked as a teacher in Paramaribo and had also worked very hard to establish a cultural platform for Hindustanis there. He continued this work in Amsterdam Zuidoost, which he felt was also a Creole-dominated environment:

*'We lived in Suriname in a multicultural country. The culture of the black people was very dominating, but the Hindustani people were hard working people...I was I think 14, 15 and we started to celebrate festivals like Holi, immigration day...and I was always involved in organising and when I came here, after my study was over I began cultural work...we began with a small scale and we were connected with the Tropical Institute [Royal Netherlands Tropical Institute]...When they had money to invite classical artists from India... In Zuidoost, we had the same that we had in Paramaribo, I'm taking about Paramaribo, the districts [In Suriname] are more dominated by Hindustanis. Most of the black people lived in Paramaribo... We also here [In Amsterdam Zuidoost] had the domination of the Creoles. We had to see how we could give our culture a place here. That's why I began with my cultural foundation [In Zuidoost]...'*

Another respondent who felt that Hindustani culture must be 'celebrated' is Tina, a woman in her mid forties who had grown up in Paramaribo in an upper-middle class, well educated family. She felt that Paramaribo reflected 'black'<sup>38</sup> culture rather than Indian culture, and that the second and third generation Hindustanis in the Netherlands were increasingly 'going to the source' of their culture by developing an interest in India rather than Suriname, as India reflected

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<sup>38</sup> Here, 'black' not only refers to Afro-Surinamese residents, but anyone who may appear to be of African or Afro-Caribbean descent.



more authentically the roots of Hindustani values and habits<sup>39</sup>. Although she had first come to Amsterdam Zuidoost as a young girl after her mother immigrated to the Netherlands in the late 1970s, she had left the area when she had enough money:

*'If you look around, this [Amsterdam Zuidoost] is a black area...Earlier there were more Hindustanis...but now the Hindustanis have grown, they get better jobs and they study...And many went to [towns like] Almere, they buy their own houses<sup>40</sup> ...As you have better income, you'll not stay here. There was a time when this area looked like it would fall down, but now they've done renovations. But 10, 15 years ago—it didn't look like this'.*

Tina also pointed out that the presence of Ghanaian churches in the neighbourhood exemplified that Amsterdam Zuidoost was now a 'black area', as Hindus did not have large, purpose built temples in the area. What is more, she felt that Hindus who could were moving out of the neighbourhood to not only escape the social stigma of living in Amsterdam Zuidoost, but to live in an environment 'less hostile to Hindus'.

Accompanying the idea of a 'black neighbourhood' are persistent images of Amsterdam Zuidoost as an unsafe neighbourhood in my respondents' eyes. A young woman named Payal had grown up in the East part of Amsterdam and attended a Hindu primary school<sup>41</sup>, and felt that she had to be on her guard when in the neighbourhood. On one evening trip to a temple with her

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<sup>39</sup> There exists a large body of critical research on the relationship between second generation Hindustanis and India. Among the most significant contributions are Choenni (2011, 2009), Gowricharn (2009), Verstappen (2005), Verstappen and Rutten (2007) and Lynnenbakke (2007). Verstappen (2005) and Verstappen and Rutten (2007) pay particular attention to the consumption of Bollywood films and an ambivalent relationship to India among young Hindustanis. However, I argue that the relationship between the second and third generation Hindustanis in the Netherlands to India is often overstated or presented as unproblematic. For a compelling account that explores the ambivalence among second generation Hindustanis in relation to 'Indian' culture see Verstappen (2005).

<sup>40</sup> Tina's comments about moving out of the neighbourhood reflect a well-rehearsed narrative among Hindustanis—that rapid social mobility enables them to move out of Amsterdam Zuidoost and into smaller towns where they can buy their own homes. This idea is also perpetuated in academic literature (see Choenni 2015, 85-7). However, as I mention in my introduction, this study is about those members of the community who do not achieve upward social mobility, as well as those who, for various reasons, choose to stay committed to building a temple in the neighbourhood.

<sup>41</sup> Under Dutch law, religious groups are entitled to set up denominational schools. In the 1988, a group of active Surinamese Hindus opened the first Hindu primary school in the Hague, the Shri Vishnu primary school. There are Hindu primary schools around the major cities of the Netherlands, such as Rotterdam, Utrecht and Amsterdam (Choenni 2015, 120). In Zuidoost, the Shri Lakshmi elementary school opened in 1989 as the second Hindu primary school. The curriculum is regulated by the Dutch government, but includes 'extra' subjects such as Hindi language and dharma lessons. Hindu holidays are observed along with Dutch holidays (see also Bloemberg and Nijhuis 1993, Schwenke 1994, de Ruyter and Miedema 2000, Merry and Driessen 2011).

father, a middle-aged Ghanaian man asking for 'our help' in Dutch approached us. He had stopped his car in the parking lot near the temple space. As I looked up with the intention of answering, Payal and her father gently pushed me in the other direction. As we moved away from the man Payal told me: 'You have to be careful here. This neighbourhood is a bit ghetto [sic] and so are the people.'

It was the first time I had heard Payal say negative things about Amsterdam Zuidoost, especially because she often told me of her fond memories of attending school and the temple in the area. Similarly, my respondent Jaya, a woman in her 30s who was born and raised in Amsterdam Zuidoost, was particularly negative about Amsterdam Zuidoost and vocal about her dislike of 'black people' in the neighbourhood. Although she was happy to attend the temples in the area, she had very few positive comments about the surrounding neighbourhood:

*'If you look outside, there's nothing around, this isn't a good neighbourhood, there are no shops or restaurants. There's a lot of black people.'*

Not only did she feel slightly embarrassed to celebrate Hindu cultural and religious festivals publicly, she felt that Afro-Surinamese festivals, such as the hugely popular Kwaku festival in Amsterdam Zuidoost, were garish spectacles. She once casually suggested that I attend the festival so I could see how different the Afro-Surinamese community was in comparison to Hindustanis:

*'It's so gross, they cook a whole goat and they eat it. Then they do their dances...they look like monkeys.'*

I (expectedly) found that Jaya's mother, Devi, a Hindustani woman who had been born and raised in Paramaribo, also echoed Jaya's disdain. When I first met Devi, we had begun a conversation about Paramaribo, where she had grown up. She was delighted to know that I had conducted fieldwork down the street from her family house. When I asked her if she visited often, she said:

*'I don't go so much anymore. I'm scared of all the black people there.'*

These types of tensions are influenced by racial and cultural conflicts that have historically existed between Indo Caribbean and Afro Caribbean communities (Deosarran 1988, 88). Indeed, they also reinforce hierarchical ethnic differences that are common across Caribbean localities (Deosarran 1988, de Koning 2011, Hosein 2012, Model 2008, Khan 2004). As Deosarran (1988) and Hosein (2012) argue, the struggle for Indo-Caribbeans (alongside Chinese and Indigenous communities) to lay claim to a national identity in the Caribbean context has been precarious, and has often resulted in novel ways of articulating their belonging and citizenship (Hosein 2012, 740-

3). In the case of my respondents, it seems as well that articulations of belonging as well as pride and recognition are intimately tied to a relationship with their Hindu and Indian roots and a conscious effort articulate their 'own' culture through organisations and events independent of Creole Surinamese communities in Amsterdam Zuidoost.

While the locality is often reproduced by my respondents as unsafe, there are also committed residents of Amsterdam Zuidoost who reject that it is an 'unsafe' neighbourhood. Sieta, who had lived in Amsterdam Zuidoost since she came to the Netherlands as a young girl, was very defensive about the negative image Amsterdam Zuidoost had. She spoke of an unconscious association with criminality and Amsterdam Zuidoost that had been perpetuated not only among Hindustanis who wished to 'distance' themselves from 'black people', but also the media<sup>42</sup>:

*'Amsterdam Zuidoost is not unsafe anymore, Amsterdam Zuidoost is for a long time one of the better places to be. It is just accidents-- that are happening all over--sometimes they happen in Amsterdam Zuidoost, you see it [reports of crime] in the newspaper and your hidden knowledge of Amsterdam Zuidoost comes up-- 'oh, Amsterdam Zuidoost again!', but you never say 'Oh, this is the city [centre] of Amsterdam again!'...In a way your brains have saved that Zuidoost is unsafe. It is one of the safest places. Of course if you have mafia [everywhere]... They will choose any place to shoot each other, but we have taken a lot of safety measures in Amsterdam Zuidoost, like breaking up all the big flats...I walk through the streets in the morning, in the evening and I've never felt unsafe...Statistics are showing now that the buildings, the social activities, they are working and making Amsterdam Zuidoost safe.'*

The conflicting perspectives on Amsterdam Zuidoost that I presented above reflect the ways in which the difficulties in producing a Hindu locality are articulated by my respondents. From earlier experiences of migration into a failed futuristic neighbourhood, to the idea that the neighbourhood is a microcosm of Paramaribo, and 'Creole domination', my respondents felt that Amsterdam Zuidoost was a particularly hostile environment in which to live, especially as Hindustanis.

I now turn to the situation that develops from the 1990s to the present, where the reality of an ethnically diverse community is visioned through urban renewal policies as strong multicultural diversity. As I will demonstrate, reproducing the neighbourhood as a multicultural enclave is similarly contested, with a sharp difference between those Hindus living outside

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<sup>42</sup> Based on a study by Nauta *et. al.* (2001), Wassenberg (2004, 275) notes that after 1997, over one third of the print media articles he surveyed portrayed Amsterdam Zuidoost in negative terms, focusing on crime, safety and nuisance.

Amsterdam Zuidoost who see the neighbourhood as a budding multicultural enclave, and those who live inside the neighbourhood who still feel marginalised.

### Producing the 'Multicultural' Bijlmer

Into the 1990s, the problems with Amsterdam Zuidoost had reached a peak. It was now vehemently argued among architects and designers that the project had been a failure (Bhalhotra 1997) and that measures had to be taken to improve not only the socio-spatial elements of the neighbourhood, but the socio-economic standing of its poor ethnic residents. The utopian ideas of the modern highrise lifestyle were now being met with demands to return 'back to the human scale' with single-family dwellings on curved streets (Wassenberg 2004, 272).

A large consulting team called Bijlmermeer Renewal Steer (hereby SVB), took on the task of redeveloping the neighbourhood along with prominent architects as consultants for the project (Blair and Hulsbergen 1993). The SVB soon uncovered unsettling data about Amsterdam Zuidoost's residents: a quarter of them were unemployed or on welfare benefits, at great cost to the Dutch government (approximately 12000 guilders). The SVB therefore developed a plan to improve physical and social space in the neighbourhood under four related themes: housing, employment, management and integral renewal—which referred to practical aspects such as transportation and accessibility links, but also commitments to social, ethnic and religious activities in the area (Helleman and Wassenberg 2003, 7).

The ongoing renewal process in Amsterdam Zuidoost is not only a redevelopment of space, but also an exercise in shifting the neighbourhood's negative stigma (cf. Wassenberg 2004). One of the key frames used to shift the stigma was to celebrate the area as multicultural, rather than a low-class, predominantly black enclave.

Paalman (2002) argues that renewal processes can only be truly successful if the various ethnic groups who had come to reside in Amsterdam Zuidoost were involved in a re-production of locality that stressed multicultural diversity. He states: 'If one really wants to make use of the 'multicultural society' then the very least that has to be done is to allow room for the inhabitants' initiatives to develop, according to their own ideas' (77). Therefore, present day renewal policies developed in the 1990s expressly respond to a more complex set of stakeholders, especially those who live in the neighbourhood (Wassenberg 2004, 283).

de Haan and Keesom (2004) also note that although the neighbourhood has a reputation for drugs, crime, and social alienation, renewal projects should not ignore that the neighbourhood has developed its own multicultural society within each honeycomb style high rise. Specific restaurants carrying ethnic food and small ethnic businesses could only flourish in such a multicultural environment and would not be as successful in other parts of Amsterdam (13).



However, the early efforts to include community members into the renewal plans of the neighbourhood remained muted (Pennan and Wuertz 1986), and ideas of ‘the organised representation of cultural difference’ (Baumann 1999, 122) through festivals, events, and community centre events did not necessarily translate into an actually existing awareness of or empowerment from cultural diversity in the neighbourhood. In my research, it became clear people residing outside of Amsterdam Zuidoost most often reproduced the idea of the neighbourhood as multicultural, while those living in the area were reluctant to say it was the vibrant and diverse setting that others claimed it to be. This is reflected in the section above, as Hindustanis felt they were in competition with Afro-Surinamese groups and recent African migrants, rather than sharing a multicultural locality with them.

I also heard from non-Hindustani residents that there was very little interaction between various ethnic and religious groups in the neighbourhood. When I spoke to a young Dutch artist named Caroline, she told me that she had tried to develop an artist collective in the neighbourhood in the early 2000s that would interact with the ‘multicultural background’ of the area and reflect this through artistic interventions around Amsterdam Zuidoost. She had already developed an installation that involved her neighbours across a diversity of backgrounds. However, she found that the multicultural environment in the neighbourhood was somewhat ‘fabricated’ and difficult to access on a daily basis:

*When I moved to Amsterdam Zuidoost that’s what I was attracted to...that there were all these cultures...Indian food, Surinamese stores...but it actually doesn’t really mix much together...In general in the streets I can say that over the time I lived here [13 years], it is hard to meet people outside of your own ‘milieu’. First I was always stuck with the artists...then I moved away and bought a house quite consciously in Amsterdam Zuidoost. I do have a lot of contact with my neighbours and I think my street is really different because there are some white people and a lot of Hindustanis and some Suriname Creoles and Turkish and Ghanaian families...It’s a very small street with 20 houses but it’s really super diverse. And that I really like. These people were all involved with [my art project]... But aside from that cute street I live in, I feel like you don’t have much access to other communities...Not as much as I thought or hoped I would...’*

While Caroline felt that ethnic diversity was certainly alive in Amsterdam Zuidoost, the interaction between groups was somewhat limited. She had moved to Amsterdam Zuidoost in search of a multicultural dream (Baumann 1999) where not only equality and recognition existed, but also solidarity across group identifications (Prashad 2000). She was disappointed by the lack of actually existing multiculturalism in the residential areas of the neighbourhood, beyond markets and community centres where people ‘have to mingle’.

Yet, these organised events that showcase ‘difference’ contributed to the ongoing narrative of Amsterdam Zuidoost as a multicultural neighbourhood<sup>43</sup>, especially according to my respondents who live outside of Amsterdam Zuidoost. One of my young respondents in her early 20s named Saskia had grown up in Utrecht, but travelled to Amsterdam to visit temples. When she heard about my research she was eager to help me, and suggested that we meet near the Bijlmer Arena so she could show me the ‘Indian’ shops of Amsterdam. Amsterdam Zuidoost was her favourite part of Amsterdam, she told me, as she felt it was the only part of the city that was really ‘multi-culti’. She took me to Surinamese grocery stores, Indian clothing stores, and to the weekday market and proudly showed me how diverse the produce and the people in the area were. She did not express any discomfort at travelling to Amsterdam Zuidoost: she said that she and her family often drove in from Utrecht to buy special vegetables and spices at a cheaper price, as there was far less selection where she lives. To her, Amsterdam Zuidoost was a place where she could find the things that she identified with her culture and religion: she picked up packages of turmeric, bundles of glass bangles, and discs of devotional music excitedly, commenting on how easy it was to find them in Amsterdam Zuidoost. Unlike my other respondents who lived in the area, Saskia did not mention that Amsterdam Zuidoost may be unsafe, or may be a ‘black’ dominated area.

I first met Sharlinie at a temple space in Amsterdam Zuidoost, and quickly learned that she had been an active volunteer at the DD temple before it closed. She had grown up in Paramaribo and had come to the Netherlands with her children in the 1980s. Although she now lived in Utrecht, she was very happy with the busy shopping and commercial areas of Amsterdam Zuidoost, and was thrilled that you could see Indian films in the area. She often travelled from Utrecht to go and see a film, and would call and invite me to join her. She never mentioned feeling uncomfortable in the neighbourhood, and saw it, much like Saskia did, as a place where ‘many people from the world’ can live together in harmony. What is more, she found that the many Indian shops, eateries and clothing boutiques represented the importance of Indian and Hindustani presence in the neighbourhood.

There exists today great ambivalence about who belongs and is represented by Amsterdam Zuidoost. While some of my respondents who live outside of the neighbourhood see this neighbourhood as the ideal representation of a Hindu diaspora community, with dress shops, food stalls, and religious shops, those who were born and raised in the area still feel that it is not their ‘own’.

Amsterdam Zuidoost represents a space that is somehow impenetrable for those of my Hindu respondents who find themselves ‘stuck’ in a neighbourhood that does not live up to the

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<sup>43</sup> For more on diversity as an urban renewal strategy in Amsterdam, see de Wilde (2015).

reputation others perpetuate about its diversity, approaching Jaffé's (2012) observations that the 'ghetto' is a social imaginary that particularly addresses the idea of urban immobility (676). On the other hand, those who do enter into the neighbourhood temporarily see it as superficially fulfilling their ideas about diversity and multicultural interaction, which creates specific boundaries between resident and outsider narratives of the neighbourhood.

This section has addressed to the ways in which Amsterdam Zuidoost is a contested locality: with the constant shifts in meaning and value and the struggles to reproduce them among residents, my respondents present an ambivalent relationship to their neighbourhood. What is more, as the Bijlmermeer has been framed as a 'second Paramaribo', the anxieties of marginalisation that many of my respondents claim to have experienced there are reproduced in Amsterdam Zuidoost.

The third and final chapter in Part I focuses on one of the Hindu community's grandest solutions to laying claim to and feeling at home in Amsterdam Zuidoost: establishing a purpose-built temple. I highlight how the diverse groupings of Hindu migrants in Amsterdam Zuidoost have involved themselves most directly in struggling to produce locality in Amsterdam Zuidoost—through establishing temple spaces in converted buildings and community centre spaces throughout the neighbourhood. The ultimate goal and dream of the Hindu community is to have a purpose-built space to symbolically mark out their claim to the neighbourhood, but for the moment these spaces exist as specific 'Hindu' orderings of space and time.