Jagernath Lachmon and India

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HINDUSTANI-NESS

Jagernath Lachmon, the youngest of four brothers, was born and spent the early years of his life in the Corantijn Polder in Nickerie. It was customary in those days that district residents identified more closely with nearby Guyana than with Paramaribo, the capital located at 145 miles from Nickerie.[1] Lachmon's parents made a living as small farmers. His mother sent her son to Paramaribo at the age of 13 to continue his studies. Having finished secondary education in 1935, Lachmon completed an intensive private training provided by the well-respected lawyer, Julius Caesar de Miranda, and in 1940, he established himself as one of the first Hindustani lawyers in Suriname. Lachmon's relocation from Nickerie to Paramaribo, his socialization in an urban and largely Creole setting, and his admission to the bar laid the foundations for a long and memorable career as a lawyer and a politician (Azimullah 1986: 13-31, 91-2; Khemradj 2002: 13-22; Gonesh 2015: 24-33, 61).[2]

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[1] This also applied to the Lachmon family. Interview author with Dew Lachmon, Paramaribo, 18 June 2018.

[2] See also National Archives, The Hague: Database Hindostaanse immigranten in Suriname: http://www.gahetna.nl/collectie/index/nt00345/7291b0f6-c061-102d-a5b5-0050569c51dd (last accessed on 22 January 2017). Julius Caesar de Miranda (1906-1956) studied law in the Netherlands before embarking on a prolific career as a lawyer, judge and prosecutor. He served as a member of (the then colonial) parliament and was Suriname's first prime minister heading the government between 1949 and 1951. Following his death in

Rather than celebrating a version of constructed Indian-ness, Lachmon cherished Hindustani-ness as the collective identity of the ethnic group he wished to represent. Hindustani-ness stipulated that Uttar Pradesh and Bihar were commemorated as locations of departure of two generations of indentured labourers, while the indentured labour *experience* was presented as the foundation story and common narrative of their descendants in Suriname. Identification with Hindustan—more specifically, the Bhojpuri/Awadhi-speaking region—allowed for keeping in mind past setbacks and humiliations, but primarily encouraged the honouring of socio-cultural practices and religious traditions that had aided Hindustanis to overcome their backward conditions in the New World and fostered their post-indentured position in Surinamese society. Hindustani-ness encapsulated a tale of poverty, submission and exploitation that bore the seeds of freedom and subtly foreshadowed development and progress. Particularly from the moment substantial numbers of Hindustani traded their temporary residence for permanent settlement in Suriname. Hindustani-ness also served as an incentive to connect to life beyond the confinements of the plantation, seize new opportunities and strive for upward mobility (Hassankhan 2013; Ramsoedh 2016).

Lachmon shared the opinion that the *werdegang*, inner life and worldview of the Hindustani group in Suriname was reflected in the *Ramayana*, more particularly in the retelling and reinterpretation of the Sanskrit epictitled the *Ramcharitmanas*. This sixteenth century poem had been written by the Indian poet, philosopher and mystic Goswami Tulsidas (*c.*1511-1623). The *Ramcharitmanas* was one of the few books indentured labourers had taken with them travelling from India to the Caribbean. The popularity of the work had to be attributed to the fact that it was written in Awadhi—the vernacular—, that the image-ridden and plot-driven

text effectively appealed to the emotions of the male and female labourer, and that popular scenes containing moral teachings and spiritual guidance were regularly sung and re-enacted on stage, particularly during the annual *Rāmlīlā* (play about Rama's life).[3] The protagonist of the *Ramcharitmanas* is the divine prince Rama. He manages to succeed his father as the king of Ayodhya after fourteen years of exile culminating in the defeat of his adversary Ravana, the demon-king of Lanka.

As recorded by Tulsidas, the kingdom of Rama secured peace and happiness for all subjects owing to the common acceptance of caste hierarchy and concomitant socio-cultural and religious distinctions. This (partly) explains why Indians, who in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had been approached by recruiters stating that decent paying jobs were available in *Sriram desh* (country of Lord Rama; surprisingly Sriram also being a corruption of Suriname) had been tempted to sign a labour contract and leave their native village. They expected to move to a paradise-like kingdom. Having discovered that they had been deceived, they found consolation in identification with Rama's endurance and ingenuity in coping with crisis. After all, he had survived his years in exile and had vanquished Ravana with the unfailing support of his wife Sita, his brothers and the monkey god Hanuman. Heartened by readings and evocations of the *Ramcharitmanas*, Hindustani labourers set their hopes on overcoming their hardship in Suriname in a similar fashion (Bakker 1999: 154-71; Singh 2012; Seecharan 2015: 64, 114-16, 247-8).

Ram raj (the reign of Rama) as a model of benevolent rule has been invoked not only by the politicians in India, but also in the Caribbean. Lachmon was conscious of the parallels that could be drawn between the *Ramcharitmanas* and Surinamese political life. He tended to present parliamentary democracy and the rule of

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[3] C.J.M. De Klerk (1951: 28-9, 74-9) dubs the *Ramcharitmanas* the mirror of Surinamese Hinduism, and Rama the most beloved and invoked deity. In Suriname, the *Ramcharitmanas* is also known under the names *Hindi-Ramayan* or *Ramayana* of Tulsidas (Adhin 1976: 47). Instructive about the *Rāmlīlā* is C.J.M. De Klerk (1951: 209-13).

law as a contemporary version of *Ram raj* by pointing out that as a political leader, he aimed at harmony, justice and reverence of socio-cultural and religious principles and like Rama, fought evil acts as performed by Ravana.[4]

Lachmon's decision to productively deal with Hindustani-ness fit his personal beliefs, but it also had to do with realism. He understood the importance of connecting to the heritage indentured labourers had taken with them and the experiences in Suriname they had gone through. References to itfulfilled a profound emotional and spiritual need and provided a sense of security and comfort helping them to deal with feelings of alienation in a society which they viewed as predominantly Eurocentric and Christian. Their orientation included a longing to maintain relations with the country of their ancestors, mainly through religious and cultural exchanges (Samaroo 1987). Hindustani energetically celebrated the independence India attained on 15 August 1947. They perceived the event as the crowning achievement of the decade-long liberation struggle of the Indian National Congress.[5]

Early 1947, Lachmon had entered Surinamese politics by establishing the *Hindostaans-Javaanse Politieke Partij* (Hindustani-Javanese Political Party—HJPP). In competition with the *Surinaamse Hindoe Partij* (Surinamese Hindu Party) and the *Moeslim Partij* (Muslim Party), the HJPP profiled itself as a multiracial and multireligious party exerting considerable mobilization power notably among Hindustani and Javanese in the rural districts. Under Lachmon's leadership, the HJPP in 1949 initiated the merging of the three parties into the *Verenigde Hindostaanse Partij* (United Hindustani Party—VHP). Since Surinamese Javanese, in the meantime, had created political parties of their own, the VHP, formally a secular party, mainly focused on the Surinamese Hindu community for electoral purposes (Mitrasing 1959: 80, 84-6).

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[4] Compare S. Singh (2012); E.M. Dew (1978, 176) mentions Lachmon referring to Lakshmana and Ravana after the formation of Henck Arron's first government in 1973. Lakshmana and Ravana obviously stood for Lachmon and Arron.

[5] *Suriname* 11, 14 and 16 August 1947 and *De Surinamer* 5 August 1947.

Lachmon applauded India's independence, but was all but blind to the darker sides of this historic event. After all, the partition of British India between Hindus and Muslims had been accompanied by violent riots, mass casualties and the displacement of millions of people. These developments were at odds with the HJPP's multi-religious views and set a bad example to Suriname being on the brink of obtaining autonomy status. On the occasion of India's declaration of independence, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru in his address to overseas Indians labelled his co-ethnics mother India's children. According to him, they were expected to defend the honour of India and contribute to the maintenance of the freedom the country had gained (De Klerk 1953: 29-30). Although Nehru's allusions to common features of Indian-ness must have aroused Lachmon's attention, his Suriname-centred views precluded too close identification with the future of the Indian nation-state.

The VHP incorporated political parties which had been established on both sides of the Hindu/Muslim divide and which were now integrated on the basis of a common ethnic denominator. The ideal of the VHP was epitomized in the 1949 election campaign slogan: '*Hindoo, Muslim, Sikh, Isaai; sab hain bhai, bhai!; Bharat Mata sab kei mai!*' (Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christian; they are all brothers!; India is the mother of them all!). The motto was meant to forge ethnic unity, reduce religious conflict and advance common interests vis-à-vis political competitors, mainly those of Creole origin (Mitrasing 1959: 161).[6] As the party symbol, the VHP took the elephant which was considered to represent power, faithfulness, patience, wisdom, dignity, memory and invincibility. Orange—in India referred to as saffron—was embraced as the VHP's colour. Regarded as a colour symbolizing various aspects of Hinduism, in the Indian national flag saffron emblematized courage and sacrifice (Parekh 2015, 41-5).

As chairman of the HJPP, Lachmon had insisted that the introduction of universal suffrage in Suriname should precede the

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[6] The term 'Creole' refers to the Afro-Surinamese population group. It excludes Maroons, descendants of enslaved people who had fled the plantations and established communities of their own in the Surinamese interior.

proclamation of self-government. Autonomy status would only serve the interests of all ethnic groups if they would be represented in parliament in proportion to their numerical strength on a district basis. Aiming at achieving this goal, Lachmon combatted the *Nationale Partij Suriname* (National Surinamese Party—NPS) in which the Creole elite had organized themselves. The NPS rejected universal suffrage claiming that it would be a grave error to establish this given the low levels of (Western) education the majority of the Surinamese population had attained. The HJPP, together with two smaller political parties, replied that holding on to limited suffrage was a pretext to prolong the social and political privileges of the highest ranks of society (Mitrasing 1959: 127-35, 142-53; Azimullah 1986: 44-61; Sedney 2017: 25-9).

In 1948, the protests of the VHP and its political allies in favour of universal suffrage were honoured by the Dutch. Yet, The Hague left it to the Creole elite, holding administrative power in the colony, to decide about the electoral system. The constituency system the elite favoured Creoles over other population groups. As a matter of fact, the distribution of ethnic groups and parliamentary seats over the existing districts allowed the Creole upper-middle class to maintain its preponderant position. In the 1949 and 1951 elections, the NPS secured 13 out of 21 seats in parliament. On both the occasions, the VHP won 6 seats. These results would incite Lachmon to submit proposals to amend the electoral system in the years to come.[7]

In the context of negotiations about a new charter for the Kingdom of the Netherlands granting autonomy to Suriname and the Netherlands Antilles—which was finally arranged for in 1954— VHP leader Lachmon and NPS strongman Johan Adolf Pengel grew more closely together. Both felt that they were mocked at and discriminated against by representatives of the Creole elite and Dutch officials. 'Polder boy' Lachmon—a disapproving allusion

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[7] In the 1960s, the electoral system changed considerably. In 1966, the number of parliamentary seats was established at 39 and the division of electoral districts adjusted bringing the size of ethnic groups more in line with their chances to gain political power.

to his Nickerie roots—and '*pras oso* boy' Pengel—derogatory for his presumed upbringing in an inter-city slum-dwelling as a descendant of formerly enslaved people—were eager to fight these stereotypes and ready to terminate the political dominance of Creole 'reactionaries and conservatives' (Azimullah 1986: 100-3). They wished to collaborate in order to bolster their political power and boost the emancipation of lower class co-ethnics. In this regard, Lachmon focused on improving the position of Hindustani farmers, drivers and traders; Pengel on promoting the interests of Creole workers and civil servants.[8]

Under Lachmon's leadership, the VHP became the main champion of the interests of the Hindustani community. The party safeguarded the Hindustani heritage which included their eventful migration history (exposed, memorized and taught during the annual celebration of Arrival Day), their high regard for the principles of Hinduism and Islam as ways of life and their preservation of socio-cultural traditions manifest in language, cuisine, dress, dance, music and literature. The VHP leadership wished to uphold Hindustani culture considering it a coreconstituent of the identity of their supporters and a composite element of the evolving Surinamese nation. Lachmon's ultimate goal, however, was to do away with the stigma of second-class citizens Hindustani were still facing, notably in Paramaribo, and to gain the respect and appreciation of their fellow-citizens (Azimullah 1986: 32-43).[9]

Benefitting from their post-war demographic growth, Hindustani children increasingly attended schools and got access to higher levels of education. In case they wished to pursue academic studies abroad, on the recommendation of the VHP they could obtaina

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[8] The collaboration between Lachmon and Pengel resembled the partnership between Cheddi Jagan and Forbes Burnham in Guyana, be it that between 1950 and 1955. The latter two managed to unite members of the country's major ethnic groups in a single political party, the People's Progressive Party (PPP).

[9] In the mid-1940s, outlawing the word *koeli* or *koeri* (*coolie* in English) and creating more sympathetic attitudes towards the Hindu religion in schools were the objectives already on Lachmon's agenda (Dew 1978: 60).

scholarship that enabled them to enrol in degree programmes across foreign universities. The achievements of successive generations of students had a major impact on the socio-economic position of the Hindustani. Apart from securing jobs in agriculture, transport and trade Hindustani progressively entered the public service sector (teacher, police officer, and administrator), and the professions (lawyer, medical doctor, notary, tax specialist), which contributed to their upward mobility and growing presence in the capital.

From the mid-1960s, the natural increase and economic advancement of the Hindustani group made Creole politicians feel insecure. The substantial political leverage Lachmon had obtained over the years had undeniably undermined the NPS hegemony. In 1967, Lachmon's pact with Pengel—which the VHP leader himself considered the fruit of his fraternization politics (see next paragraph)—was overdue to differences of opinion on the distribution of cabinet posts between the NPS and the VHP, and the issue of independence. The latter controversy and the succession in 1970 of Pengel as NPS-chair by Henck Arron would turn out to be the main sources of political tension between the two parties in the decade to come.

Lachmon's conviction that Creoles considered themselves the legitimate heirs to the colonial elite and aspired to dominate other population groups having gained political independence would be validated, once sovereignty was handed over by the Dutch. Between 1976 and 1980, the NPS and the VHP were diametrically opposed, the first indefatigably clinging to power, the latter fixated on dismissing the government. Following a coup d'état staged by non-commissioned officers, under the command of Desi Bouterse, in the mid-1980s on the initiative of Lachmon, the VHP and the NPS renewed their partnership and together with the Javanese-oriented *Kerukunan Tulodo Prenatan Inggil* (Party for National Unity and Solidarity of the Highest Level—KTPI) formed the *Front voor Democratie en Ontwikkeling* (Front for Democracy and Development). From its inception in 1987 until Lachmon's death, the Front would be the main competitor of *Bouterse's Nationale Democratische Partij* (National Democratic Party—NDP) and a strong

proponent of parliamentary democracy and the rule of law (Dew 1994; Meel 2014).

During his lifetime supporters and non-supporters alike would identify Lachmon as the political strongman of the Hindustani group. The VHP would not lose the Hindustani label—despite half-hearted attempts to award the party a more multiethnic image— and Lachmon would not relinquish the party leadership.[10] Not receptive to accusations that the VHP under his leadership showed signs of stagnation, if not immobility, even at a higher age Lachmon would tell journalists that he did not intend to hand over the VHP to a younger party member. He pretended not to understand why he would have to resign from the party chair as long as he was mentally sane and capable of thinking rationally, as long as he could contribute something meaningful to his country, and as long as voters put their support behind him (Khemradj 1996: 429, 540; 2002: 122-8).

Fellow party members defying Lachmon's preponderate position —nicknaming him '*mahārāja*' or '*sultān*'—rapidly discovered that Lachmon preached fraternization politics in the national political arena, but less so within the VHP. The party organization rested on Lachmon's authority as chairman and until 1987, did not provide structures and statutes guaranteeing party members a significant measure of co-determination and control. According to Lachmon, there could only be one captain to a ship and also following 1987, this remained his maxim. This implied that he effectively mono-polized the VHP board, demanded strict loyalty from his fellow-

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[10] In 1966, the name of the party changed into *Vatan Hitkari Partij* (Party for National Well-Being) and in 1973 into *Vooruitstrevende Hervormings Partij* (Progressive Reform Party). These adjustments, however, did not substantially affect the focus of the party. Starting in 1967, both the NPS and the VHP put representatives from other ethnic groups on their list, but only once in a while these candidates were elected. M. Hassankhan (2003: 60) identifies the then NPS and VHP as monoethnic parties with a multiethnic fringe. With reference to these adaptations, R. Derveld (1999: 8) discusses the practice of tokenism in Surinamese politics. See also J. Sedney (2017: 30-2).

board members and did not tolerate attempts to contradict him. VHP-ers challenging his political leadership met with vigorous opposition and counteraction, and were often successfully sidetracked, if not politically eliminated.[11]

In Lachmon's view, ethnic cooperation on a nationwide scale presupposed undisputed control over the participating Hindustani segment. Particularly since he was backed by the Sanatan Dharma followers (Sanatanis) and the Arya Samajis–influential among the Hindustani electorate and as a rule represented in the VHP board—Lachmon was able to prolong his powerful position. He could also sustain his authority owing to the central role he played in various elite networks. Particularly his collaborations with wealthy Hindustani entrepreneurs allowed him to allocate resources, such as jobs, permits, scholarships and acres of land among his supporters (Bakker 1999: 96-7, 109-10).

GANDHI

Being born of Hindu parentage and brought up in a patriarchal family system, Lachmon upheld a rather traditional way of life, be it with a modern touch. His daily routines included abstinence from alcohol, beef and pork meat, attention for spiritual needs, and participation in services and celebrations connected to the highlights of the Hindu calendar. A member of the reformist Arya Samaj, Lachmon identified himself as a Hindu 'from a higher caste', but refrained from attributing much social value to it and by no means considered this an obstacle to collaborations with lower caste Hindustani or non-Hindustani (Khemradj 2002: 23, 26, 39).[12]

In Lachmon's opinion, aiming at material progress was laudable as long as this ambition was directed at removing hindrances to economic security. Although not without financial means himself,

[11] Interview author with Jagernath Lachmon, Paramaribo, 4 November 1988 and observations by R. Khemradj (2002: 52-4).

[12] In the Hindustani database, Lachmon's mother was classified as an Ahir, a traditional cattle-rearing 'caste'. Whereas Brahmins and Kshatriyas pass for higher caste, Ahirs are generally considered as middle caste.

he rejected capital accumulation targeted at excessive self-enrich-ment.[13] Lachmon was known to visit the *mandir* (temple), when the occasion demanded his presence and to be reserved about regularly holding a worship service at home. His three successive marriages reflected a more Creolized outlook. Since they involved women of mixed ethnic origins, these marriages met with scepticism from the VHP's traditional rank-and-file (Khemradj 2002, 18-25).

Lachmon would demonstrate great admiration for the acts and teachings of M.K. Gandhi. He used to refer to him as 'my big example'. A portrait of Gandhi was hanging in the central office at his law firm. But not only had his clients encountered his main source of inspiration, whenever they visited their advisor. For many years Lachmon's firm also served as the unofficial centre of operations of the VHP. As a matter of fact, having a pied-à-terre in the centre of Paramaribo enabled Lachmon to receive anyone who wished to consult him. In all instances the image of Gandhi was watching over them.[14] It enabled Lachmon to cultivate Gandhi as his *guru* and encouraged VHP-supporters to promote Lachmon as the Surinamese Gandhi.

What attracted Lachmon to Gandhi? First of all, we have to acknowledge that among Hindustani in Suriname identification with an icon of Indian nationalism was an act of social and cultural desirability. As a consequence, making recurrent references to Gandhi's achievements and ideas was almost inescapable for those who were eager to perform a leadership role among people belonging to this population group. Lachmon knew that as a politician, he would

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[13] Lachmon was definitely familiar with the concept of *artha* (pursuing material wealth and worldly success), one of the four aims of human life in Hinduism. Identifying them as acts of immoderation and outright immoral and illegal behaviour, he particularly condemned illegal capital flows that from the early 1980s had started to penetrate government operations in Suriname.

[14] In 1986, on the occasion of Lachmon's seventieth birthday, the VHP's official headquarters was inaugurated. The location was named De Olifant (The Elephant). See E. Azimullah (1986: 244).

improve his odds and expand his opportunities by paying tribute to Gandhi.

Lachmon's economic ideas did not converge with Gandhi's anti-capitalist stand and the latter's ambition to establish a self-supporting cottage-industry society. Although sympathizing with the rural proletariat contemplating development in Suriname, Lachmon did not take village life nor subsistence activities as points of departure. To him, these could create a limited form of autarky at the most, but, more importantly, would deny people the 'fruits of progress', and would unfairly disconnect Suriname from major advancements in other parts of the Western Hemisphere.[15] Different from Gandhi, Lachmon also had no craving whatsoever to relinquish wealth and luxury and self-effacingly serve the poor

[15] Throughout his life, Lachmon would present himself as an advocate of free enterprise and opposed manifestations of 'strange ideologies', a euphemism for the varieties of socialism that had gained a foothold in neighbouring countries like Guyana. With Cheddi Jagan Lachmon shared a poverty-stricken childhood in a rural district populated by co-ethnics, who earned a living in agriculture. Their political views, however, diverged in many respects. Jagan was raised on the Port Mourant sugar plantation and was particularly struck by the exploitation of and injustice imposed upon the workers by the plantation regime which at the time was in the hands of the British-owned Booker Company. His experiences laid the foundation for his rejection of colonialism, capitalism and imperialism, his crusade against King Sugar and his unrelenting belief in the merits of 'scientific socialism'. Lachmon's upbringing in the Corantijn polder familiarized him with the principles of subsistence farming. Small Hindustani farmers engaged in a self-sufficient lifestyle growing crops and keeping livestock to support family needs and selling surplus products at the local market. For Lachmon, the market orientation of the farmers and their efforts towards production expansion and economic independence induced him to favourably consider capitalism. Whereas Jagan's adherence to Marxism made him quite consistent in his opinions and judgements, but also inflexible and regularly out of touch with the realities of Guyanese society, Lachmon did not have any use for ideological nitpicking, showed flexibility and expressed a strong will to compromise in order to tackle the perils of ethnic conflict. On Jagan's social background and political ideas, see F. Birbalsingh (2007), C.A. Palmer (2010: 157-90) and C. Seecharan (2015: 76-7, 204-50). Lachmon and Jagan are compared by H. Ramsoedh (1997).

and powerless. Neither did he take a keen interest in improving the position of women or extending women's rights.[16]

Ideological similarities between Lachmon and Gandhi can be found when examining their political goals. Both men endorsed and defended democracy, justice, dignity and simplicity and favoured dialogue and consensus building in order to attain their objectives. Particularly, Gandhi's application of the concepts of *ahimsa* and *satyagraha* appealed to Lachmon. The concept of *ahimsa* (non-violence) was a strategy Lachmon would deploy throughout his life and with considerable success; *Satyagraha* (holding firmly to the truth) complemented with *ahimsa*. In Gandhi's case, the two were the engine behind his anti-colonial stance and programme for social reform. Concentrating on parliamentary politics, Lachmon's affinity to both concepts was particularly motivated by a practical concern to maintain a manageable social order and a workable balance of power (Gowricharn 2016: 9).

Inspired by Gandhi's commitment to appease Hindus and Muslims and favour their incorporation into an undivided nation-state, Lachmon in the mid-1950s launched his fraternization politics. This ideological position epitomized his belief in political dialogue directed at conflict resolution and enduring cooperation in order to attain stability. The Indian example had taught him that ethnic rivalry and religious tensions bore the danger of pitting people against each other, often with startling and unprecedented consequences. According to Lachmon, viewing inhabitants of Suriname as Surinamese with due recognition of their distinct cultures and religions was the preferred way to deal constructively with the ethnic makeup of the country.[17]

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[16] Interviewing (former) female members of parliament M. Snoep (2018) demonstrates that under Lachmon, the patriarchal barrier maintained by male VHP colleagues could obstruct the freedom of movement of VHP's women representatives considerably.

[17] Lachmon's fraternization politics—never elaborated upon by the VHP-leader himself—spurred many pundits to reflect on its fundamentals and significance. See F.E.H. Breeveld (2000: 174-97), E.G. Gonesh (2015: 13-23, 91-119, 193-7) and J. Sedney (2017: 22-50). Analytically meaningful E.G. Gonesh (2015: 19-23) distinguishes between the fraternization politics

In 1957, VHP associate Jnan Adhin added a philosophical underpinning to Lachmon's fraternization politics. Basing himself on the Rigvedic philosophy in a short essay called *Eenheid in verscheidenheid* (unity in diversity), Adhin advocated a cultural synthesis that allowed all ethnic groups in Suriname to preserve their own cultures and traditions, while being part of a unified culture bearing an unmistakable Western stamp. One of the features of this unified culture was the maintenance of Dutch as Suriname's official language. To illustrate his point, Adhin pictured Surinamese society as a flower garden. With reference to the ethnic groups coexisting in Suriname, he underlined that the diversity of the flowers determined the beauty, attractiveness and charm of a garden. Selecting examples of only one type of flower would create an uninspiring and poor whole, lacking allure. Deploying the garden metaphor, Adhin opposed unity in diversity to unity in uniformity. His objections against the latter were informed by the manoeuvring of young Surinamese nationalists. According to Adhin, these activists attempted to impose on other ethnic groups a version of nationalism that favoured Creole over non-Creole interests and forced particularly the Asian population groups to adjust to a culture showing exclusionary tendencies and unjustly neglecting the broader political and legal framework that kept Surinamese citizens together (Adhin 1957).[18]

In the 1960s, for Lachmon, India as a point of reference receded into the background and rapidly made room for Guyana. Whereas Lachmon considered India a mixed bag that Surinamese politicians

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as a leadership style, a way to build political coalitions between the VHP and the NPS, and an instrument to bridge the distance between Hindustani and Creoles.

[18] P. Meel (1999) and E. Marshall (2003) have examined Creole nationalism and Lachmon's balanced responses to it. Lachmon vigorously rejected manifestations of Hindu radicalism, such as calls for racial purity or pleas for the partition of Suriname into a Hindustani and a Creole state. The latter scenario might have been provoked by Afro-Guyanese and Indo-Guyanese, who developed comparable plans in the early 1960s. See C.A. Palmer (2010: 207-8, 236).

could draw lessons from, in his opinion Guyana demonstrated outright undesirable developments, when taking into account its tense ethnic relations, questionable ways of power sharing and ideological quibbling. The disturbing course of events in Guyana in combination with Creole nationalism progressively gaining ground in Suriname reinforced Lachmon's view that Suriname was not ready for independence yet. In his opinion, the mental integration of the different population groups needed more time to proceed and mature and economic independence had to precede political independence, if Suriname was to have a fair chance to survive as a sovereign state.

Referring to the violent ethnic clashes that had resulted in hundreds of casualties in the years prior to Guyana's independence, the VHP during their 1967 election campaign in Nickerie invited on stage Indo-Guyanese women who were presented as the victims of rape and urged to testify about the horrors they had experienced at the hands of Afro-Guyanese men. The message VHP propagandists wished to convey was clear: if Creole politicians in Suriname would win the elections, similar things might happen to Hindustani women. In this hazardous atmosphere Surinamese political leaders, however, managed to remain level-headed. Between 1969 and 1973, Lachmon—principal force behind a VHP-controlled government—skilfully delayed discussions about independence.[19]

In early 1974, Lachmon felt overwhelmed by prime minister and NPS leader Henck Arron, who had quite unexpectedly announced the transfer of political sovereignty to Suriname. According to Lachmon, he was not opposed to independence, but favoured a gradual evolution over hasty actions to accomplish this goal. Lachmon attempted to postpone the independence date and, when this did not work out, to submit the issue of independence to a referendum. But this initiative turned also out to be ineffective.

[19] Guyanese political developments in the 1950s and 1960s are handsomely summarized by S. Garner (2008: 99-129) and C.A. Palmer (2010: 191-240). The VHP election campaign in 1967 has been covered by E.M. Dew (1978: 147-8) and H. Breeveld (2000: 290).

Finally, Lachmon tried to obtain as many constitutional guarantees as possible in order to safeguard the interests and ease the concerns of large sections of the Surinamese population, those of Hindustani in particular. Having enforced several guarantees the VHP in late 1975 voted in favour of the new Surinamese constitution and enabled the parliamentary acceptance of Suriname's independence by a unanimous vote.

From the 1960s, Lachmon experienced the 'Guyanese nightmare' as an imminent danger that had to be kept outdoors in order to sustain societal peace. In speeches, Lachmon referred to the 1962-4 riots and the subsequent suppression of Indo-Guyanese by the Burnham administration. Discussing independence, Lachmon juxtaposed his political fights with Arron and those between Jagan and Burnham. Unwilling to accept the underdog role, he stated that he was confident to escape from Arron's headlock and take over control again. This goal, however, proved difficult to achieve. In spring 1975, Lachmon's Gandhian approach failed to prevent Hindustani youngsters, fiercely opposing independence, to set fire to government buildings and business properties in Paramaribo's inner city (Meel 2014: 129-238).

Fraternization politics spotlighted a multicultural society based on respect for and acceptation of ethnic diversity. They suggested a proactive stand and seemed to imply Surinamese citizens performing acts of active pluralism. As a politician, however, Lachmon primarily limited himself to reciting the mantra of fraternization. He did neither encourage his supporters nor its citizens in general to critically contemplate its foundations and consequences. In his opinion repeating the message of fraternization and complying with the rule of law would create the right conditions to further the process of interethnic rapprochement that the VHP had launched. According to Lachmon, no further action was required to strengthen the evolutionary development of a Surinamese nation-state built on multiethnic principles (Ramsoedh 2013: 25, 27).

Lachmon's stance on the issue of power sharing came more specifically to the fore with regard to the occupation of the position of prime minister (before 1987) and president (from 1987). A

number of times the VHP collected that many votes and outrivalled competing parties in such an impressive way that Lachmon was the obvious candidate to become leader of the government. However, also under those circumstances Lachmon consequently rejected this job opportunity arguing that as Speaker of Parliament, he was in a more powerful position, since it allowed him to control the government (Khemradj 2002: 55-6, 94-6, 111-18).

Observers have hypothesized that Lachmon did not want to become leader of the government because he estimated that Creoles, feeling economically and demographically surpassed by Hindustanis, and on the verge of losing political control, would never accept a Hindustani holding the office of chief executive. They would consider this a manifestation of their weakened societal position and would mobilize supporters to undo this humiliation. Others linked the defensiveness Lachmon in their opinion demonstrated to what they termed a Hindustani predisposition to avoid conflict and aim for workable compromises.[20]

No doubt, Lachmon acted cautiously to sustain ethnic peace. In this respect, he was straight forward, predictable and apt to play safe. But allowing non-Hindustanis to obtain the leadership of the government, while being in a position to claim the office himself in his view did not reflect a Hindustani inferiority complex towards Creoles, nor a 'natural inclination to submissiveness'. It demonstrated a Gandhian adherence to discipline and a firm resolve to rule out the possibility that interethnic tensions would upset the

[20] R. Gowricharn (2016: 5, 7-8) introduced the term 'ethnic habitus' and attributed the 'self-imposed second-class position' of Hindustanis in politics to their political cowardice and fear. I would argue that Lachmon understood the signs of his times and the political psychology of his fellow Surinamese and acted accordingly. This also clarifies why current VHP chairperson Chandrikapersad Santokhi—two generations younger than Lachmon and operating in a society more conversant with the need to prudently deal with multiethnicity—openly aspired to secure the office of president. In 2020, Santokhi managed to acquire this position. Author's interview with Chandrikapersad Santokhi, Paramaribo, 2 March 2017 and Ramdien Sardjoe, Paramaribo, 6 March 2017.

existing social order. The Guyanese example had shown that it did not take much to disrupt parliamentary democracy and the rule of the law.

VISITING INDIA

Lachmon dovetailed his affinity with the Dutch model of consociationalism and his efforts to prolong friendship ties with the Dutch[21] with a continued emphasis on the importance of maintaining connections with India. Politically and economically, however, these relations were characterized by alienation. This was partly a consequence of the fact that Suriname had been part of the Dutch colonial empire. Delegates of Gandhi regularly visited Indians in Guyana and Trinidad, but less frequently in Suriname (De Klerk 1953: 27-32; Samaroo 2006; 2016: 128-9; Seecharan 2011). Moreover, following Gandhi's death policy changes in India greatly affected the country's foreign relations. Gandhi had taken a sympathetic stance towards the Indian diaspora and had pressed for the discussion of their grievances during meetings of the Indian National Congress. Being one of the founders of the Non-Aligned Movement and a proponent of state socialism, Nehru presented himself as an advocate of solidarity that transcended the bonds between 'mother India' and her diaspora. In his view, diasporic communities should not look to *Bharat Mata* for salvation, but opt for integration in their host societies (Samaroo 2016: 134-6). Confronted with this attitude Lachmon confined himself to promoting the perpetuation of cultural and religious ties with India.

Lachmon experienced the distant relations between the two countries during his first visit to India in spring 1960. As a member

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[21] Lachmon viewed the Netherlands as a safety valve, if ethnic strife would upset Surinamese society and as a dependable donor country Surinamese governments could rely on in case socio-economic disaster would threaten their country. Zooming in on his connections with the Dutch royal family his critics conferred upon him the nickname 'Lachmon of Orange', a badge of honour he was proud to wear. Pictures of Lachmon with members of the Dutch royal family were decorating the central office of his law firm. Compare R. Khemradj (2002: 42).

of a Surinamese delegation consisting of members of parliament and ministers, Lachmon was received by the Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and Vice-President Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan. In Delhi, he laid a wreath at Raj Ghat, the cremation site of Mahatma Gandhi. He considered this one of the highlights of his journey. Apart from Delhi, the delegation visited Calcutta (modern-day Kolkata), from where Lachmon's parents had been shipped to Suriname as indentured labourers. Lachmon also endeavoured to find the village of Behta (Uttar Pradesh), the birthplace of his parents. We are not informed about the results of his investigations. He considered this a private matter.[22]

The Indian government had not received Lachmon as the political leader of the Indian community in Suriname. This was not only contrary to his expectations, but also a cause for disappointment. Apparently, the Dutch embassy had not been able to pass this information correctly to the Indian authorities. But it turned out that his hosts were not at all familiar with Suriname. In order to remedy this, the delegation provided their counterparts with basic facts about the autonomy phase Suriname had entered. Briefed on Suriname's total population, their interlocutors responded that if elections were held this number would not be enough to obtain a seat in the Indian parliament. Comparisons like these, touching on differences in scale and population density, put Surinamese affairs into a sobering perspective.[23]

At the time Lachmon made his second trip to India, in April 1993, a number of things had changed.[24] Suriname had become independent and had established diplomatic relations with India

[22] Information derived from E. Azimullah (1986: 254), P. Meel (1999: 167-9), *Suriname* 25 June 1960 and interviews author with Jules Sedney, Paramaribo, 10 March 2017 and Dew Lachmon, Paramaribo, 18 June 2018. Sedney was the only surviving member of the Surinamese delegation.

[23] Interview author with Jules Sedney, Paramaribo, 10 March 2017.

[24] Some informants leave room for the possibility that Lachmon did not pay two, but three visits to India due to lack of factual data in order to substantiate this assumption. Interviews author with George Ramkhelawan, Paramaribo, 4 March 2017 and Dew Lachmon, Paramaribo, 9 March 2017.

in 1976. A year later, India opened its embassy in Paramaribo. An Indian Cultural Centre (ICC), operating under the supervision of the embassy, started its activities in 1978. Not long afterwards the political climate in India had altered as well. The Nehru era—which had come to a close in 1991—had been succeeded by a regime that had started policies of economic liberalization and had reintro-duced the Gandhian receptiveness towards the Indian diaspora. The latter strategy was largely aimed at enhancing trade relations with the states that hosted the various diasporic communities (Samaroo 2016: 135-6).

Travelling at the invitation of the Indian government, Lachmon discovered that Delhi was well-prepared to welcome the Surinamese delegation. He was credited as the political leader of the Hindustani in Suriname, but insisted that he had come on behalf of all Surinamese. Lachmon met with President Shankar Dayal Sharma, Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao, the Indian Speaker of Parliament, ministers and representatives of the private sector. Indian and Surinamese officials discussed the organization of the first meeting of the Suriname-India Joint Commission for strengthening bilateral cooperation—which had been established in 1992—and the planning of an official visit of the vice-president of Suriname to India. Aiming to obtain financial support for his country Lachmon successfully negotiated a (second) letter of credit. His return to Raj Ghat turned out to be an emotional event. Lachmon scattered flowers over the memorial and muttered Gandhi quotes as to pay once more his respect to the person whom he regarded as his example.[25]

In the 1990s, transnational relations between Suriname and India did not figure prominently on the policy agenda as yet. Annual high-level diaspora conferences hosted by the Indian

[25] *De West* 29 and 30 April 1993, *De Ware Tijd* 30 April and 3 May 1993, and telephone interview author with Marijke Indra Djwalapersad, Paramaribo, 13 June 2017. Djwalapersad was one of the members of the Surinamese delegation. About India's foreign policy in 1993-4, see: http://mealib.nic.in/?2522?000#Central and South America and the Caribbean (last accessed on 17 May 2017).

government and corresponding activities and initiatives propelled by these meetings would gain momentum only after the turn of the century.[26] In this respect the opening in 2000 of a Surinamese embassy in Delhi was a promising step forward. However, it was not India, but the Netherlands that would be the setting of the final days of Lachmon. In 2001, while visiting the Netherlands as leader of a parliamentary delegation, quite suddenly the VHP leader passed away. Lachmon's mortal remains were transported to Suriname where he was cremated. In 2002, one the foremost roads in Paramaribo would be named after him. Subsequently, three statues in honour of Lachmon would be raised: one in Independence Square, one in front of the VHP headquarters, and one in the district of Nickerie.[27]

CONCLUSION

To Lachmon, India offered multiple sources of inspiration to which he wished to relate in order to achieve his political goals. In his opinion, the country of his ancestors presented a highly valued civilization preserving cultures and religions that determined the lives of millions of Indians across the world. Indian politicians had demonstrated the power and perseverance to throw off colonial status, and embark on an independent course by gradually transform their country into a regional power. Simultaneously, Indian experiences in the field of ethnicity, religion and economic development had displayed the vulnerabilities of nation-building. According to Lachmon, particularly the partition of British India signalled a warning. Considering himself an apprentice of Gandhi, he modelled his fraternization politics after his acts and ideas. Upholding Hindustani-ness Lachmon believed that a contemporary version of *Ram raj* built on parliamentary democracy and the rule of law required a sense of moderation and willingness to compromise.

[26] http://surinameembassy.in/bilateral_relations.html (last accessed on 17 May 2017).

[27] The state cremation for Lachmon is covered in *Reformatorisch Dagblad* 25 October 2001.

In the 1960s, Guyana quickly replaced India as his point of
reference. A Nickerie-born Surinamer, Lachmon perceived ethnic
tensions in close-by Guyana as a possible harbinger of a Surinamese
catastrophe. The violence that had preceded the country's secession
from the British informed Lachmon's critical stand towards Suri-
namese's independence and induced him to compare Arron's
mission to attain this goal with Burnham's drive to establish an
independent state catering to the needs of Afro-Guyanese at the
expense of their Indian compatriots. It was only as a consequence
of military rule imposed on Suriname in the 1980s that Lachmon
and Arron reconciled and during the remainder of their careers
pursued a partnership based on unity-in-diversity.

Lachmon applauded the maintenance of good relations with
the Dutch. The idea that Suriname was able to benefit from their
material and immaterial support reassured him. Likewise, he wished
to continue friendship ties with the Surinamese community in
the Netherlands. India's current diaspora policy took shape after
Lachmon had passed away, but there can be no doubt that he
would have endorsed this new course of action. The prospect that
diasporic connections with an emerging global power might
reinforce the socio-economic development of Suriname would have
energized him.

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