

From the Deed of Cession to Decolonisation: Re-examining the Historical Evolution of Education in Fiji

Davendra Sharma¹

Lecturer and PhD Scholar University of Fiji, Fiji Islands

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ABSTRACT

The evolution of formal education in Fiji is inseparable from the broader historical processes of colonisation, cultural encounter, and socio-political transformation that have shaped the nation since the nineteenth century. This paper critically re-examines the historical trajectory of education in Fiji from the Deed of Cession in 1874 to the contemporary era of decolonisation, with particular attention to the roles of missionary enterprises, colonial administration, and the indentured labour system in structuring educational access, curriculum content, and social stratification. Drawing on historical and postcolonial scholarship, the study analyses how early indigenous systems of knowledge transmission were marginalised through the imposition of Western epistemologies, Christian moral instruction, and racially differentiated schooling models designed to serve colonial economic and governance objectives.

The paper further explores how education functioned as a tool of social control during the colonial period, reinforcing ethnic divisions between Indigenous iTaukei communities and Indo-Fijian descendants of indentured labourers, while simultaneously limiting pathways to higher education and leadership for colonised populations. Following independence in 1970, Fiji's education system entered a complex phase of reform marked by efforts to expand access, promote national cohesion, and reassert cultural identity, yet continued to reflect deep-seated colonial legacies in curriculum design, language policy, and assessment practices. By situating Fiji's educational development within wider global debates on decolonisation and postcolonial education reform, this paper highlights the enduring tensions between inherited colonial structures and contemporary aspirations for culturally responsive, inclusive, and equitable education.

The study contributes to the growing body of Pacific and global South scholarship by offering a historically grounded, critical analysis of education in Fiji, and by identifying key lessons for current policy and curriculum reform initiatives aimed at decolonising knowledge systems and repositioning education to meet the social, cultural, and developmental needs of a postcolonial society.

Keywords: Education in Fiji; Deed of Cession; Colonisation; Missionary Education; Indentured Labour; Postcolonial Education; Decolonisation; Indigenous Knowledge Systems; Pacific Education.

INTRODUCTION

Education in Fiji has evolved through a complex and often contested historical trajectory shaped by indigenous knowledge systems, colonial intervention, missionary activity, and post-independence nation-building. Prior to European contact, Indigenous iTaukei societies possessed well-established systems of education embedded within communal life, where knowledge transmission occurred through oral traditions, apprenticeship, ritual practices, and collective responsibilities tied to land (*vanua*), kinship, and spirituality (Nabobo-Baba, 2006; Thaman, 2003). Education in this context was holistic, relational, and culturally grounded, emphasizing moral values, survival skills, leadership, and

social cohesion rather than formal schooling or credentialism. These indigenous pedagogical traditions formed the foundational epistemological base of Fijian society but were later systematically marginalized through colonial processes.

The signing of the Deed of Cession in 1874, which formally transferred sovereignty of Fiji to the British Crown, marked a decisive turning point in the development of formal education. Colonial rule reconfigured education as a strategic instrument for governance, social regulation, and economic productivity (Whitehead, 1981). British administrators viewed schooling not as a means of intellectual empowerment for the colonised population, but as a mechanism to maintain order, produce a compliant labour force, and support the colonial economy.

Education policy during this period was therefore deeply entangled with imperial ideologies that positioned Western knowledge systems as superior while devaluing indigenous epistemologies (Altbach, 2007).

Missionary organisations played a central role in the early expansion of formal education in Fiji. Christian missions—particularly Methodist, Catholic, and Anglican—established the first schools, where literacy and numeracy were closely linked to religious instruction and moral discipline (Ravuvu, 1983; Whitehead, 1981). While missionary education contributed to increased literacy and provided limited opportunities for social mobility, it simultaneously functioned as a vehicle for cultural transformation and assimilation. Indigenous belief systems, languages, and practices were often reframed as primitive or incompatible with Christian doctrine, leading to profound cultural dislocation (Thaman, 2003). As Nabobo-Baba (2013) argues, missionary schooling redefined what constituted legitimate knowledge, privileging Western theological and cultural norms over indigenous ways of knowing.

The introduction of the indentured labour system (1879–1916) further complicated the educational landscape of colonial Fiji. The arrival of Indian indentured labourers to work on sugar plantations created a racially stratified society in which education was organised along ethnic lines (Gillion, 1962; Lal, 2000). Separate schooling systems emerged for Indigenous Fijians and Indo-Fijians, reflecting colonial policies of segregation and differential development. Education for Indo-Fijian communities was often community-driven and focused on literacy and advancement, while Indigenous Fijians were deliberately steered towards vocational and agricultural training to preserve traditional hierarchies and prevent political mobilisation (Lal, 2004; Whitehead, 1981). These policies entrenched structural inequalities that would persist well beyond the colonial period.

Throughout the colonial era, education in Fiji functioned as a mechanism of social control rather than social transformation. Curriculum content, language policy, and access to higher education were tightly regulated to align with colonial interests, limiting the development of critical consciousness among colonised populations (Freire, 1970; Tikly, 2004). English was promoted as the dominant language of instruction, reinforcing linguistic hierarchies and restricting meaningful participation for students from indigenous and rural backgrounds (Thaman, 2009). The marginalisation of

indigenous knowledge within formal schooling contributed to a lasting epistemic imbalance that continues to shape educational outcomes in Fiji.

Following independence in 1970, Fiji embarked on a process of educational expansion and reform aimed at nation-building, economic development, and social cohesion. Post-independence governments invested in widening access to schooling, teacher education, and tertiary institutions, recognising education as a key driver of national development (Government of Fiji, 2013). However, despite these reforms, the structure and content of the education system remained heavily influenced by colonial legacies, including examination-oriented curricula, Eurocentric knowledge frameworks, and externally derived assessment standards (Narsey, 2015; Thaman, 2003). As a result, tensions emerged between inherited colonial models of education and growing demands for culturally responsive and inclusive pedagogies.

In recent decades, global movements advocating for decolonisation of education have renewed critical attention to the historical foundations of schooling systems in postcolonial societies. Scholars argue that meaningful educational reform requires confronting the enduring impacts of colonialism on knowledge production, curriculum design, and institutional governance (Smith, 2012; de Sousa Santos, 2014). In the Pacific context, there has been a strong call to re-centre indigenous epistemologies, languages, and values within formal education systems as a means of addressing educational inequities and restoring cultural integrity (Nabobo-Baba, 2006; Thaman, 2009).

Against this backdrop, this paper critically re-examines the historical evolution of education in Fiji from the Deed of Cession to the contemporary decolonisation discourse. By situating Fiji's education system within its colonial and postcolonial contexts, the study seeks to illuminate how historical power relations continue to shape present-day policy and practice. The paper argues that understanding these historical trajectories is essential for informing current and future education reforms aimed at creating a more equitable, culturally grounded, and socially responsive education system for Fiji and the wider Pacific region.

Table 1: Historical Evolution of Education in Fiji – Key Periods and Influences

Period	Key Actors	Education Characteristics	Key Policies & Practices	Long-term Implications
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Pre-Colonial	Indigenous iTaukei communities	Holistic, relational, experiential	Oral traditions, apprenticeship, communal learning	Strong indigenous knowledge systems, cultural cohesion
Missionary Era (1830s-1874)	Methodist, Catholic, Anglican missionaries	Literacy, religious instruction, moral education	Bible-based curricula, English literacy, teacher training	Introduced Western education, marginalized indigenous epistemologies
Colonial Era (1874-1970)	British administration, missionaries	Vocational training for Fijians, academic paths for Indo-Fijians	Ethnic differentiation, English-medium instruction, examination system	Institutionalized inequality, limited access to higher education for Indigenous Fijians
Indentured Labour System (1879-1916)	British administration, Indo-Fijian communities	Segregated education by ethnicity	Community-driven schools, emphasis on literacy & moral instruction	Ethnic stratification in education, long-term socio-economic disparities
Post-Independence (1970-Present)	Government, NGOs, religious organizations	Expanded access, national curriculum	Centralized curriculum, teacher training, examination-oriented system	Persistence of colonial structures, need for decolonization, focus on equity and inclusion

Source: Whitehead (1981); Lal (2004); Thaman (2003); Narsey (2015); Nabobo-Baba (2013)

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarly literature on the evolution of education in Fiji is situated at the intersection of colonial history, missionary activity, labour migration, and postcolonial development. Early historical accounts primarily document the establishment of Western-style education through missionary and colonial institutions, often presenting education as a civilising force introduced to Indigenous Fijian societies (Whitehead, 1981; Gillion, 1962). While these works provide valuable descriptive insights into institutional development, they tend to adopt colonial perspectives that underplay indigenous agency and knowledge systems.

Indigenous Education and Knowledge Systems

Pacific scholars have strongly challenged deficit-oriented portrayals of pre-colonial education by emphasising the

sophistication of Indigenous iTaukei knowledge systems. Thaman (2003, 2009) conceptualises indigenous education in the Pacific as holistic, relational, and deeply embedded in cultural values, language, spirituality, and the *vanua*. Similarly, Nabobo-Baba (2006, 2013) argues that indigenous Fijian pedagogies prioritised collective responsibility, experiential learning, and moral development, offering an epistemological framework fundamentally different from Western schooling models. This body of literature highlights that colonisation did not introduce education per se, but rather imposed a narrow, institutionalised form of knowledge that displaced existing systems.

Missionary Education and Cultural Transformation

Missionary education occupies a central position in the historiography of Fijian schooling. Whitehead (1981) and

Ravuvu (1983) document how Christian missions established the earliest schools, linking literacy to religious conversion and moral discipline. While missionary schools contributed to increased literacy and the spread of formal education, critical scholars argue that they also facilitated cultural assimilation and epistemic dominance. Thaman (2003) and Nabobo-Baba (2013) note that missionary curricula often delegitimised indigenous belief systems, languages, and practices, framing them as incompatible with Christian doctrine. This literature positions missionary education as both enabling and constraining, providing access to schooling while simultaneously reshaping cultural identities.

Colonial Administration and Education Policy

Colonial education policy in Fiji has been widely analysed as a tool of governance and social control. Whitehead (1981) and Lal (2004) illustrate how British administrators deliberately limited educational opportunities for Indigenous Fijians, favouring vocational and agricultural training over academic pathways to preserve traditional hierarchies and prevent political mobilisation. Education was designed to serve colonial economic interests rather than foster critical citizenship. Drawing on broader postcolonial education theory, Tikly (2004) and Altbach (2007) situate Fiji's experience within global patterns of imperial education systems that reinforced racialised knowledge hierarchies and unequal access to power.

Indentured Labour and Segregated Schooling

The introduction of Indian indentured labourers between 1879 and 1916 created enduring ethnic and social divisions that shaped educational development. Gillion (1962) and Lal (2000) provide detailed historical analyses of the indenture system and its socio-economic consequences, including the emergence of separate schooling structures for Indo-Fijian and Indigenous communities. Later studies argue that Indo-Fijian communities often pursued education as a pathway to social mobility, while Indigenous Fijians were constrained by colonial paternalism and restricted curricula (Lal, 2004; Narsey, 2015). This literature highlights how education reproduced ethnic stratification, with long-term implications for equity and social cohesion.

Post-Independence Reform and Persistent Colonial Legacies

Following independence in 1970, education became central to national development and identity formation. Government policy documents and academic analyses emphasise expansion of access, teacher education, and curriculum reform (Government of Fiji, 2013; Narsey, 2015). However, scholars

consistently argue that post-independence reforms have struggled to dismantle colonial structures embedded in curriculum content, assessment practices, and language policy (Thaman, 2003; Nabobo-Baba, 2006). Examination-oriented systems and Eurocentric knowledge frameworks remain dominant, limiting the integration of indigenous epistemologies and culturally responsive pedagogy.

Decolonisation and Contemporary Education Debates

More recent scholarship situates Fiji's education system within global decolonisation discourses. Smith (2012) and de Sousa Santos (2014) argue that decolonising education requires confronting epistemic injustice and reclaiming indigenous ways of knowing. In the Pacific context, Thaman (2009) and Nabobo-Baba (2013) advocate for culturally sustaining education that recognises indigenous knowledge as central rather than supplementary. This literature underscores the importance of historical analysis in informing contemporary reforms aimed at equity, inclusion, and cultural relevance.

Literature Gaps

Despite a growing body of scholarship on education in Fiji, several critical gaps remain.

First, much of the existing literature treats historical periods in isolation, focusing separately on missionary education, indenture, colonial administration, or post-independence reform. There is a lack of integrative studies that trace the continuities and transitions from the Deed of Cession through to contemporary decolonisation efforts, limiting holistic understanding of how historical legacies shape current educational structures.

Second, while indigenous knowledge systems are increasingly acknowledged, they are often discussed theoretically rather than historically. Few studies systematically examine how indigenous epistemologies were progressively marginalised through specific colonial policies, curricula, and institutional practices over time. This gap weakens efforts to design historically grounded decolonising reforms.

Third, the intersection between indentured labour, ethnicity, and education remains underexplored in education-focused research. While historians have analysed indenture extensively, fewer studies examine how racially differentiated education systems institutionalised inequality and how these patterns continue to influence educational outcomes and policy debates in Fiji.

Fourth, much of the policy-oriented literature adopts a technical or developmental lens, emphasising access, quality, and efficiency without sufficiently interrogating

the colonial epistemological foundations of the education system. There is limited critical engagement with how curriculum, language policy, and assessment practices reproduce inherited power relations.

Finally, there is a paucity of scholarship that explicitly connects historical analysis to contemporary decolonisation discourse in the Pacific. While global decolonial theories are increasingly influential, empirically grounded studies that apply these frameworks to Fiji's historical education trajectory remain limited.

Addressing these gaps, this study offers a historically grounded, critical re-examination of the evolution of education in Fiji from the Deed of Cession to the present. By integrating indigenous, colonial, and postcolonial perspectives, the paper seeks to contribute to more informed and transformative debates on education reform and decolonisation in Fiji and the wider Pacific region.

BRITISH INFLUENCE ON EDUCATION IN FIJI

British influence on Fiji's education system was both foundational and enduring, shaping its structures, purposes, and epistemological orientations from the late nineteenth century well into the post-independence era. Following the Deed of Cession in 1874, British colonial authorities systematically reorganised education as an instrument of governance, social regulation, and economic management rather than as a means of intellectual emancipation for the colonised population (Whitehead, 1981). Education policy under British rule reflected broader imperial ideologies that sought to preserve social order, maintain racial hierarchies, and produce a labour force suited to colonial economic needs (Altbach, 2007).

Education as a Tool of Colonial Governance

British colonial administrators viewed education as a strategic mechanism to stabilise colonial rule and manage Indigenous populations. Early education policy prioritised moral discipline, obedience, and basic literacy, aligning closely with missionary objectives and reinforcing hierarchical relationships between colonisers and the colonised (Ravuvu, 1983). Formal schooling was deliberately limited in scope for Indigenous Fijians, as colonial officials feared that widespread academic education might disrupt traditional authority structures and stimulate political resistance (Whitehead, 1981; Lal, 2004). As a result, educational opportunities for Indigenous Fijians were largely confined to village schools offering rudimentary instruction.

Vocationalism and Differential Development

A defining feature of British educational influence in Fiji was

the policy of differential development, whereby distinct educational pathways were prescribed for different ethnic groups. Indigenous Fijians were channelled towards vocational and agricultural education intended to reinforce subsistence lifestyles and village-based social organisation, while Indo-Fijian communities, descendants of indentured labourers, often pursued academic education as a route to social mobility (Gillion, 1962; Narsey, 2015). This approach reflected British paternalistic beliefs that Indigenous Fijians required protection from the perceived destabilising effects of Western academic education (Lal, 2004).

The emphasis on vocationalism not only constrained Indigenous participation in professional and leadership roles but also entrenched long-term inequalities in access to higher education. Scholars argue that this policy contributed to enduring disparities in educational attainment and socio-economic outcomes between ethnic groups in Fiji (Whitehead, 1981; Thaman, 2003).

Curriculum, Language, and Epistemic Control

British influence extended deeply into curriculum design and language policy. English was promoted as the primary language of instruction, reinforcing its status as the language of power, administration, and upward mobility (Thaman, 2009). Indigenous languages and knowledge systems were marginalised within formal schooling, often confined to informal or cultural domains. This linguistic hierarchy not only limited meaningful participation for many learners but also facilitated the transmission of Western epistemologies as universal and superior forms of knowledge (Smith, 2012).

Curricula under British administration emphasised British history, geography, and cultural values, reinforcing imperial worldviews and legitimising colonial authority (Altbach, 2007). Indigenous histories and perspectives were largely absent, contributing to what de Sousa Santos (2014) describes as *epistemicide*, the systematic devaluation and erasure of non-Western knowledge systems.

Institutional Structures and Examination Systems

The British colonial education system introduced bureaucratic structures, standardised curricula, and examination-based assessment models that continue to influence Fiji's education system. External examinations and rigid assessment regimes prioritised rote learning and compliance over critical thinking and creativity (Thaman, 2003). These structures mirrored British educational traditions and were designed to produce administrative and clerical workers rather than independent thinkers

capable of challenging colonial authority (Freire, 1970). Although these institutional frameworks provided administrative coherence and standardisation, scholars argue that they also constrained pedagogical innovation and cultural relevance. The persistence of examination-driven education remains a key challenge in contemporary reform efforts (Narsey, 2015).

Enduring Legacies of British Educational Influence

The legacy of British influence on education in Fiji extends beyond the colonial period. Post-independence reforms have expanded access and sought to promote national development, yet the underlying structures, curricula, and assessment systems remain deeply rooted in colonial models (Government of Fiji, 2013). Thaman (2009) and Nabobo-Baba (2013) contend that these inherited frameworks continue to marginalise indigenous epistemologies and limit the transformative potential of education.

In contemporary debates on decolonisation, British colonial education policies are increasingly recognised as central to understanding current inequities and reform challenges in Fiji. A critical examination of British influence reveals that meaningful educational transformation requires not only policy change but also epistemological reorientation, one that values indigenous knowledge systems, cultural identity, and local contexts as foundational rather than peripheral to education in postcolonial Fiji.

CONTRIBUTIONS OF MISSIONARIES AND RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS TO EDUCATION IN FIJI

Religious organizations have played a pivotal role in the development of Fiji's education system, shaping not only access to schooling but also curriculum content, cultural norms, and social values. The introduction of Western-style formal education in Fiji was largely driven by Christian missionary activity, while subsequent religious organizations representing Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh communities also established schools that responded to the needs of their communities, contributing to Fiji's multi-ethnic educational landscape.

Missionary Contributions

Christian missionaries, particularly from the Methodist, Catholic, and Anglican denominations, were the first to establish formal schools in Fiji during the late nineteenth century (Whitehead, 1981; Ravuvu, 1983). Their contributions were multifaceted:

- Literacy and Basic Education:** Missionary schools focused on teaching reading, writing, and numeracy, often linking these skills to religious instruction and Bible study. Literacy initiatives facilitated not only spiritual formation but also broader social mobility for Indigenous Fijians (Thaman, 2003).
- Moral and Social Formation:** Missionaries aimed to inculcate Christian values such as obedience, discipline, and ethical conduct, framing education as a moral project. This approach reinforced the social order preferred by both missionaries and colonial authorities (Whitehead, 1981).
- Teacher Training and Educational Infrastructure:** Missionary organizations were instrumental in training the first cohorts of teachers, establishing teacher training institutions, and building the earliest primary and secondary school infrastructures in rural and urban areas (Ravuvu, 1983).
- Curricular and Language Development:** Missionary schools promoted English literacy while also documenting Indigenous Fijian languages for religious instruction. This contributed to early efforts at creating bilingual literacy materials, although the focus remained on Western epistemologies (Nabobo-Baba, 2013).

While missionary schooling provided essential educational opportunities, scholars note that it also contributed to cultural displacement, as Indigenous knowledge systems and spiritual practices were often marginalized in favor of Christian and Western norms (Thaman, 2003; Smith, 2012).

Table 2: Missionaries' Contributions to Education in Fiji

Aspect	Contribution	Impact on Education	Cultural Implications
Literacy & Basic Education	Teaching reading, writing, numeracy	Increased literacy among Indigenous Fijians	Introduced Western knowledge systems; facilitated socio-economic mobility

Moral & Social Formation	Christian values, obedience, discipline	Shaped student behaviour and social norms	Reinforced colonial hierarchy and moral conformity
Teacher Training & Infrastructure	Established teacher training programs and schools	Built foundational education system in rural and urban areas	Marginalized indigenous pedagogies while providing structured schooling
Curriculum & Language	English literacy, documentation of Fijian languages	Facilitated bilingual literacy	Prioritized Western epistemologies over indigenous knowledge
Religious Instruction	Bible studies and Christian doctrine	Promoted religious literacy	Contributed to cultural transformation and Christianization of Indigenous communities

Source: Whitehead (1981); Ravuvu (1983); Thaman (2003); Nabobo-Baba (2013)

Contributions of Other Religious Organizations

The influx of Indo-Fijian communities under the indenture system (1879–1916) created a significant demand for education that reflected Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, and reformist religious values, while also addressing the socio-economic realities of colonial Fiji. In response, a range of religious and socio-cultural organisations established schools that combined religious instruction, cultural preservation, and basic secular education, thereby filling critical gaps left by missionary- and state-led education systems (Gillion, 1962; Lal, 2000).

Arya Samaj Schools

The Arya Samaj movement established schools that emphasised both religious and secular education, with a strong focus on moral instruction, Hindi language literacy, and Vedic teachings. Arya Samaj institutions promoted egalitarian educational principles, often challenging rigid social hierarchies such as caste discrimination and advocating for social reform through education (Lal, 2000). These schools played an important role in shaping a reform-oriented Indo-Fijian identity within a colonial context.

The first school established by the Arya Samaj in Fiji was **Gurukul Primary School** at Saweni, Lautoka in 1918. This marked the beginning of a major educational contribution to Indo-Fijian society. **Education Network:** Over the decades, the **Arya Pratinidhi Sabha of Fiji** expanded to manage numerous institutions including **pre-schools, primary schools, secondary schools, and tertiary education**, including key involvement in the establishment and support of the **University of Fiji**. **Cultural and Language Promotion:**

Schools affiliated with the Samaj have promoted **Hindi language and Vedic values**, contributing to the preservation of Indian culture and language within Fiji. Government officials have recognised these contributions, noting the Samaj's role in shaping educational opportunities and cultural heritage.

Sanatan Hindu Schools

Sanatan Hindu institutions focused on maintaining religious orthodoxy, cultural continuity, and moral discipline. Instruction typically included Sanskrit, Hindu religious texts, moral education, and basic literacy and numeracy. These schools provided Indo-Fijian children with culturally grounded education and a strong sense of identity in a colonial society that largely privileged European epistemologies and Christian norms (Gillion, 1962).

Sangam (Then India Sanmarga Ikya Sangam) Schools
Then India Sanmarga Ikya (TISI) Sangam schools have played a significant role in the development of education among Fiji's South Indian communities since the early twentieth century. Established following the formation of TISI Sangam in 1926, these schools emerged as community-driven institutions aimed at providing access to formal education while preserving South Indian languages, culture, and religious values. Beginning with Nadi Sangam School in 1927, the Sangam education network expanded steadily to include primary, secondary, and later tertiary institutions across Fiji. While adhering to the national curriculum, Sangam schools have historically emphasized moral education, community service, and cultural continuity, and they remain an important pillar of

Fiji's multicultural and faith-based education landscape.

Sangam institutions were largely community-funded and community-governed, reinforcing education as a collective responsibility. They played a critical role in expanding access to schooling, supporting teacher development, and promoting gender inclusion, particularly in rural and semi-urban areas. In the post-independence era, Sangam schools have continued to contribute to Fiji's education system while preserving linguistic and cultural diversity (Nabobo-Baba, 2013; Narsey, 2015).

Muslim Schools

Muslim educational institutions, including primary schools and madrassas, emphasised Quranic instruction, Arabic literacy, and ethical education, while also integrating basic secular subjects. These schools fostered religious cohesion and moral development within Indo-Fijian Muslim communities and enabled students to participate more effectively in wider social and economic life (Lal, 2000).

Sikh Educational Initiatives

Sikh organisations, though smaller in scale, established schools and community centres that promoted Punjabi language literacy, Sikh religious teachings, and moral values. These institutions often functioned as community hubs, supporting cultural preservation and social cohesion among Sikh populations in Fiji's urban centres (Gillion, 1962).

Collectively, these non-Christian religious organisations expanded educational access, preserved cultural and linguistic identities, and shaped early curriculum and pedagogy for Indo-Fijian communities. However, their development within a colonial framework also contributed to ethnic and religious segmentation in education, a legacy that continues to influence debates on equity, integration, and decolonisation in Fiji's contemporary education system (Nabobo-Baba, 2013; Thaman, 2009).

Table 3: Contributions of Non-Christian Religious Organizations in Fiji (Arya Samaj, Sanatan, Sangam, (TISI Sangam), Muslim, Sikh)

Religious Organization	Type of Education	Curriculum Focus	Community Impact	Cultural Implications
Arya Samaj	Primary and secondary schools	Hindi literacy, Vedic teachings, moral instruction	Promoted egalitarian values; challenged caste discrimination	Preserved Hindu reformist identity and social cohesion
Sanatan Hindu	Community schools	Sanskrit, religious texts, arithmetic, literacy	Maintained Indo-Fijian Hindu traditions	Strengthened cultural continuity and religious literacy
Sangam (TISI Sangam)	Primary and secondary schools	Tamil language, Saivite philosophy, moral and secular education	Expanded access; supported teacher development and gender inclusion	Preserved Tamil identity, linguistic diversity, and cultural heritage
Muslim	Primary schools and madrassas	Quranic studies, Arabic literacy, ethics	Reinforced Muslim community cohesion	Preserved religious identity and moral grounding
Sikh	Community schools and centres	Punjabi language, Sikh teachings, moral values	Served small urban Sikh populations	Preserved language, religious knowledge, and community solidarity

Source: Gillion (1962); Lal (2000); Nabobo-Baba (2013)

6.3 Impact of Religious Organizations on Fijian Education

Collectively, missionaries and other religious organizations:

- **Expanded Access to Education:** By establishing schools in both rural and urban areas, these organizations significantly increased educational access for Indigenous Fijians and Indo-Fijian communities alike.
- **Preserved and Promoted Cultural Identities:** While missionary schools often marginalized Indigenous epistemologies, Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh schools actively maintained cultural, religious, and linguistic traditions among their communities.
- **Shaped Early Curriculum and Pedagogy:** These institutions contributed to literacy, numeracy, moral education, and early teacher training, laying the foundation for formal education structures that continue to influence the modern Fijian education system.
- **Created Community Engagement Structures:** Religious schools functioned as centres for community cohesion, parental engagement, and social support, reinforcing education as a communal responsibility (Thaman, 2009; Nabobo-Baba, 2013).

However, it is important to note that while these contributions were significant, they also reinforced ethnic and religious segregation in education. Separate schooling systems for Indigenous Fijians and Indo-Fijians, as well as for different religious communities, contributed to long-term social and educational stratification, a pattern that has persisted into post-independence educational policy (Whitehead, 1981; Narsey, 2015).

Conclusion of the Section

Religious organizations, both Christian and non-Christian, were central to the historical development of Fiji's education system. Missionaries facilitated the introduction of formal Western education and literacy for Indigenous Fijians, while Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh institutions provided culturally and religiously relevant schooling for Indo-Fijian communities. Together, these contributions laid the structural, pedagogical, and cultural foundations of Fiji's multi-ethnic education system. Nevertheless, they also reflected and reinforced colonial and ethnic hierarchies, highlighting the need for contemporary reforms aimed at integration, cultural responsiveness, and decolonisation.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

The historical evolution of education in Fiji reveals that schooling has never been a neutral or purely developmental enterprise; rather, it has been deeply embedded in relations of power, culture, and political economy. From the Deed of Cession in 1874 to contemporary calls for decolonisation, education in Fiji has functioned as a site where colonial authority was asserted, social hierarchies were produced, and

particular forms of knowledge were legitimised. This discussion critically analyses these dynamics by examining education as a colonial project, the reproduction of inequality through schooling, and the persistence of colonial legacies in post-independence reform efforts.

Education as a Colonial Instrument of Power

British colonial influence positioned education as an instrument of governance rather than emancipation. Drawing on postcolonial education theory, scholars argue that colonial schooling systems were designed to produce disciplined, compliant subjects who would sustain imperial administration and economic extraction (Altbach, 2007; Tikly, 2004). In Fiji, this intent was evident in the limited scope of educational provision for Indigenous Fijians, the emphasis on moral discipline, and the prioritisation of vocational training over critical academic education (Whitehead, 1981; Lal, 2004). Education thus became a mechanism for stabilising colonial rule by reinforcing existing power structures and limiting opportunities for political consciousness.

Missionary schooling, while expanding access to literacy, further embedded colonial epistemologies by linking education to Christian conversion and Western moral frameworks (Ravuvu, 1983; Thaman, 2003). The framing of Indigenous belief systems as inferior or incompatible with "modern" education contributed to cultural displacement and epistemic subordination. From a critical perspective, this reflects what Smith (2012) describes as the colonial imposition of knowledge systems that invalidate indigenous ways of knowing and being.

Indenture, Ethnicity, and Educational Stratification

The introduction of the indentured labour system intensified educational inequality by institutionalising ethnic differentiation within schooling structures. Colonial policies encouraged segregated educational pathways for Indigenous Fijians and Indo-Fijians, reinforcing racialised notions of ability, destiny, and social role (Gillion, 1962; Lal, 2000). Indo-Fijian communities, often excluded from land ownership and traditional power structures, strategically invested in education as a means of social mobility, while Indigenous Fijians were constrained by paternalistic colonial policies that prioritised village life and subsistence agriculture (Narsey, 2015).

This stratification aligns with broader analyses of colonial education as a system that reproduces inequality rather than mitigates it (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Tikly, 2004). In Fiji, educational differentiation contributed to enduring disparities in access to higher education, professional

employment, and political representation. These patterns did not disappear with independence; instead, they became embedded within national education systems, shaping debates around meritocracy, equity, and national unity.

Curriculum, Language, and Epistemic Inequality

One of the most enduring impacts of British influence lies in curriculum design and language policy. English-medium instruction and Eurocentric curricula positioned Western knowledge as universal and authoritative, marginalising indigenous languages and epistemologies (Thaman, 2009). This epistemic hierarchy reflects what de Sousa Santos (2014) terms *epistemic injustice*, whereby certain forms of knowledge are systematically excluded from formal recognition.

The exclusion of indigenous histories, philosophies, and pedagogies from the curriculum not only undermined cultural identity but also limited the relevance of schooling for many learners. Research in Pacific education consistently demonstrates that culturally disconnected curricula contribute to disengagement, underachievement, and inequitable outcomes (Nabobo-Baba, 2006; Thaman, 2003). From this perspective, colonial curriculum frameworks continue to shape educational experiences long after the formal end of colonial rule.

Post-Independence Reform and the Persistence of Colonial Structures

Following independence in 1970, Fiji undertook significant efforts to expand access to education and position schooling as a driver of national development. Policy initiatives focused on increasing enrolment, improving teacher training, and aligning education with economic growth objectives (Government of Fiji, 2013). However, critical scholarship suggests that these reforms largely operated within inherited colonial frameworks rather than fundamentally transforming them (Narsey, 2015; Thaman, 2009).

Examination-oriented assessment systems, centralised curricula, and external benchmarks continued to reflect British educational traditions. While these structures provided standardisation and international recognition, they also constrained pedagogical innovation and limited space for indigenous knowledge integration. This tension reflects a broader postcolonial dilemma: how to balance global competitiveness with cultural relevance and epistemological sovereignty (Altbach, 2007; Tikly, 2004).

Decolonisation as a Contemporary Imperative

Recent decolonisation discourse has re-centred historical analysis as a necessary foundation for educational transformation. Scholars argue that decolonising education

requires more than curricular inclusion of indigenous content; it demands a rethinking of whose knowledge counts, how learning is assessed, and what purposes education serves (Smith, 2012; de Sousa Santos, 2014). In Fiji, this entails confronting the historical role of education in cultural marginalisation and social stratification.

Pacific scholars advocate for culturally sustaining pedagogies that integrate indigenous values, languages, and epistemologies as central to teaching and learning rather than peripheral additions (Nabobo-Baba, 2013; Thaman, 2009). Such approaches challenge colonial legacies by repositioning education as a site of cultural regeneration and social justice rather than merely economic productivity.

Synthesis and Implications

Taken together, the analysis demonstrates that the evolution of education in Fiji is characterised by continuity as much as change. Colonial priorities, discipline, differentiation, and epistemic control, remain embedded in contemporary structures, even as policy rhetoric increasingly emphasises inclusion and equity. Understanding this historical continuity is essential for designing reforms that move beyond surface-level change. This study reinforces the argument that meaningful educational reform in postcolonial contexts must be historically informed and epistemologically transformative. Without addressing the colonial foundations of curriculum, language policy, and assessment, efforts to improve quality and equity risk reproducing the very inequalities they seek to resolve (Smith, 2012; Tikly, 2004). For Fiji, decolonising education represents not only a policy challenge but a moral and cultural imperative tied to national identity, social cohesion, and sustainable development.

CONCLUSION

The historical evolution of education in Fiji demonstrates that schooling has been deeply entwined with colonial power, missionary activity, and socio-economic stratification. From the Deed of Cession in 1874 to post-independence reforms, education has functioned as both a mechanism of social control and a tool for nation-building. British colonial policies, missionary schooling, and the indentured labour system institutionalised racial and ethnic differentiation, privileging Western knowledge systems while marginalising indigenous epistemologies and cultural practices (Whitehead, 1981; Lal, 2004; Thaman, 2003). These historical legacies continue to shape contemporary education, influencing curriculum design, language policy, access to higher education, and

pedagogical approaches. Despite decades of post-independence reform, Fiji's education system still reflects inherited colonial structures, limiting the full realisation of culturally responsive, inclusive, and equitable schooling (Nabobo-Baba, 2013; Narsey, 2015).

The imperative for decolonising education in Fiji is therefore both urgent and multifaceted. Decolonisation entails not only the incorporation of indigenous knowledge and languages into curricula but also the transformation of underlying pedagogical paradigms, assessment practices, and institutional frameworks to foreground local epistemologies and cultural values (Smith, 2012; de Sousa Santos, 2014). This requires a deliberate shift from viewing Western education as universal and superior to recognising multiple knowledge systems as valid, legitimate, and relevant for fostering critical thinking, social cohesion, and sustainable development in the Pacific context.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Curriculum Reform and Cultural Integration

Policymakers should prioritise the systematic integration of indigenous knowledge systems, local histories, and cultural practices into national curricula at all levels. This includes embedding oral traditions, environmental stewardship, communal ethics, and Fijian languages alongside standardised academic content, thereby promoting a more culturally relevant and engaging learning experience (Thaman, 2009; Nabobo-Baba, 2006).

2. Teacher Education and Professional Development

Teachers play a pivotal role in operationalising culturally responsive and decolonised pedagogy. Pre-service and in-service teacher training programs must equip educators with the knowledge, skills, and pedagogical tools to facilitate inclusive and contextually grounded learning, bridging colonial legacies and contemporary educational goals (Narsey, 2015; Thaman, 2003).

3. Equitable Access and Ethnic Inclusion

Historical patterns of ethnic differentiation in education necessitate targeted interventions to reduce disparities. Policies should ensure equitable access to quality education, including vocational pathways, tertiary education opportunities, and leadership programs for historically marginalised communities, particularly Indigenous Fijians and Indo-Fijians from disadvantaged regions (Lal, 2000; Whitehead, 1981).

4. Assessment and Evaluation Reform

Standardised, examination-driven systems rooted in colonial frameworks should be supplemented or replaced with formative, culturally relevant assessment practices. Assessment models must value collaborative learning,

critical thinking, problem-solving, and indigenous knowledge application to more accurately reflect student capabilities and societal needs (Smith, 2012; Thaman, 2009).

5. Policy-Research Synergy and Evidence-Based Decision Making

Policymakers should encourage research-informed approaches to curriculum and education reform. Historical analyses, ethnographic studies, and educational research must inform policy design, ensuring interventions are contextually appropriate and aligned with decolonisation objectives (de Sousa Santos, 2014; Tikly, 2004).

6. Community and Stakeholder Engagement

Decolonising education requires active engagement with families, communities, traditional leaders, and indigenous knowledge holders. Collaborative policymaking ensures that reforms are locally relevant, culturally legitimate, and socially sustainable, fostering ownership and long-term impact (Nabobo-Baba, 2013; Thaman, 2003).

WAY FORWARD

To reposition education in Fiji for the twenty-first century, it is essential to address the enduring legacies of colonisation while simultaneously fostering innovation, equity, and cultural sustainability. By integrating indigenous epistemologies, strengthening teacher capacity, reforming assessment, and promoting inclusive access, Fiji can cultivate a decolonised education system that empowers learners, preserves cultural identity, and contributes to socio-economic development. Such reforms have the potential to transform education from a historically exclusionary instrument into a tool for social justice, national cohesion, and culturally grounded human capital development, thereby aligning Fiji's education system with both regional and global aspirations in the postcolonial era.

In conclusion, the study underscores that meaningful educational reform in Fiji is contingent upon historical consciousness, epistemic justice, and deliberate policy interventions that reconcile colonial legacies with contemporary needs. Only through such a comprehensive, culturally responsive, and evidence-informed approach can Fiji realise an equitable and transformative education system that serves all its communities in the age of decolonisation and globalisation.

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