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*Debunking ten myths about Hindi in Fiji: Taking some of the hot air out
of the Mirchi FM debate*

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***Debunking ten myths about Hindi in Fiji: Taking some of the hot air
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Abstract

This paper responds to a vitriolic debate that raged across Fiji's media and social media platforms throughout January and February 2020, following a decision by a national radio station to begin broadcasting in Fiji Hindi. It identifies ten myths from the debate and debunks each in turn, showing how the language ideologies underpinning this debate are serving to endanger all varieties of Hindi in Fiji, including the one that is most idealised.

Keywords

Fiji; Hindi; Language ideologies; Media

1 Introduction

On 31 December 2019, the Fijian Broadcasting Corporation announced: “Mirchi FM has started airing programs in Fiji Hindi from today” (Krishna 2019). Until that point, the station had officially broadcast simply in Hindi. The decision to switch to Fiji Hindi (FH) was based on a trial in 2019 in which the station ran their breakfast show in FH every Friday. Following positive audience feedback, and a prestigious Asia-Pacific Broadcasting Union award for promoting the use of FH on air (I. Singh 2019), Radio Mirchi then switched to FH for the majority of their programmes.

For two months, the debate across print and social media was fierce, yet familiar. Siegel (1992) summarises similar debates about the legitimacy of FH that played out in the newspapers in the late 1970s and mid 1980s in response to the publication of a textbook and dictionary, respectively. Following a similar episode several decades later, Kanwal (2010) observed, “The debate on Fiji Hindi is on again. It is interesting to note that after every five or six years, the subject is brought up by young Hindi enthusiasts for discussion and The Fiji Times, very graciously, provides space”.

In this article, we pick out ten themes from the Radio Mirchi debate, and show how these are myths that can be debunked with reference to research evidence from the literature. Their power draws not from logic, but from their familiarity in public discourse, both at the grassroots and at the highest levels of political and religious domains. Through their recirculation at ever-increasing levels of power, these myths gain a legitimacy and authority that become hard to question (cf. Blackledge 2005). Our data was obtained through keyword searches for ‘Hindi’ on the online pages of the mainstream media outlets, as well as manual searches of the Facebook pages of the four main political parties and three main Hindu organisations, throughout January and February 2020. This data is occasionally supported by comments from personal pages or blogs¹. The discussion of this data also draws on the deep ethnographic experience of the first author as a native speaker of Fiji Hindi, and of both authors as educators in Fiji.

We use three labels for the linguistic varieties discussed: ‘Fiji Hindi’ (FH) to refer to the national variety; ‘Standard Hindi’ (SH) to refer to the idealised variety; and ‘Hindi’, without qualification, when there is no need to distinguish between them.

2 Myths

2.1 *Myth 1: Fiji Hindi is a corrupted form of Standard Hindi*

FH is frequently condemned as “broken Hindi” (Sanatan Dharam Pratinidhi Sabha Fiji’s national secretary Pandit Vigyan Sharam, in Nagelevuki, 2020); or as “not a language [but] a dialect” (National Federation Party president, Pio Tikoduadua, in Chaudhary 2020). The assumption is that

¹ Comments from personal pages are cited anonymously and have only been used if the posts had ‘public’ settings.

it is a corrupted form of an earlier, pure language, which has deteriorated over the generations or broken off from the true branch of the language.

As seems to be well known by users of the language, FH formed during the indentured labour (Girmit) period. However, what appears less well known is that the girmitiya did not start out speaking SH and then simplify it. The labourers came from all over India, initially particularly from the northern parts where many regional varieties of Hindi were spoken, as well as the lingua franca Hindustani² (Lal 1983; Siegel 1992, 1998). So they all spoke different, but related, languages and dialects when they arrived in Fiji, but they could generally understand one another. As they were forced together, their communication drew on elements of many different varieties of both Hindi and Hindustani. A process called koineization occurred, through which elements of the different varieties were mixed together and then levelled (Siegel 1989). Where speakers' own ways of speaking had originally been in competition with one another, this variation levelled out and one variant triumphed for each feature. For example, the first-person singular pronoun *ham* would originally have been in competition with other variants of this pronoun, but was gradually selected through common usage as the dominant form for FH (Siegel 1987). Other aspects, such as gender marking, were simplified (Siegel 1998).

The result is a new variety in its own right, which became the mother tongue of children born during indenture. It has close similarities to other varieties of Hindi, but it is incorrect to say that it began as a single, pure variety of Hindi that has gradually changed into what we know today. Whether we refer to FH as a language or a dialect depends on context. On the one hand, it is a fully-fledged language in the sense that it is the mother tongue of virtually all Indo-Fijians and enables them to express any concept they need. If we had no knowledge of SH to compare it to, we would simply describe FH as a language, just like any other. On the other hand, it is a dialect of Hindi, in the same way that SH is a dialect of Hindi. These are two differentiable varieties that are both Hindi-like in nature, so we can call them both dialects of Hindi if we wish. What we cannot say is that FH is a dialect *of* SH, because there is no direct continuity between the two.

Of course, what is at the root of all this is that SH is considered more prestigious than FH. As far back as the 1926 Education Commission, we have evidence that communities were aware of the difference between the variety spoken in Fiji and the variety they idealised (*Report of the Education Commission*, 1926, p. 14). We can say that both are equally valid as languages in their own right but, as Mackey (1978: 7, in Siegel 1999: 702) notes, “only before God and linguists are all languages equal”. SH is associated with a longer tradition of literature, culture, religion and formal education, as well as with a country of much greater economic clout than Fiji. There is good reason why parents want their children to have access to SH, and this is why efforts must be made to teach this variety more effectively in schools and to encourage children to take this subject. Once we recognise the relationship between the two varieties, and treat them both seriously in their own right, it is more straightforward to put in place an effective school programme through which

² We follow Siegel (1998) in using ‘Hindustani’ to refer to the lingua franca used across North India, a continuum with the formal written varieties of Standard Hindi (in the Devanagari script) and Urdu (in the Perso-Arabic script) at one end and informal varieties such as Bazaar Hindustani at the other. However, the terms ‘Hindustani’ and ‘Hindi’ have long been contested terms with sociopolitical connotations both in India (Nijhawa 2016) and in Fiji (Willans & Prasad 2021).

speakers of FH can acquire and learn to love SH, without belittling or discarding their own mother tongue or linguistic identity.

2.2 Myth 2: Fiji Hindi has no grammar

A common attitude held against FH is that it lacks grammar. Thakur Ranjit Singh (2020a) writes in the *Fiji Times* in February 2020, for example, that the language “has no grammar” and “will crumble when scrutinised for grammar and syntax”. A social media poster from the same period set out to support the same belief by asking his interlocutor:

Ok, tell me which of the following simple sentences in Fiji Hindi is grammatically sound:

- *Oo ladki aaj iskool gais raha*
- *Oo ladki aaj iskool gayi rahi*

The meaning of both sentences is ‘That girl went to school today’. His point is that the second example uses the *-i* suffix on *gay-i* (go-PST.FEM) and *rah-i* (copular verb) to mark the grammatical gender of *ladki* (girl), according to the norms of SH. The first example does not. He uses this to argue that FH lacks grammar. He is correct that the first example does not follow SH norms, but he misses the point that it follows the systematic grammatical norms of FH. The norms of the two varieties are simply different. While one set of norms is morphologically simpler than the other, many languages (including English and Fijian) do not mark gender agreement on verbs, so this does not indicate structural incompleteness.

Grammar refers to the rules that guide how the words of a language work together to convey meaning. Without such rules, we would not be able to communicate. As speakers, we follow these rules unconsciously, but all Hindi speakers know that *के नीचे पेड़* or *ke niche ped'* (literally ‘under tree’) is incorrect, while *पेड़ के नीचे* or *ped' ke niche* (literally ‘tree under’) is correct. When we judge this correctness, we use our unconscious knowledge of grammar that phrases like *ke niche* must come after phrases like *ped'*. Linguists might explain that Hindi has postpositions (placed after a noun phrase) while English has prepositions (placed before the noun phrase), but we do not need to know these technical terms in order to recognise when a sentence breaks the rules. As children, we learn the grammar of our first language without formal teaching, which is why many people may not even realise that this grammar exists. Since most Indo-Fijians have learnt SH grammar in school but have been taught to shun FH from the classroom, it is not surprising that many think that the latter has no grammatical rules.

However, no linguistic variety can function without grammar. FH shares much of its grammar with SH, including its use of postpositions. However, some rules are different. For example, both varieties distinguish between present and future tense, but they use different suffixes to do this, as shown in Examples 1 (a) to (d). In both varieties, information about tense is contained in the suffixes, but the form of these suffixes is different.

1. (a) FH (present) *Rakesh ghar-e* *ja-e* *he*
 PN house-OBL go-3SG.PRS COP
 ‘Rakesh is going home’.

- (b) SH (present) *Rakesh ghar ja-ta* *he*
 PN home go-3SG.PRS COP
 ‘Rakesh is going home’.
- (c) FH (future) *Rakesh khana kha-i*
 PN food eat-3SG.FUT
 ‘Rakesh will eat’.
- (d) SH (future) *Rakesh khana kha-ega*
 PN food eat-3SG.FUT
 ‘Rakesh will eat’.

The fact that FH speakers can distinguish between tenses, or between singular and plural and so on, demonstrates that it has an organised, systematic grammar. FH learners find its system of verb constructions quite complicated, if they have no prior knowledge of any other variety of Hindi, so it is only in comparison to SH that its grammar seems simple. Similarly, an FH user would recognise immediately if an SH user tried to speak FH and missed the mark, by drawing on their intuitive knowledge that its grammatical norms had been flouted. These norms have been captured formally in grammar books (Moag 1977; Siegel 1977), dictionaries (Hobb 1985), theses (Pillai 1975; R. Prasad 2016; R. Singh 2018) and other academic works (Siegel 1987, 1992, 1998), for those who wish to study them.

2.3 *Myth 3: Fiji Hindi is impure because it relies on borrowed vocabulary*

National president of Then India Sanmarga Ikya (TISI), Sadasivan Naicker, was quoted in the *Fiji Times* in January 2020, describing the promotion of FH as “the bastardisation of the Hindu language” and “the rape of the Hindi language” (Vakasukawaqa 2020). Whether he is being flippant about sexual assault, or he really does consider that a language has been physically violated, this is an emotive expression of a common perception. He contrasts FH with what he refers to as “pure” or “shudh” Hindi, as though to suggest that this other variety of Hindi remains in its original state, untainted by external influences. Similarly, in the piece by Thakur Ranjit Singh, referred to above, FH is described as “a chop suey, casserole or khichri of language” in contrast to the “proper Hindi” imagined to be in use on all formal occasions. The image presented of SH is a language that remains impervious to external influence, unmixed and unchanged.

The reality, however, is that all languages borrow in order to adapt to their speakers’ circumstances, such as contact with other cultures or new developments. FH has evolved by drawing from the different varieties spoken by the indentured labourers, as well as other languages they became exposed to. For instance, the names of most fish and native timber have been borrowed from Fijian, since the lexicon of Indian origin had no names for the flora and fauna of Fiji (Siegel 1998).

SH also borrows from other languages. For example, the influence of Persian during Mogul rule in India has left an imprint on the Hindi spoken today, with words such as *asman* (sky), *kalam* (pen), *rah* (way), *zahar* (poison), *avaz* (voice), and *khat* (letter) all coming from this source (Khansir & Mozafari 2014). Similarly, Sharma (1997) lists borrowings from other languages such as *kaechi* (scissors) from Turkish, *pipa* (drum) from Portuguese, *turup* (troop) from Dutch, and *chai* (tea) from Chinese. And, of course, the influence of English is well attested in SH too, with phrases such as इंफोमैशन टेक्नोलोजी (information technology), कंप्यूटर हार्डवेयर (computer hardware), इलेक्ट्रॉनिक (electronic), डेटाबेस (database), हर्डड्राइव (hard drive), सिमकार्ड (sim card) and इंटरनेट (internet) frequently used directly from English. In exactly the same way, English has borrowed from a vast range of languages (with the words ‘vast’, ‘range’ and ‘languages’ all coming from Latin or French). It is estimated that less than a third of modern English vocabulary derives from Anglo-Saxon (Old English), while the rest is borrowed from elsewhere (McWhorter, 2008).

Linguistic ‘purity’ is thus an imagined characteristic. FH is a dynamic language that meets the needs of its speakers, following the processes that all languages undergo. People who are already predisposed to disparage FH will always be able to point out borrowings that monolingual SH users would not use, but neither variety is ‘pure’.

2.4 *Myth 4 Fiji Hindi is not written so it is not a language*

Another perception is that FH cannot be written, a view that was brought up during the discussions about its use on the oral platform of Radio Mirchi as though this lends weight to a general argument of its inadequacy:

“Fiji Hindi as a language is a khichdi with no alphabets and it can’t be written and be read or taught.” (public post on *Fiji Exposed Forum* Facebook group)

There are many ways to represent a spoken language in written form. For example, in a dictionary, pronunciation is often indicated in the international phonetic alphabet (IPA). The English word *ghost* is represented in IPA as /gəʊst/, while the Hindi word घर or *ghar* is represented as /GəR/. However, we are more accustomed to seeing our languages written using other conventions. SH is generally written using the Devanagari script, while English is generally written using the Roman script. The written symbols used to represent the different sounds in each system are arbitrary. For example, there is nothing about the phoneme /tʃ/ that makes it particularly suitable to be represented by <च> in SH, or by <ch> in English, but we learn these sound-symbol correspondences and can then decode new written texts that we encounter. Literacy usually requires teaching because we cannot simply acquire this knowledge of which symbol to use for which sound instinctively.

Since the systems are arbitrary, it is possible to represent a word in Hindi using either the Devanagari or Roman script. For example, पेड़ and *ped* both represent the same word that is pronounced /pəḍ/ and that has the English meaning ‘tree’. In exactly the same way, it is theoretically possible to represent a word in English using either the Devanagari or Roman script. For example, येल्लो and ‘yellow’ could both represent the word pronounced /'jeləʊ/. By convention,

we are more used to seeing SH written in the Devanagari script and English written in the Roman script, but this is all it is: convention.

FH does not have a long history of being written, particularly in institutional contexts, so its orthographic conventions are not fully established. For example, while Hobbs (1985) used <D> to represent the retroflex plosive /d/ and <T> to represent /t/, Siegel (1977) used <d> and <t> to represent the same sounds, while Shameem et al. (2022) suggest d and t. Similarly, Hobbs used double letters to mark long vowels (e.g. <aa>), while Siegel used a macron (e.g. <ā>) and Shameem et al. suggest an acute accent (e.g. <á>). However, any language *can* be written when there is a need, and a standard writing system for FH can easily be established. The most straightforward system, put forward in Prasad (2016) and used in the current paper, may be to use the Roman alphabet, with double letters for long vowels, and the addition of the apostrophe for the retroflex sound (<d'> and <t'>, representing /d/ and /t/, respectively). This use of the apostrophe avoids the confusion of capitalisation (cf. Hobbs) when writing a proper noun or beginning a sentence, and is easier to type than a dot below the letter (cf. Siegel), which will also be obscured if a word is underlined, a problem that would also occur with Shameem et al.'s suggestion.

Others have chosen to use Devanagari to represent FH, such as Subramani in his novels *Dauka Puran* and *Fiji Maa*. While people sometimes think these novels are written in SH, because of the script³, this is clearly not the case. For example, on page 433 of *Dauka Puran* we see: जाइसे हम निच्चे उतरा दुई कबरा कुत्ता हमार तरफ लपकिना

If this sentence was written in Roman and analysed, it would be:

2. (a) *Jaise ham niche utr-a dui kabra kutta hamar*
 Just as I down climb-1SG.PST two spotted dog 1SG.GEN
taraf lapk-in
 towards leap-3PL.PST
 'Just as I climbed down, two spotted dogs leaped towards me'.

However, the same sentence could be written in SH as जैसे मैं नीचे उतरा दो चितीदार कुत्ते मेरे तरफ लपके, in which case it would be analysed as:

- (b) *Jaise mae niche utr-a do chitteedar kutt-e mere*
 Just as I down climb-1SG.PST two spotted dog-PL 1SG.GEN
taraf lapk-e
 towards leap-3PL.PST
 'Just as I climbed down, two spotted dogs leaped towards me'.

The first-person singular pronoun हम (*ham*) and first-person possessive हमार (*hamar*) used by Subramani (shown in 2(a)) are features of FH, whereas in SH these are मैं (*mae*) and मेरा (*mere*), respectively (shown in 2(b)). The verb लपकिन (*lapkin*) in (a) uses the FH suffix *-in* to mark third-

³ This was argued by Biman Prasad in a recent talk back show 'Aaina' (Fiji Broadcasting Commission, 2020).

person plural, while *-e* would be used in SH (shown in (b)). The FH form of the numeral ‘two’, दुई (*dui*), is used in (a) rather than SH दो (*do*) as shown in (b).

It is therefore clear that FH can be written, using one of a range of approaches to do so. The fact that it is not yet written consistently is a reflection of its exclusion from formal education. If people are not taught how to write FH in a systematic way, then people are unlikely to do so, thus perpetuating the fallacy that it *cannot* be written.

2.5 Myth 5: Fiji Hindi lacks literature

The belief that FH is unwritten is often tied together with the perception that it has no literature and is therefore a lesser variety than SH. Part of the problem is the faulty assumption that anything written in Devanagari must be SH, exemplified above, which erases some of the most prominent FH work from public consciousness. However, even by excluding such viewpoints, we still see frequent aspersions, such as the following Facebook comment made by the general secretary of a prominent religious organisation in January 2020:

फीजी हिन्दी जब तक शिस्ट समाज और साहित्य में अपनी जगह नहीं बना लेता तब तक उसे वह सम्मान नहीं मिल सकता जिसका वह सही हकदार है। जब तक साहित्य के माध्यम से हमें एक मानक संस्कारण नहीं मिलता है फीजी हिन्दी एक बोली ही रहेगी।

(Until FH establishes itself in a knowledgeable and literacy society, it won't get the respect it deserves. Until we have a formal literature in FH, it will remain a dialect.)

The first point to make in response to such statements is that FH has a rich oral literature passed down through the generations. For example, narratives of the history of indenture and tales of family relocation have been mostly oral. Similarly, most folk songs (*bhajans*, *kawalis* and *kirtan*) performed in Fiji during weddings and funerals use FH. This sense of oral history is paramount to our understanding of who we are and where we come from, just as it is for the indigenous populations of Fiji and the wider region whose languages were also typically not written prior to missionisation and colonisation. To dismiss oral literature is to dismiss our heritage and takes a very narrow definition of ‘literature’.

However, there is also a vibrant body of work that does qualify for this narrower definition. As noted above, Subramani has written two novels in FH, and Kanwal (2010) points out that Subramani was not the first person to write in this variety. He highlights the works of Pandit Babu Ram (satirical writings), Mahabir Mitra (poetry), and Ram Narayan Govind and Ram Kumari (folk songs), as well as the columns in the Hindi-medium newspaper *Shanti Dut* by Tarlok Tiwari and Thakur Ranjit Singh.

Well-known plays and films in FH include Raymond Pillai's play *Adhura Sapna*, later released as a film; Zareena Khan's feature film *Pump Up the Mandali*; Mohit Prasad's *A for Apple*, a short film on indenture; and the films *Once were farmers* and *Sahara* by the Raivision Film company. There were also the well-loved comedy recordings of John Mohammed, released by Procera Music in the 1980s, which were a hit not only in Fiji but globally (M. Prasad 1998).

Other writers have chosen to use snippets of FH within works that are otherwise in English (such as Sudesh Mishra and Satendra Nandan) or in SH (such as Joginder Singh Kanwal).

When writers make deliberate choices that their characters should speak FH, rather than English or SH, or that certain FH phrases should be used to flavour a description, they are demonstrating the creative value of the language in shaping their characters or settings.

Perhaps most telling of all, we see that FH has been analysed within the field of literary criticism, as for example in Vijay Mishra's epilogue, 'the subaltern speaks', on Subramani's *Dauka Puran*, in which he describes FH as an "anti-language ... capable of generating an alternative reality ..., a social semiotic [with] marks of social resistance and protest as well as an interpersonal dimension that enabled social intercourse to take place through a unique discourse made out of the original vernaculars of the indentured labourers" (Mishra 2007: 246).

Once again, it seems that arguments about the inferiority of FH are based on a comparison with SH, rather than objective criteria. There is undoubtedly a greater range of literature in SH than in FH, produced over a vastly longer timeframe, but this has no implication for whether it is possible to create and sustain a literary tradition in FH.

2.6 *Myth 6: Fiji Hindi has a negative influence on the Hindu religion*

Within the domain of religion, particularly with reference to Hinduism, the concern is that any use of FH will taint the sanctity, purity and maintenance of practices. For example, the Sanatan Dharam Pratinidhi Sabha Fiji General secretary is quoted as saying: "Whenever there is a function, nobody speaks in Fiji-Hindi. All the organisations whenever there is preaching or ritual it is all conducted in shudh, pure Hindi. Pure Hindi has to be maintained if not the language will die" (Naelevuki 2020). This perceived corruption of Hinduism is closely tied to that of the Hindi language, as we see in this statement by the General Secretary of the Fiji Labour Party, Mahendra Chaudhry: "To dilute one's language effectively means diluting one's culture because language is so intrinsically tied up with the practice and preservation of one's culture and traditions" (Fiji Labour Party 2020). Once again, we see the emotive nature of the commentary. He continues: "It is a gratuitous insult hurled at the Indians, particularly the followers of the Hindu religion", while a comment posted beneath a *Fiji Pundit* blog post compares the use of FH to "injecting aids virus into Hindu religion and culture" with the certainty that "there is no cure and sure demise of the foundation Hinduvta is founded on" (T. R. Singh 2020b).

It is true that SH is dominant within religious functions. However, it is equally clear that FH plays a significant role within these same functions, often to bring out the meaning of the sacred texts, and make them more accessible. For example, Bhan's (2021) analysis of the language used during the Ramayan recital found that while SH was the main variety used, there was frequent usage of FH elements to maintain a strong connection with the audience without undermining the status of the narrator. This use of code-switching between SH and FH is not a sign of corruption, but accommodation to the needs of those present. This is similar to the way doctors switch codes when speaking to patients rather than colleagues, explaining diagnoses in a patient-friendly manner without hindering their ability to discuss them in technical terms with other doctors, or indeed to treat the patient.

To practise religion, one does not need a specific language, and most significant texts have been translated. New versions are often controversial but, as time passes, they become accepted. Just as many theologians were horrified when the Bible was first translated from Latin into English (despite it being an original Hebrew text that had already been translated into Greek, and then Latin) (Dove 2007), orthodox Hindu scholars have been vehemently opposed to the use of Hindi instead of Sanskrit for many central texts of Hinduism. More recently, new translations of the Bible into languages such as Jamaican Patois (McFadden 2012) have attracted criticism amongst Christians who are happy to use English rather than Latin, Greek or Hebrew, just as conservative Hindus who shun the use of FH in the domain of religion are happy to use Hindi versions of texts that were originally penned in Sanskrit. The significance of these texts has not been eroded through these translations, but they have become accessible to greater numbers.

FH thus plays a vital role, in parallel with SH, in realising the religious texts of Hinduism in Fiji. The two varieties are not at war with each other, but hold complementary roles in ensuring the maintenance of practices in Fiji.

2.7 *Myth 7: Promoting Fiji Hindi on air will undermine Standard Hindi*

When it was announced that Mirchi FM would begin broadcasting in FH, print media and social media were flooded with comments such as the following on a popular Facebook group: “Wanna take this time to mourn the demise of our mother language Hindi which is now in danger due to stupid radio stations who want to endorse Fiji Hindi as a superior language”. A petition on www.change.org was then circulated, imploring, “Please sign this petition to let Radio Mirchi know that majority reject this systematic killing of Hindi in Fiji” (“We want Sudha Hindi on Radio Mirchi,” 2020). The concern appears to be that exposing listeners to FH will erode the use of SH.

There are three other Hindi radio stations in Fiji which continue to broadcast predominantly in SH, so those who oppose Mirchi FM’s decision have plenty of alternatives. However, audience figures from these other stations also suggest that listeners like hearing FH on air, in line with Radio Mirchi’s own successful trial on their breakfast show. For example, Navtarang has been running a daily afternoon drive show in FH for years, and its fan following is huge. While some might wish that SH was the only variety that made listeners tune in, this is apparently not the reality.

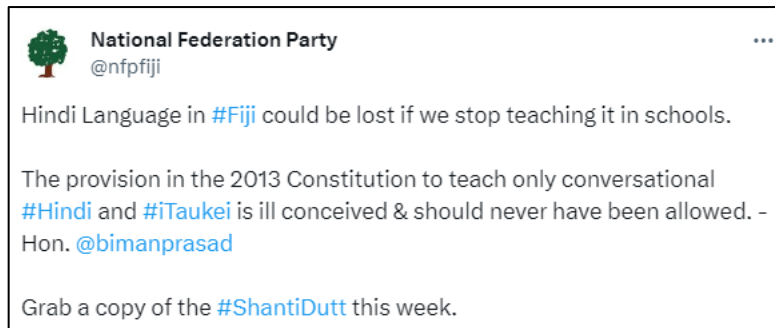
Moreover, by responding to audience demand in this way, Mirchi may well be retaining listeners who would otherwise switch to English stations, given the encroachment of English in many domains. Although it may seem counter-intuitive, the best strategy to pursue when concerned that the use of SH is declining may be to increase the amount of any variety of Hindi in popular domains. By using FH on air, Mirchi FM is keeping Indo-Fijians using Hindi rather than switching to English.

Instead of harming SH, FH and its users have therefore helped in keeping it alive. Most other countries with histories of indenture, such as South Africa, Trinidad and Guyana, have lost their variety of Hindi and, as a result, their use of SH has also been affected (Devy & Kumar 2022; Siegel 1998). Meanwhile, Fiji and Suriname have maintained their unique varieties of Hindi and, as a result, SH remains widely used in both countries (Siegel 2014). The very survival of SH in

Fiji can be attributed to the active status of FH here, since both varieties share the same linguistic base.

2.8 Myth 8: The 2013 provision for conversational Fiji Hindi to be a compulsory subject is an attempt to get rid of Standard Hindi

This is a myth that recirculates whenever someone is concerned about the use of FH. For example, during the debate about Radio Mirchi, the National Federation Party leader, Biman Prasad tweeted the following from the official party account on 11 January 2020:



He expanded in the *Shanti Dut* article referred to in the tweet:

प्रोफेसर प्रसाद ने देश में हिन्दी की स्थिति पर चिंता व्यक्त करते हुए कहा कि अगर मिलकर कदम नहीं उठाया गया और हिन्दी कि रद्दा नहीं कि गई तो फीजी में भी हिन्दी भाषा लुप्त होने के कगार में हो जाएगी जैसे त्रिनिदाद में हुआ हाए। उहोने फीजीके 2013 सविधान की उस धारा का घोर खण्डन किया जिसमे फीजी बोली 'फीजी हिन्दी' को स्कूलो में अनिवार्य रूप से पढ़ने का प्रावधान है। मै देश के सभी हिन्दू धार्मिक संस्थाओ द्वारा स्नाचालित स्कूलो के अधिकारियों से मांग कर रहा हू कि वे मानक हिन्दी के पठन-पाठन पर विशेष धायन दे और उसे ज्यादा बढ़ावा दे। (Kumar 2020)

(Professor Prasad while stressing his concern about the status of Hindi in Fiji said that if a combined effort is not taken to save Hindi it will be lost just like in Trinidad. He denounced the section in the Constitution which has made Fiji Hindi a compulsory subject in schools, “I call on the religious organizations running schools to pay special attention to the teaching and learning of Standard Hindi”.)

A similar statement was released by the Fiji Labour Party on the same day, with leader Mahendra Chaudhry criticising Mirchi FM’s decision before concluding:

“The issue may have its roots in Clause 31(3) of the Bill of Rights in the imposed 2013 Constitution which provides for ‘conversational and contemporary iTaukei and Fiji Hindi languages’ to be taught as compulsory subjects in all primary schools. This was imposed without any consultation with leaders of the Indian community, or the people. The clause must be amended to allow schools to teach the proper form of Hindi. This is essential for the preservation of our language, religion, culture and traditions” (Fiji Labour Party 2020).

This stipulation about learning to speak other languages of Fiji was only added for the first time in Fiji's fourth constitution. We can assume from the multicultural ethos of this 2013 constitution that the new provision was intended to promote harmony between the two major ethnic groups, with the children of each group learning the language of the other. Indeed, this was the interpretation made by the then national secretary of Sanatan Dharam Pratinidhi Sabha, Vijendra Prakash:

To steer Fiji into a new direction it's important for the people to understand each other's language. ... Our children should be proud to learn the iTaukei language as it is very important, and at the same time we will be very, very happy to see the iTaukei members of the community learn Hindi (Devi 2013).

This was confirmed by the then Attorney-General, Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum, during an interview in April 2020. He affirmed that this particular subject was only ever intended to help break down barriers and feelings of distrust or alienation between different groups, promoting everyday interaction such as being able to crack jokes together. The word 'conversational' indicates an intention for students to be able to converse with each other, enabling different groups to communicate without resorting to English as the only shared language. Since the iTaukei population should now have greater chances to learn to converse in Hindi, the specific variety chosen (FH or SH) is not really the main issue.

This conversational subject is completely separate from the vernacular subject that has been in place for years, in which Hindi-speaking children study their own language in depth, and learn to read and write the SH variety through the Devanagari script. The Curriculum Development Unit has created a new post to oversee the new conversational subject, and has developed a new set of teaching materials that are freely available on their website alongside the vernacular materials (Ministry of Education Heritage & Arts 2020). Moreover, the classes are scheduled at different times, so have not taken time away from the vernacular subject.

The belief that the plan is to replace SH with FH is the result of a blunder once made by the Ministry. In 2016, the Year 10 Hindi (vernacular) exam paper had a section where students were required to answer a few questions in FH. This infuriated Hindu organisations as well as parents. A new body, *Hindi Parishad Fiji*, was formed to look into the matter. The Ministry acknowledged the administrative error and, since then, there has been no FH used in any vernacular paper. The perpetuation of this myth is simply due to a few individuals who continue to use this error as supposed evidence of a conspiracy.

Finally, the issue is likely compounded by the use of the phrase 'compulsory' in the constitution with reference only to the conversational subject. There remains ambiguity and inconsistency as to whether the vernacular subject (i.e. the subject that uses SH) is also compulsory, hence the wording of the NPF Leader's tweet at the start of this section. This is an unfortunate ramification of the fact that the vernacular subject was already well-established by the time of the 2013 constitution, and there was no apparent need to specify that it should continue. However, tightening up of the policy to ensure that all children should study their own language is a completely separate issue from whether children should acquire basic conversational ability in the language of the other dominant group.

2.9 *Myth 9: Fiji Hindi belongs at home*

Those most vehemently against the use of FH argue that Hindi speakers in Fiji need access to the variety of Hindi spoken internationally, and that there is no need for radio stations or schools to use FH since people can use this at home. So we see, for example, that “all Sanatan Dharam organisations promote the pure Hindi language only” since we “only speak Fiji Hindi when we talanoa in our homes” (Naqelevuki 2020). The separate parts of this argument are indeed correct, but their sum does not lead to a correct whole.

It is precisely because those from Hindi-speaking homes know FH so well that it is a logical medium to use in so many other domains. The languages used at home are the ones in which we are most comfortable interacting, and in which we have the best chance of understanding information. We master the main elements of these languages by the age of about five, a foundation on which we continue to build as we grow older (Biemiller 2009; Clark 2016).

It is also perfectly logical that we want to learn new languages and varieties. These give us access to new opportunities, experiences and information from outside the home environment. For a typical Indo-Fijian child, FH is the most likely language they will use at home. Other languages or varieties to which they are less likely to be exposed on a daily basis at home, but which they would benefit from learning, include SH and English. To this repertoire, we might add Fijian; other Indian languages such as Tamil or Gujarati; Urdu or Arabic; and potentially any number of other languages from Chinese to French to Tongan, depending on the interests, connections and experiences of each child.

Additional languages or varieties cannot simply be picked up without certain conditions in place. These conditions are, in summary: fluent and regular input through which we hear (or see) the language around us; opportunities to produce new output ourselves and to interact with others; a genuine motivation to communicate through this language; and some form of attention to the way the language works (such as asking a native speaker to explain something, being corrected, or simply noticing the way more fluent speakers use the language differently) (Ellis 2015; Ortega 2009). These conditions are easy to put in place in the classroom, once they are understood by educators and curriculum developers.

However, when we are so desperate to learn particular languages or varieties that we cut off opportunities to use the ones that we already know, we create problems. The most common example of this is taking five-year-old children who speak one language (e.g. FH) and then expecting them to learn to read, count and learn new information about the world in another language or variety (e.g. English or SH) that they do not yet know, a problem referred to by Harris et al. (2022: 219) in their study of a rural Indo-Fijian community as “the disconnects between the Hindi of home language and the Hindi of schooling”. While children absolutely need to learn languages such as English and SH, these languages need to be taught effectively as second languages or varieties before they can be used with any success across the whole curriculum. Using a second variety or language for high-stakes purposes before children understand and know how to speak it is detrimental to the learning of both content and language (Ouane & Glanz 2011; UNESCO 2016; Walter 2013).

2.10 Myth 10: The University of the South Pacific promotes Fiji Hindi over Standard Hindi

Rumours appear to be circulating that the University of the South Pacific (USP) is promoting and teaching FH over SH. While of course it is true that we conduct research about the different varieties of Hindi (hence this paper), it appears that taking a descriptive and analytical interest in FH is seen as some kind of attack on any other variety.

Since 1996, USP has offered a programme called Pacific Vernacular (Hindi). The students enrolling have studied Hindi throughout school, usually until Year 13, and they are therefore as well-versed in SH as the school system enables. To suggest that USP admits students who are proficient in SH and then teaches them to use FH instead is as bizarre in theory as it is unfounded in practice.

The truth is that, over the past decade, USP has struggled to recruit high numbers of students who want to study Hindi. A 1998 external review report of the department indicates that there were 115 students enrolled in 100-level Hindi Studies that year. However, at no time during the past ten years has the number of students enrolled at this level exceeded 22. This drastic decline is mirrored within the school system, where figures show that only 79 students sat for the Year 13 Certificate in 2017, and 81 in 2018. Even if all these students decided to continue to degree level in the language, this leaves a limited pool of applicants.

In response, USP plans to work more closely with the Ministry to support the teaching of Hindi in schools. Work is already in progress to redevelop USP's own programme to enhance the training of Hindi teachers: aiming to raise their proficiency in SH; addressing the pedagogical aspects of language teaching for both the vernacular and conversational school subjects; and adding sociolinguistic content that helps students navigate this rather odd debate about FH. Greater collaboration should also help the Ministry review the materials currently used for both subjects, so that the learning outcomes for each are appropriate and aligned to what is taught and assessed. Once the subjects are taught effectively, we have no doubt that more students will opt to take Hindi right to the end of school, thus increasing the number of proficient users of this language.

In addition to its vernacular programme, USP offers a completely separate course called 'Conversational Hindi'. This course is oriented to international students, as well as local and regional students with no prior knowledge of Hindi. In other words, its objectives are similar to the conversational subject offered in schools. It does not compete with the vernacular programme, since it does not accept students with prior knowledge of Hindi, and it aims to achieve basic conversational proficiency. Given its international student base, it also introduces students to aspects of Indo-Fijian culture, relating to food, festivals and etiquette. Far from endangering Indian culture and heritage in Fiji, this course helps make it visible to those who may arrive in Fiji thinking that 'language', 'culture' and 'heritage' are the preserve of the indigenous population.

3 Where does all this lead us?

Is this just a case of hot air? From a linguistic point of view, it is. It makes no sense to be ‘for’ or ‘against’ any variety of language, and this debate has no effect on the way Hindi speakers actually use the different varieties within their repertoires. However, beliefs about language can have real world impacts. This negativity surrounding FH is likely to jeopardise the learning of all varieties of Hindi in schools, thus ultimately endangering Hindi as a language of Fiji. Conservative views about the purity and superiority of SH perpetuate the insecurity that many Indo-Fijians already hold about their proficiency in their own vernacular, making them more likely to shift towards English rather than the prestige variety of Hindi. By putting SH on such a high pedestal, and by denigrating the variety of Hindi that is spoken around the base of that pedestal, this prestige variety remains further out of reach.

For this reason, it may help to revisit the term ‘Fiji Baat’ (literally ‘Fiji Talk’), a name first used during the Girit period (Lal 1983), and still in use by some as an alternative to FH (Siegel 2014; Willans & Prasad 2021). Rather than modifying ‘Hindi’ with a national label, suggesting that ‘Fiji Hindi’ is a variety of something else, spoken in a distantly remembered land, the name ‘Fiji Baat’ helps to remind us of its unique development as a linguistic variety in its own right. By making explicit the difference between this variety and SH, it becomes easier to accept the value of both, and therefore to sustain both in Fiji.

What we are seeing is not a tension between the interests of different ethnic or linguistic groups, but a series of intra-group tensions surrounding identity, belonging and heritage. These tensions are embedded in networks of power and politics, but it is not a politics of ‘us’ versus ‘them’. It is a politics of how to identify as a Fijian of Indian descent, a grappling with a sense of being Fijian in the present without losing a grip on linguistic, cultural and religious heritage (cf. Naidu 2017; Willans & Prasad 2021). To a certain extent, this is a personal matter. While some people take pride in knowing more about a heritage that draws from India but has developed in unique ways in Fiji, others seem to wish that they could sanitise their history a little, discomforted by the impurity of the story. However, awareness of such insecurities enables high-profile figures to make this anything but a personal issue, and it is noticeable that so many political and religious leaders have weighed in so vocally. It is clear that the deep-rooted language ideological configuration underlying the Mirchi FM debate will exert an influence within the new era of national politics for some time to come, even as Fiji attempts to move beyond its familiar ethnic divisions.

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APPENDIX**Abbreviations**

1	first person
3	third person
COP	copula
FEM	feminine
FUT	future
GEN	genitive
OBL	oblique
PL	plural
PN	proper noun
PRS	present
PST	past
SG	singular