

# Historical Analysis of Dutch Education Policy Towards Indigenous Peoples

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## **Abstract.**

*This study discusses the historical analysis of Dutch educational policies towards indigenous people in the Dutch East Indies. The objectives of this study are to determine the form of Dutch colonial educational policies, understand the objectives of implementing an education system for indigenous people, and analyze the impact of these policies on social development and nationalism in Indonesia. The research method used is a historical research method with a qualitative approach through literature study. Data were obtained from various sources such as books, journals, historical documents, and research results relevant to the topic of study. The results show that Dutch colonial education was initially discriminatory and only intended for certain groups, such as European children, nobles, and families of indigenous officials. Education was used as a political tool to support administrative interests and maintain colonial power in the Dutch East Indies. Policy changes began to be seen with the implementation of the Ethical Policy in the early 20th century through educational programs that opened wider educational opportunities for indigenous people. However, the main objective of colonial education remained directed at creating an educated workforce at a low cost and loyal to the Dutch government. On the other hand, the development of colonial education had a significant impact on the emergence of an educated indigenous class with a national consciousness. Western-educated intellectuals began to understand the concepts of freedom, democracy, and nationalism, which then led to the emergence of national movement organizations in Indonesia. Figures such as Ki Hajar Dewantara, Mohammad Hatta, and Soetomo utilized education as a means of fighting against colonialism. Thus, Dutch education policy had a dual impact: it served as both a tool of colonial power and a factor in the growth of Indonesian nationalism.*

**Keywords :** Colonial education, Ethical Policy, indigenous people, nationalism and Dutch East Indies.

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## **I. INTRODUCTION**

Education is a crucial element in social life because it plays a role in shaping the mindset, knowledge, and social development of a nation. In the context of Indonesian history, the development of education cannot be separated from the Dutch colonial period, which lasted for hundreds of years in the Dutch East Indies. During that period, education served as a tool to support the interests of the colonial government. The educational system implemented by the Dutch was not entirely aimed at improving the welfare of the indigenous people, but rather was directed at maintaining colonial power and meeting government administrative needs. Therefore, colonial education policies differed from the national education system after Indonesian independence. At the beginning of Dutch colonial rule, opportunities for formal education for indigenous people were very limited. The colonial government prioritized education for European children and certain elite groups.

Schools established during that period were accessible only to the nobility, families of officials, or groups considered to have high social standing. Meanwhile, the majority of indigenous people, who came from common backgrounds, did not receive adequate educational opportunities. This condition resulted in very low levels of education among indigenous people and created a social gap between Europeans and local communities. In practice, the colonial education system was discriminatory. The Dutch government differentiated schools based on race and social status. Children of European descent received better educational facilities, both in terms of facilities, teacher quality, and curriculum. In contrast, education for indigenous people was more directed at creating a workforce capable of assisting the administration of the colonial government. In other words, education was used as a political tool to maintain the stability of Dutch power in the Dutch East Indies. Entering the late 19th century to the early 20th century, the colonial government began implementing a new policy known as the Ethical Policy. This policy emerged as a form of criticism of the system of exploitation carried out by the Dutch against the Indonesian people during the

forced cultivation period. Dutch figure Conrad Theodor van Deventer, in his writing entitled *Een Eereschuld*, stated that the Netherlands had a "debt of honor" to the people of the Dutch East Indies. This thought then gave birth to the Ethical Policy policy which included three main programs: irrigation, emigration, and education. In the field of education, the Dutch government began to expand access to schools for indigenous people.

Various types of schools were established, such as the *HollandschInlandsche School (HIS)*, *Meer Uitgebreid Lager Onderwijs (MULO)*, *Algemene Middelbare School (AMS)*, and village schools aimed at rural communities. The presence of these schools provided opportunities for some indigenous people to receive a Western education. However, colonial education policies still had certain limitations. Education for indigenous people was not provided equally because the colonial government feared the emergence of an educated group that could threaten Dutch rule. Despite its political and economic objectives, colonial education had a significant influence on the development of Indonesian society. Through Western education, a class of indigenous scholars began to emerge with a more modern mindset and a critical attitude towards colonialism. They began to understand the concepts of nationalism, democracy, freedom, and equal rights that were developing in Europe. This intellectual group later played a crucial role in the emergence of the Indonesian national movement in the early 20th century. The emergence of organizations such as *Budi Utomo* in 1908 is evidence that colonial education contributed to the growth of national consciousness among indigenous people. Furthermore, organizations such as *Sarekat Islam* and the *Indische Partij* emerged as a form of resistance against the colonial system. National figures such as *Ki Hajar Dewantara*, *Mohammad Hatta*, and *Soetomo* were among the educated class who were greatly influenced by Western education.

On the other hand, colonial education also had various negative impacts on indigenous communities. The unequal education system led to a social gap between the educated and the common people. Furthermore, the colonial education curriculum emphasized the interests of the Dutch government rather than the needs of the Indonesian people. Education was directed solely at producing low-paid civil servants and administrative staff who could assist the colonial government. This demonstrates that education during the colonial period remained a tool of exploitation and social control over indigenous communities. Studying Dutch education policies towards indigenous people is crucial for understanding how education was used as an instrument of colonialism and a means of fostering Indonesian national consciousness. This research not only discusses the educational policies implemented by the colonial government but also analyzes their objectives, implementation, and impact on the social life of indigenous communities.

## II. METHODS

Melalui pendekatan historis, penelitian ini diharapkan dapat memberikan pemahaman yang lebih mendalam mengenai perkembangan pendidikan di Indonesia pada masa kolonial dan pengaruhnya terhadap lahirnya pergerakan nasional. Selain itu, penelitian ini juga relevan untuk melihat bagaimana warisan sistem pendidikan kolonial masih memberikan pengaruh terhadap perkembangan pendidikan di Indonesia hingga saat ini. Beberapa pola pendidikan seperti sistem administrasi sekolah, penggunaan jenjang pendidikan, serta model birokrasi pendidikan pada dasarnya merupakan peninggalan dari masa kolonial Belanda. Oleh karena itu, mempelajari sejarah pendidikan kolonial tidak hanya penting dalam konteks sejarah, tetapi juga sebagai bahan refleksi untuk memahami perkembangan sistem pendidikan nasional Indonesia. Berdasarkan uraian tersebut, penelitian ini berfokus pada analisis historis kebijakan pendidikan Belanda terhadap kaum pribumi di Hindia Belanda. Kajian ini diharapkan mampu memberikan gambaran mengenai dinamika pendidikan kolonial serta dampaknya terhadap perkembangan sosial, politik, dan intelektual masyarakat Indonesia.

## III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Dutch Education Policy for Indigenous People

The education policy implemented by the Dutch colonial government in the Dutch East Indies was fundamentally inseparable from colonial political and economic interests. Education served as a tool to maintain power and streamline the colonial administration system. In practice, the Dutch educational system

was limited and discriminatory, providing educational opportunities only to certain groups within the indigenous population. In the early 19th century, formal education in the Dutch East Indies was still dominated by European interests. Schools established by the colonial government were primarily intended for children of Dutch descent and the elite.

Meanwhile, indigenous people received very limited access to education. The colonial government deliberately limited education for indigenous people out of concern that the emergence of an educated group could threaten the stability of colonial rule. Over time, the Dutch government began to recognize the importance of an educated workforce to assist with government administration in the colonies. Therefore, several schools were opened for indigenous people, particularly for the children of aristocrats and families of government officials. The education provided was still aimed at producing a workforce that would be obedient to the colonial government. Thus, the primary goal of education was not to educate the people, but rather to meet the needs of the colonial bureaucracy. The colonial education system also demonstrated clear social stratification. The Dutch government differentiated schools based on social and racial background.

European children received far better educational facilities than indigenous people. Schools like the Europeesche Lagere School (ELS) were intended for European descendants, while indigenous people could only attend certain schools, such as the Village School or the Hollandsch-Inlandsche School (HIS). This disparity demonstrates that colonial education at that time was unequal and still influenced by the politics of racial discrimination. Furthermore, the use of Dutch in some elite schools also served as a form of social restriction. Not all indigenous people had the opportunity to learn Dutch, as only certain groups could access higher education. As a result, education became a symbol of social status, distinguishing the indigenous elite from the common people.

### **Politik Etis dan Perkembangan Pendidikan Pribumi**

Major changes in Dutch colonial education policy began to emerge in the early 20th century when the colonial government implemented a policy known as the Ethical Policy. This policy was born in response to criticisms in the Netherlands regarding colonial practices that were considered excessively exploitative of the people of the Dutch East Indies. For years, the colonial government profited greatly from the agricultural produce and labor of the Indonesian people through the forced cultivation system and other colonial economic policies. However, the welfare of the indigenous people was in a worrying state. Many people lived in poverty, suffered from hunger, and lacked adequate access to education and social services. This situation sparked criticism from Dutch politicians and intellectuals. One of the most influential figures in the emergence of ideas for changing colonial policy was Conrad Theodor van Deventer. In his 1899 essay, "Een Eereschuld," or "Debt of Honor," Van Deventer argued that the Netherlands had a moral obligation to repay the people of the Dutch East Indies, who had provided significant benefits to the country. He argued that the colonial government should begin to pay attention to the welfare of the indigenous people through more humane policies. This thinking gave birth to the Ethical Policy, which began to be officially implemented in the early 20th century.

The Ethical Policy had three main programs known as the Trias van Deventer: irrigation, emigration, and education. The irrigation program aimed to increase agricultural yields through the construction of irrigation canals, emigration aimed to reduce population density on Java through transmigration, and education focused on expanding education for the indigenous population. Of these three programs, education was the most influential aspect in the development of Indonesian society. The colonial government began opening more schools for indigenous people as part of the implementation of the Ethical Policy. Various types of educational institutions were established to meet the need for an educated workforce and support the administration of the colonial government. Schools such as the Hollandsch-Inlandsche School (HIS), Meer Uitgebreid Lager Onderwijs (MULO), Algemene Middelbare School (AMS), and vocational schools began to develop throughout the Dutch East Indies.

Furthermore, the colonial government established teacher training and medical schools, such as STOVIA, which became the birthplace of many prominent figures in the Indonesian national movement.

These schools provided opportunities for some indigenous people to receive formal education under the Western system. However, the expansion of education during the Ethical Policy era remained limited. The Dutch government did not fully grant educational freedom to all indigenous people. Education remained discriminatory and was only accessible to certain groups, particularly the children of aristocrats, families of government officials, and those from certain economic backgrounds. Most ordinary people still struggled to access adequate education. Furthermore, the colonial education system remained geared toward meeting the needs of the Dutch government in the Dutch East Indies. Education for indigenous people focused more on producing low-level administrative personnel who could work in government offices, plantations, and Dutch-owned companies at low cost. Thus, the primary goal of colonial education was not to educate the people as a whole, but rather to serve the colonial economic and political interests.

The educational curriculum implemented by the colonial government was also structured in such a way as to maintain the indigenous population's loyalty to the Dutch. Learning materials focused more on instilling the values of discipline, obedience, and work skills required by the colonial government. Opportunities for indigenous people to obtain higher education were also very limited, as the colonial government feared the emergence of intellectual groups that could challenge Dutch rule. Although colonial education had many limitations, developments during the Ethical Policy era brought significant changes to the lives of Indonesians. More and more indigenous people began to learn about modern education and gained the opportunity to study Western science. Education opened new horizons regarding international developments, modern political thought, and concepts such as democracy, freedom, equal rights, and nationalism. Indigenous people who received a Western education began to realize that the colonial system implemented by the Dutch contained various forms of injustice.

They saw social discrimination between Europeans and indigenous people in education, economics, and politics. This awareness then led to the emergence of a group of indigenous intellectuals who were passionate about fighting for the rights of the Indonesian people. From the development of education during the Ethical Policy era, an educated class emerged who later became the pioneers of the Indonesian national movement. Many national figures emerged from colonial educational environments, such as Soetomo, Ki Hajar Dewantara, and Mohammad Hatta. They used the knowledge and experience they gained to build national consciousness among the indigenous population.

In addition to producing intellectuals, education during the Ethical Policy era also fostered the development of national movement organizations and indigenous mass media. Educators began actively criticizing the colonial government through writings, speeches, and socio-political organizations. Thus, education, initially intended to strengthen Dutch power, instead became a crucial factor in the growth of Indonesian nationalism. Historically, the Ethical Policy can be viewed as a two-pronged colonial policy. On the one hand, this policy continued to aim to safeguard Dutch interests in the Dutch East Indies by providing a cheap, educated workforce loyal to the colonial government. However, on the other hand, the educational policies implemented during the Ethical Policy era actually paved the way for the emergence of national consciousness and a spirit of independence among the indigenous population. Therefore, the development of education during the Ethical Policy era became a crucial stage in the history of the Indonesian nation's struggle for independence.

#### The Emergence of the Educated and National Awareness

One of the most significant influences of Dutch colonial education policies on indigenous society was the emergence of a group of educated or indigenous intellectuals. This group emerged as a result of the development of the Western education system in the Dutch East Indies, particularly after the implementation of the Ethical Policy in the early 20th century.

Although initially colonial education was intended solely to meet the administrative needs of the Dutch government, over time, education gave rise to a society Indigenous people who possess a modern, critical mindset and are aware of the conditions of their people under colonial rule. The indigenous educated population consists of individuals who had the opportunity to receive formal education in colonial schools such as the *Hollandsch-Inlandsche School (HIS)*, *Meer Uitgebreid Lager Onderwijs (MULO)*, *Algemene Middelbare School (AMS)*, and even universities established by the Dutch government.

Through this education, they became acquainted with Western science, developments in world politics, and various modern ideas such as democracy, freedom, equal rights, and nationalism. This knowledge gradually influenced the indigenous people's perspectives on the colonial system implemented by the Dutch in Indonesia. Before the development of Western education, most indigenous people lived with limited education and lacked the opportunity to understand broader socio-political conditions. However, the arrival of educated people brought significant changes to Indonesian society. They began to recognize that the colonial system implemented by the Dutch was fraught with injustice. The colonial government not only exploited the Indonesian people economically but also implemented discrimination in education, politics, law, and social life.

This awareness then gave rise to a new spirit among the indigenous people to fight for their rights as an independent nation. Educated people began to utilize education as a tool of struggle to build national consciousness within the community. They sought to convey ideas about the importance of unity, freedom, and national progress through various means, such as organizations, newspapers, education, and social activities. In the early 20th century, various national movement organizations, spearheaded by educated people, emerged.

The Budi Utomo organization, founded in 1908, is often considered the birthplace of the Indonesian national movement. It was founded by students at the School for the Operation of Inlandsche Artsen (STOVIA), who recognized the importance of unity and educational advancement for the indigenous population. Budi Utomo marked the beginning of the development of modern organizations dedicated to championing the interests of the Indonesian people. In addition to Budi Utomo, the Sarekat Islam organization also played a crucial role in fostering national consciousness. This organization was not only active in economics and trade, but also developed into a political movement opposing unjust colonial practices. Sarekat Islam successfully captured the attention of the wider public by uniting various segments of the indigenous population in a spirit of struggle against colonialism.

The development of the national movement was also marked by the birth of the Indische Partij, which openly advocated for Indonesian independence. This organization was led by nationalist figures such as Douwes Dekker, Ki Hajar Dewantara, and Tjipto Mangoenkoesoemo, known as the Three Musketeers. They used writings, speeches, and the mass media to criticize the policies of the Dutch colonial government. The Western education received by the indigenous people also produced national figures who had a significant influence on the Indonesian independence struggle. Mohammad Hatta, for example, received his higher education in the Netherlands and was deeply influenced by European democratic thought and nationalism. This educational experience shaped his critical thinking, which he later used to fight for Indonesian independence. In the field of education, Ki Hajar Dewantara was one of the figures who strongly opposed the discriminatory colonial education system. He believed that education should be the right of all people, regardless of social status or background. As a form of resistance to the Dutch education system, Ki Hajar Dewantara founded the Taman Siswa educational institution in 1922.

Through Taman Siswa, Ki Hajar Dewantara sought to create a national education system that instilled a love of the homeland, a spirit of nationalism, and an awareness of the importance of independence.

Education was no longer solely aimed at producing a workforce for colonial interests, but also at fostering an independent national character and a national identity. The educational principles developed by Ki Hajar Dewantara placed the indigenous people as the primary subjects of education, not merely tools supporting colonial rule. In addition to organizations and education, educated people also utilized the mass media as a means of struggle. Newspapers and magazines began to be used to disseminate nationalist ideas and critique colonial policies. The writings of intellectuals helped broaden the public's understanding of the importance of national unity and the struggle against colonialism. Thus, colonial education indirectly gave rise to a group of people who became key drivers in the Indonesian national struggle. Although initially aimed at maintaining Dutch rule in the Dutch East Indies, education actually became a crucial factor in accelerating the emergence of national consciousness among the indigenous population. Western-educated educated people successfully transformed education into a tool of political and social struggle to achieve the

ideals of Indonesian independence. Therefore, the emergence of an educated class can be considered one of the most significant impacts of Dutch colonial education policy on the development of Indonesian history.

#### The Impact of Colonial Education Policy on Indigenous Communities

Dutch education policies had a significant impact on the development of Indonesian society, both in social, political, and cultural aspects. On the positive side, colonial education produced an educated group with intellectual abilities and national awareness. Education also introduced modern science and opened opportunities for indigenous people to learn about developments in the outside world. Furthermore, colonial education contributed to the birth of the press and modern organizations in Indonesia. Educators began actively writing for newspapers and expressing criticism of colonial policies.

These developments were crucial to the growth of Indonesian nationalism. However, on the other hand, the colonial education system also had negative impacts. Unequal education led to social disparities within society. Only a small portion of the indigenous population was able to enjoy higher education, while the majority remained illiterate. Colonial education also reinforced social stratification due to the disparate treatment between Europeans and indigenous people. Furthermore, the educational curriculum emphasized the interests of the colonial government over the needs of the Indonesian people. Education was geared toward developing a workforce that would be obedient and supportive of the colonial system. Nevertheless, historically, colonial education continued to have a significant influence on the development of the Indonesian nation. The education system, which initially aimed to maintain colonial rule, instead became a factor that fueled the rise of nationalism and the struggle for Indonesian independence.

#### Discussion According to Experts

The discussion of Dutch education policies towards indigenous people has been extensively studied by historians and education experts in Indonesia. Most argue that colonial education primarily aimed to support the interests of the Dutch government in the Dutch East Indies. However, on the other hand, this policy also had a significant impact on the emergence of national consciousness and the emergence of a group of indigenous intellectuals who later became pioneers of the Indonesian national movement. According to Sartono Kartodirdjo, colonial education during the Dutch colonial era was part of a colonial political strategy to maintain power in Indonesia. In his view, the colonial government deliberately limited education for indigenous people to prevent intellectual development that could threaten the Dutch position.

Education was only provided to certain groups, primarily the nobility and families of indigenous officials who were deemed capable of assisting the colonial administration. However, Sartono Kartodirdjo also emphasized that Western education indirectly gave rise to a modern Indonesian elite with political awareness and nationalism. A similar opinion was expressed by S. Nasution, who stated that the colonial education system was discriminatory because it differentiated access to education based on race and social status. According to him, schools during the colonial period were primarily intended for European children and the indigenous elite, while ordinary people still struggled to obtain a proper education. Nasution explained that the primary goal of colonial education was not to educate the Indonesian people, but rather to create a skilled workforce that was obedient to the Dutch government. Meanwhile, H.A.R. Tilaar argued that Dutch colonial education had a significant influence on the formation of the modern education system in Indonesia.

According to Tilaar, although colonial education was based on Dutch political and economic interests, the system introduced the concepts of formal education, school administration, a modern curriculum, and a tiered education system, which Indonesia inherited after independence. He also believes that Western education opened the minds of indigenous people to the development of modern science and thought. Furthermore, Robert van Niel, in his study of the emergence of Indonesia's modern elite, explains that Western education was a crucial factor in the emergence of indigenous intellectuals in the early 20th century. According to Van Niel, the educated class, educated by colonial education, began to realize the importance of national unity and struggle. They no longer viewed themselves based on regional identities but began to see themselves as part of the Indonesian nation.

Another view is expressed by Taufik Abdullah, who states that the development of colonial education accelerated the growth of national movement organizations in Indonesia. Education created a

community capable of critical thinking about colonial practices. Through education, indigenous people began to understand the concepts of democracy, freedom, and political rights that were developing in Europe. This awareness was later realized through organizations such as Budi Utomo, Sarekat Islam, and Indische Partij. According to Ki Hajar Dewantara, Dutch colonial education was flawed because it did not provide equal freedom and opportunity for all Indonesians. He believed that colonial education prioritized the interests of the colonizers over those of the indigenous population. Therefore, Ki Hajar Dewantara founded Taman Siswa as a form of resistance against the discriminatory colonial education system. He emphasized that education should be able to build character, a sense of nationalism, and a spirit of independence. Based on the views of these experts, it is understandable that Dutch educational policies towards indigenous people had complex impacts.

On the one hand, colonial education was used as a tool to maintain power and meet the administrative needs of the Dutch government. However, on the other hand, this education actually gave rise to an educated group that became the main driving force behind the birth of nationalism and the struggle for Indonesian independence. Thus, colonial education was not only part of the colonial system but also a crucial factor in the formation of Indonesian national consciousness.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Berdasarkan hasil pembahasan mengenai analisis historis kebijakan pendidikan Belanda terhadap kaum pribumi, dapat disimpulkan bahwa pendidikan kolonial pada dasarnya merupakan bagian dari strategi pemerintah Belanda untuk mempertahankan kekuasaan di Hindia Belanda. Sistem pendidikan yang diterapkan tidak sepenuhnya bertujuan mencerdaskan masyarakat pribumi, melainkan lebih diarahkan untuk memenuhi kebutuhan administrasi kolonial dan menciptakan tenaga kerja yang dapat membantu jalannya pemerintahan Belanda. Pada awal pelaksanaannya, pendidikan kolonial bersifat diskriminatif karena hanya dapat diakses oleh kelompok tertentu, seperti anak-anak Eropa, bangsawan, dan keluarga pejabat pribumi. Masyarakat pribumi dari kalangan bawah masih sangat terbatas dalam memperoleh pendidikan. Perbedaan tersebut menunjukkan adanya stratifikasi sosial yang sengaja dibangun oleh pemerintah kolonial untuk mempertahankan dominasi kekuasaan Belanda di Indonesia. Perubahan kebijakan mulai terlihat sejak diterapkannya Politik Etis pada awal abad ke-20. Melalui program edukasi, pemerintah kolonial mulai membuka kesempatan pendidikan yang lebih luas bagi masyarakat pribumi dengan mendirikan berbagai jenis sekolah seperti HIS, MULO, AMS, dan sekolah kejuruan. Walaupun demikian, pendidikan pada masa Politik Etis tetap memiliki tujuan utama untuk mendukung kepentingan ekonomi dan politik kolonial.

Di sisi lain, perkembangan pendidikan kolonial membawa dampak besar terhadap kehidupan masyarakat Indonesia. Pendidikan Barat melahirkan golongan terpelajar pribumi yang memiliki wawasan modern dan kesadaran nasional. Kaum intelektual hasil pendidikan kolonial mulai memahami konsep demokrasi, kebebasan, persamaan hak, dan nasionalisme yang kemudian mendorong lahirnya berbagai organisasi pergerakan nasional seperti Budi Utomo, Sarekat Islam, dan Indische Partij. Tokoh-tokoh nasional seperti Ki Hajar Dewantara, Mohammad Hatta, dan Soetomo memanfaatkan pendidikan sebagai sarana perjuangan untuk membangun kesadaran kebangsaan dan menentang sistem kolonial yang diskriminatif. Dengan demikian, pendidikan kolonial yang awalnya dirancang untuk memperkuat kekuasaan Belanda justru menjadi salah satu faktor penting yang mendorong tumbuhnya nasionalisme dan perjuangan kemerdekaan Indonesia. Secara keseluruhan, kebijakan pendidikan Belanda terhadap kaum pribumi memiliki dampak yang bersifat ganda. Di satu sisi, pendidikan kolonial menjadi alat kontrol sosial dan kepentingan politik pemerintah Belanda, tetapi di sisi lain pendidikan tersebut turut melahirkan kelompok terpelajar yang menjadi pelopor perubahan sosial dan perjuangan nasional Indonesia. Oleh karena itu, sejarah pendidikan kolonial memiliki peranan penting dalam memahami proses terbentuknya kesadaran nasional dan perkembangan pendidikan di Indonesia.

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