Caught in the Cross Fire: Children's Right to Education During Conflict – The Case of Nepal 1996–2006

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The article focuses on the impact on children, schools and education during the 10 year conflict in Nepal and raises questions for further research on schooling in the post-conflict era. The article is based on research undertaken as part of a British Council funded Higher Education Link. Focus group discussions and interviews were conducted with school children, parents, teachers and community leaders between 2004 and 2006 and draws on informal discussions and observations with NGOs and teachers in the post-conflict period, including NGOs visual methods to enable children's voices to be heard in the peace process. © 2012 The Author(s). Children & Society © 2012 National Children's Bureau and Blackwell Publishing Limited.

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Introduction: education and conflict

Between February 1996 and November 2006, the Communist Party of Nepal, the *Maobadi* (Maoists), waged a 'people's war' in Nepal to address the inherent inequalities in Nepali society (of which education is one amongst many), and to overthrow the constitutional monarchy. During the conflict in Nepal children were used as combatants, spies, porters and messengers by both Maoist and government forces and schools became central to the conflict. This paper looks at children's experiences of conflict and the role schooling can play in both creating and resolving the conflict in Nepal.

In times of armed conflict children are disproportionately affected. Children can be directly affected by violence through displacement, death and injury, recruitment as child soldiers and sexual violence, but also indirectly affected thorough the wider impacts on the community, specifically on education and schools.

There has been a growing concern in the international community with the targeting of education in situations of conflict (Tawil and Harley, 2004). Children's right to education is enshrined in international law through the Convention on the Rights of the Child, but in situations of conflict education is one of the Human Rights that is violated on a regular basis

(Tomlinson and Benefield, 2005). In 2006 it was estimated that one-third of the 115 million children out of school are in conflict-affected areas (Save the Children 2009). Conflict can severely obstruct countries in achieving what is known as the 'Education for All' goal: the Millennium Development Goal that by 2015 all children have access to education.

The negative impact on schooling can continue long after the conflict has ended. Education can be disrupted through school closure and direct attacks on school. Educational quality can fall as schools become overcrowded with scarce and unqualified teachers and lack of appropriate resources, books, buildings and equipment. There is also evidence that high levels of violence in communities lead to increasing violence in schools, corporal punishment and sexual violence (Nicolai, 2007). There is growing recognition that a good school can have a stabilizing effect on the life of children during times of upheaval and can provide a secure and protective space for children's general welfare, enhancing their ability to cope with difficulties and providing a promise for their future in the context of conflict (Save the Children, 2009). It is essential to educate children during times of war. Education is both a fundamental right of a child, and can represent normalcy, making it easier for children to cope in times of conflict (Machel, 2001).

As Tomlinson and Benefield (2005: 9) point out; 'education in conflict and post-conflict situations as a recognised practitioner and research field is in its infancy'. The article thus attempts to begin to address this gap by providing a case study of the situation in Nepal between 2004 and 2006. The article asks how and why schools, students and teachers were targeted during the conflict of 1996–2006 in Nepal and begins to explore what is being done post-conflict to enable children to access their right to education.

Context: education in Nepal

In Nepal, education is weak at the best of times and the conflict added considerable pressure to an already poor education system, with education becoming both a cause of and solution to, conflict (Pherali, 2011; Sheilds and Rappleye, 2008; Standing and others, 2006). The elite educationalist system in Nepal played a key role in exacerbating the conflict in Nepal by further existing social divisions. The educational system represented the dominant classes, did not meet the needs of local populations, ignored ethnic, caste and geographical differences and in the main contributed to uneven development failing to provide meaningful opportunities for the majority of the population. Educational inequalities acted as a contributor to violence, reproducing existing social inequalities in terms of caste/class, ethnicity, gender and the rural/urban divide that were part of the conflicts main causes.

Nepal is one of the poorest countries in the world, with 45 per cent of the population living below the poverty line. A stark contrast exists between urban and rural areas, with poverty rates ten times higher in rural areas than in the more developed Kathmandu Valley. Nepal is culturally and ethnically diverse, yet, despite legislation, many discriminatory attitudes and practices persist to the detriment of indigenous ethnic groups, women and children. Women and children living in remote areas and those without land are the most marginalised and excluded, and were those most affected by conflict. Nepal is also a young population; overall 39 per cent of Nepal's population is under 14, and over 50 per cent is under 19. In a country where over 45 per cent of the population is unemployed, half of these are youth under 19 years of age (Save the Children, 2009).

The heterogeneity and intersectionality of children's experiences makes it difficult to generalise in terms of education, and inequalities amongst children and in education vary, with girls and dalits being amongst the most vulnerable (UNICEF 2009). Whilst an estimated 18 per cent of primary-aged children (five to nine years) do not attend school, this figure is higher for girls and Dalit children (Stash and Hannum, 2009). Inequalities in education are greatest in Far West Nepal, with reports of literacy rates as low as 30 per cent and mean years of schooling as low as two. Only 41 per cent of children aged 3–5 have access to early childhood development programmes and approximately 84 per cent of young people have dropped out of the formal education system. Access to secondary education is limited and provision poor, especially to the socioeconomically disadvantaged (Bhatta, 2009).

The problem in education is not only lack of access but also the unequal quality and type of education provided. For those enrolled in school, the lack of resources, overcrowding, poor teaching quality, irregularity of teacher attendance and the extra costs associated with schooling mean that many children drop out or fail to do well. It was estimated in 2006 that only a third of primary teachers had been trained (Save the Children, 2006). The 10 years of unrest had a negative impact on the ability of access to teacher training opportunities. The poor quality of education within Nepal has led Vaux and others (2006: 21) to the conclusion that children in government schools are 'practically all destined to become social and economic "failures"' due to low levels of progression and pass rates for the School Leaving Certificate.[1] Low pass rates, coupled with the prestige of being taught in the medium of English, led to a dramatic increase in private schooling. It is now estimated that a fifth of all school-going children attend private schools (Caddell, 2009). This two tier system divides the population further, exacerbates inequalities and led to private schools being targeted by the Maoists. General frustration with the educational system, the resulting lack of opportunities and youth unemployment were key issues which underpinned the Maoists' manifesto and helped them draw support from marginalised groups with demands for a 'janabadi shiksha' or 'peoples education'.

As in other conflict zones children were used as combatants, spies, porters, messengers by both Maoist and government forces and schools became central to the conflict (Parker and Standing, 2007; Pherali, 2011, Sheilds and Rappleye, 2008). An estimated 13,000 people were killed as a result of the conflict, including at least 500 children and Nepal had the highest number of 'disappearances' in the world during the conflict (Amnesty International, 2004) with reports of around 4000 children 'missing' (CWIN, 2006). It has been estimated that 100,000–200,000 people were displaced, of whom at least 40,000 were children (IRIN, 2005).

This article asks how and why schools, students and teachers were targeted during the conflict of 1996–2006 in Nepal and begins to explore what is being done post-conflict to enable children to access their right to education.

Researching schools in a conflict situation

This article is based on research conducted as part of a British Council funded project on gender education and development. Initially, research focussed on exploring the gendered experiences of children in 11 public secondary schools in and around the Kathmandu valley. Additional research focusing on the impact of conflict in schools was carried out in 2006–2007 in three areas of Nepal where the Maoist presence was high and many villages were rebel strongholds. Interviews were held with teachers, parents and community members and

focus group discussions with groups of 4–6 children (48 boys and 46 girls). Post-2007, follow on research is based upon observations, key informant interviews and analysing educational policies and the work being undertaken by non-government organisations such as Global Action Nepal and Children Nepal.

The conflict led to many issues and dilemmas in the research process. The researchers were unable to visit some schools in rural and semi rural areas and research was only possible because of the researchers close links with a wide range of schools in varying locations. In all locations a level of trust within both the school and the wider community was established and participants were assured that the research was no way linked to any political party or the government forces. Anonymity to individuals, schools and other key informants was guaranteed as was the locations of the research. This article presents qualitative data to share the children's experiences and to illustrate the long-term and short-term effects of conflict on schooling and children's lives. It also draws on work undertaken by NGOs with young people using visual methods in two NGO run workshops to promote children's rights and a better education system in Nepal–Global Action Nepal in Kathmandu and Children Nepal in Pokhara. Children Nepal's work with number of Child Self Help groups in 2006–2007 resulted in a picture book entitled 'Our Voice' which was presented to the Interim Government to give a voice to young people and help ensure their rights are recognised in the new constitution (Children Nepal 2008).

Findings from the field

Children and schools: political and actual battlegrounds

It is widely recognised that schools were targeted during the Maoist Insurgency from 1996–2006 as they provided perfect sites for military operations, play a central role in community life, especially in rural areas and were viewed as government structures. Schools were targeted and closed for ideological reasons as they were viewed by the Maoists as representing an oppressive system of education which indoctrinates the population rather than emancipates it. Both parties, Government and Maoist, viewed schools as the entry point of their propaganda campaign. This led to a variety of impacts, both direct and indirect, that vary according to factors such as geographical location (urban or rural), type of school (public or private) and factors such as gender, socioeconomic status and supporting or opposing the Maoist movement. As schools are often the centre of a community, and the only large building, far from providing a place of safety and security for children, they were used by both sides as areas for recruitment, propaganda and sometimes actual battlegrounds. Students reported that both the Maoist and security forces would come into schools to spread propaganda. Rural schools became one of the main recruitment arenas for both the Maoist and government forces One male participant, year 9, informed us that 'Maoists come to school from time to time and go inside the classroom and start giving orientation talks to students about their politics' and recalls a time when they were taken on a rally far from the school where they suffered from hunger and thirst as well as a fear that the security forces would come and kill them. Children reported schools being used as actual battlegrounds, and the fear of being caught in the crossfire:

> When cross fire occurs, the Maoists make the school their safe place. They use the […] school as their meeting place and their shelter. They order the community to come to attend their meeting compulsorily, which is very dangerous. When the Army comes, they just shoot down the people

without recognizing them. Our school is near to the main road. It is very appropriate to organize meetings there for the Maoists and they organize the cultural programs. So they come time to time and organize their activities. When they go back, the Army comes in to school and asks several questions. (Boy, year 9)

Maoists kidnapped students and they gave training. Maoists forced us to dig bunkers around the school. One day, there was crossfire in our school, luckily after school time. If it had happened in school time certainly dozens of our friends (maybe us) would have lost their lives. Whenever armies come to the village, Maoists hide in the bunkers of our school. […] They keep us in the front when the solders come and they go into the bunker to hide. The Maoists and the government soldiers are making teachers and students like sandwich. (Boy, year 10).

The pressure felt by children at being trapped between all parties is depicted in Figure 1 below, where the text reads 'join our party, no join our party … '

Although both the government and Maoist forces have denied the recruitment and use of child soldiers, there are reports that the Maoists used the 2003 ceasefire to recruit secondary school children aged between 15 and 18 as child soldiers (Amnesty International, 2004; Human Rights Watch, 2007). Child Workers in Nepal (CWIN, 2003), estimates that in 10 years of the insurgency 27,323 children have been abducted, while the state security forces have arrested 229 children. As part of the ceasefire, over 4000 minors were discharged from Maoist army in January 2010, about a third of whom were female. There is evidence that the Maoists kidnapped large numbers of teachers and students for 're-education' (Nepal News, 2004) and our research, like that of others (Skayka, 2010, Watchlist, 2005) found that the use of children as spies, messengers and couriers was widespread and schools were used to recruit children and teachers by both the Maoists and security forces.

The children we spoke to confirmed that both boys and girls were used in combat situations, to provide ammunition or care for the wounded. One respondent told us

The army soldiers come to our village to try to persuade us to join army. They lure us by saying as: "You don't have to do hard duty and don't have to go in the battle field. You only have to take care of the injured soldiers"

Figure 1: Drawing From Children's Club of School Environment. Source GAN (2010).

And:

> They involve children in the militant group gradually from the cultural programme … children died in the cross fire between Maoists and security forces in the past (parent)

Seeking to gain a deeper understanding of the impact of the conflict on children, work by a number of NGOs with young people in the post-conflict era highlights the stress felt by children who were caught in the middle of party politics whilst attending school. Figure 2 (below) depicts how children are used in school in political conflict, by the army and the police force as well as political parties.

In some areas which were rebel strongholds Maoists were fairly regular presences in schools, sometimes even 'teaching' classes. Whilst in some areas this was intimidating, in others it was made clear the rebels could only enter schools in civilian clothes and without guns, and children became accustomed to their presence, as one child stated:

> The Maoists used to come to our school. We used to be afraid of them … but gradually our fears have gone because we become familiar with seeing them everyday (focus group, grade 9 and 10).

The Maoists gained popular support by focussing on local concerns such as ensuring teachers regularly attend class and do not drink alcohol and that all pupils are treated equally regardless of caste or gender. In the main, these moves to make the education system in Nepal less elitist and more equitable were welcomed (IRIN, 2005; Save the Children, 2005). In some Maoist-controlled areas, increased attendance of children in school was reported and also an increase in the number of taught days. One respondent reported that in their school:

> some teachers taught roughly and used to take additional money from students for extra tuition. Then the Maoists went there and they beat the teachers and made them ready to teach well in class. Things are now better in our class. (Boy, Class 10 focus group).

Such perceived gains are seriously offset by the disrupting effect of the conflict, and the Maoist presence did not always have such a positive influence on teachers. As one informant

Figure 2: Pressures in the Classroom. Source Children Nepal (2008).

said 'the Maoists had beaten the teachers from time to time and had threatened the teachers, due to the fear of the Maoists, the teachers could not concentrate on teaching the students which has decreased the quality of education' (Boy, year 9). Other research discusses the influence parades and propaganda had on young people with many children leaving school after being inspired by Maoist propaganda (see Skayka, 2010).

It is important also to recognise the gendered impact of conflict. Our research indicates girls were likely to be members of political wing, with jobs as 'motivators' going from house to house to try to gain support for the Maoists, however there is also evidence of girls being members of the military wing and receiving firearms training (Watchlist, 2005). Joining the Maoist army however was sometimes seen as an escape from a patriarchal household for adolescent girls, but brought with it the risk of gender-based violence (see Standing *et al.*, 2006 and Parker and Standing, 2007 for more detail).

Indirect impact of conflict on children's schooling

As stated above, an indirect impact of the conflict was an increase in the school dropout rate. Our research found that whilst girls would be withdrawn from school to do household work boys would be moved to schools in safer areas, usually the nearest town or city. Children frequently migrated to urban areas, one teacher noted that 'many of the local people from [the village] have taken their children out of this school to [the nearest town] because of the conflict'. Many children were withdrawn from school completely to enter the labour market, boys tended to migrate to India or the Gulf countries as labourers, and many girls fleeing conflict ended up in commercial sex work (Save the Children Norway, 2005).

Adolescents are most at risk in times of conflict, and also the greatest hope of conflict resolution and rebuilding communities (Machel, 2001). Older children were recruited at the time of the school leaving certificate exams, leading to both fear and contributing to students dropping out and not completing their education:

> The trend is that the Maoists make their activities when children complete the final examination of grade 10. Last year, a friend did not appear at the final exam of grade 10 due to the fear of being kidnapped. He was talented but did not appear at the exam (Boy, Class 9)

Figure 3 below from Children Nepal (2008) highlights that by denying children access to education they are denied access to better life.

As well as being affected by the direct impact of conflict, violence and fear of violence, numerous general strikes were called as part of the conflict with, schools specifically targeted for strike action often bringing the educational system to a halt, at times preventing students from taking important exams (Watchlist, 2005). Between January 2005 and April 2006, 3670 schools were closed at one time or another (CWIN, 2006) and in the 10 year period an estimated 300 teaching days at least have been lost. This equates to nearly two years of schooling. The impact on student performance cannot be underestimated, leaving students feeling exasperated and having little hope for their educational future; adding to already high drop out rates. As one student told us that the frequent closure of the school disturbed their studies and 'This has hampered our study and made us feel frustrated' (Boy Class 9).
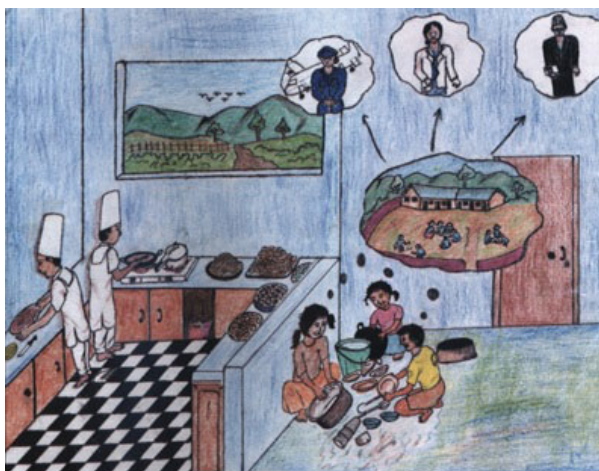
Figure 3: Drawing From Children's Club of School Environment. Source Children Nepal (2008).

Although recent data suggest that the number of children enrolling in school is increasing, including those previously recruited by Maobadi, the numbers completing their school education are still limited. The article now moves on to explore what can be done to rebuild children's lives and make schools places of security in post-conflict Nepal.

Post-conflict challenges

In November 2006 an agreement was signed bringing an end to the 10 year conflict, and the recent return to democracy indicates the potential to make progress in both formal and non-formal education and to improve the lives of children. The Comprehensive Peace Agreement ensures that children associated with armed groups and armed forces will be released and rehabilitated into their communities and Nepal is currently monitoring and reporting core violations against the rights of children through the UN Security Council Resolution 1612 Task Force. However, there is evidence that political parties continue to exploit and use children in street rallies and demonstrations (CWIN 2009). Ethnic conflict continues in the West and Terai. Nepal is thus going through a key time in establishing peace and democracy and the rights of children. However, the peace process is fragile and evolving, and there is a concern that the voices of children will not be heard. Children's demand for the right to education were evidenced in workshops run by NGOs as Figure 4 illustrates:

Many international agencies leave as soon as conflict is over; however, education requires a long-term commitment to change. Since the peace settlement of November 2006 some programmes set up and run collaboratively by national and international NGO's have achieved modest success in re-integrating children from the conflict zones into the school system and to give young people space to discuss their experiences and needs via establishing child clubs or self help groups. UNICEF (2009) makes a useful distinction between programmes targeted to specific groups and those which target all children For example, the UNICEF 'Welcome to School' campaign (Lawoti, 2006) targets girls and other programmes aim at reintegrating children associated with, or affected by, the armed conflict back to school. Generally since 2007, World Education reports to have supported over 1650 children access school, literacy classes or vocational training (World Education 2011).

Figure 4: Hami Shanti Chahanchau, Hami Phadne Chahanchau 'We want peace we want to study'. Source GAN (2010).

Other initiatives such as The World Bank-financed Community School Support Project (2003) aim to reform the defunct public school system by encouraging communities to take back the management of schools and to transform the role of the Government from that of a provider of education to a facilitator. The initial results of these reforms have been encouraging. From 2003 to 2009, net primary enrolment rose from 84 per cent to 92 per cent. Gender parity improved from 83 per cent to 98 per cent during the same period. More than 9000 schools transferred to community management (World Bank 2010). However, the right to education is about more than access and other initiatives are needed to make school schools child friendly.

As early as 2001, Save the Children, promoted the idea of 'Children as Zones of Peace' in an attempt to reduce the impact of the conflict on young people. Post-2006 the UNICEF supported Schools as Zones of Peace campaign was targeted at ensuring children had the right to access education, but also to insulate schools from the political influences that subverted the learning process during the conflict, to keep schools free from discrimination and from any form of violence. In May 2011 the Government of Nepal endorsed the Schools as Zones of Peace initiative to help address the continuing disruption in schools due to the frequent strikes in Nepal. Much of the work being done by activist groups in Nepal to give children a voice support this demand. Figure 5 places the school at the centre of peace initiatives:

However, whilst increasing educational access and creating schools as zone of peace are all positive steps, the issue in Nepal is wider than access; there needs to be wholesale reform of curriculum, pedagogy, teaching methods and materials if there is to be any lasting resolution to the conflict. Education needs to be accessible, inclusive and responsive to the needs and aspirations of the diverse Nepali population, and the voices of children need to be heard in the ongoing peace process. As one child informed us 'we need qualified teachers and experienced teachers to teach us. We would also like a science lab for practical knowledge and a good English teacher' (Boy Class 10). In the current climate of private school proliferation (Caddell, 2009) these contrasts are becoming increasing evident.

The schooling system needs to encourage creativity and enable students to develop their own ideas. Currently the educational system is heavily based on rote learning and passing

Figure 5: Zone of Peace Diagram From a Children's Club Organised by Children Nepal. Source Children Nepal (2008).

texts on an annual basis in order to progress to the next grade, as one child explained 'teachers are all looking for the exact same answer that is in the text book … there are many old teachers with this old way of thinking. They expect lots of respect from the students and do not want to see the students' views in the answer. If we do not respect them they become angry and threaten us, even the Principal shows his anger to us because of his personal tension' (Child Year 9). Schools in Nepal need to become more child friendly 'proactively inclusive, advocate human rights, are academically effective, are healthy and safe, are gender-responsive and are actively engaged with the community' UNICEF (2009: 18).

One of the effects of the 10 years of conflict has been a lack of training support provided to teachers, especially in remote areas and a lost decade of opportunity where teaching methods and texts have stayed the same. The Country Director for GAN stated that one most important issues that needs addressing in Nepal is to improve the qualifications and skills of teachers. '[whilst] 97 per cent of teachers have some sort of qualification they are not fully trained … The government needs to provide more adequate teacher training resources and techniques [and] monitor teachers as they are not being watched after they qualify […] it is essential that schools become more child friendly, not only in terms of the environment and resources which are available but also students should be given the opportunity to express their own ideas in school'. The Director of Children Nepal adds to this arguing that 'education needs to become more practical so that the children can use their education in Nepal … improving the quality of education needs to become a priority in Nepal and there needs to be more sharing of good practice between non-government and government sector' (personal communication with S Parker, April 2011).

There have, however, been some government initiatives to improve schooling in Nepal such as introducing the licensing of teachers. However, whilst the government has implemented plans for education, health and children's rights (supported by INGOS) the post-conflict situation has meant these are often difficult to implement. To reflect this, the 'education for all' target has been shifted from 2010 to 2015.

The paper has highlighted a number of initiatives which are being implemented to encourage children back to school and also to improve the quality of education and to reduce the gap between public private education differences within Nepal. Improving access to and the quality of education is vital for further unrest and conflict to be avoided. It is essential that further research is done to evaluate the impact of the various initiatives being undertaken by both Government and Non-Governmental agencies and that forum are established whereby good practice can be shared and embedded into Government policies. In particular, research conducted with young people, to enhance their voice and ensure that their right to quality education is gained.

Conclusion

Our findings supports Smith and Vaux conclusion that in Nepal 'education was a cause of the conflict and then became one of its main battlegrounds' (Smith and Vaux, 2003:19). Education can, however, also be a solution to conflict. Whilst the Maoist perspective on education presented the possibility of developing different and more emancipatory and inclusive discourses of education, including the wide scale participation of marginalized groups, in reality schooling was disrupted and children's human rights have suffered as a result of the conflict. The effects are complex and varied, as already noted.

In the accounts they gave in the research children pinpointed two experiences that are most harmful to children living in areas affected by war and its aftermath. These are loss of stability, security and normalcy when the safe space of the school is 'invaded' and the failure of the 'rehabilitated' education system to change in order to reflect their needs.

In their testimony and in their artwork the children support the findings of Rana-Deub (2005) that many children had personal experience of violence and death and that the widespread use by both sides of schools as instruments of propaganda and control had turned the learning environment during the conflict into a landscape of fear. In its intervention into the learning environment, the conflict reversed a primary social benefit of schooling, which is the protection of children from harmful external influences (Save the Children, 2007).

The elitism of Nepal's education system, which lead Vaux and others (2006: 21) to conclude that the country's state educated pupils were 'destined' for economic failure, was targeted by the Maoists before and after the war as an instrument of privilege and control. The need to extend the right to a child friendly education across social classes and ethnic groups and to reform teaching and curriculum is essential if children's right to a quality education is to be ensured. Initiatives need to consider the complexities of children's lives and be antidiscriminatory and empowering. Our findings highlight the need for further research in this area and support UNICEF's (2009) call for monitoring at the local level of these initiatives to ensure that all agencies, local, national, international and governmental co-operate to enhance the rights of children in Nepal.

Acknowledgements

Note

1 The SLC exams are often referred to as the iron gates of education. In 2005 it was reported that only 20 per cent of students in government schools pass the School Leaving Certificate at the end of Year 10 (compared to 80% in private schools), and just 4 per cent of students join higher education (CERID, 2005). Whilst the pass rate has increased in recent years to 55 per cent educational attainment varies greatly geographically and between the different caste and ethnic groups.

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