

EGS and Primary Schooling in Madhya Pradesh: A Reply

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This is a reply to the comment on my paper 'Education Guarantee and Scheme Primary Schooling in Madhya Pradesh' (*EPW*, May 10, 2003, pp 1855-69) by Amita Sharma and R Gopalakrishnan. Their text shows a careful reading of the paper, criticises my interpretation of fieldwork results and provides information on recent developments of educational policies in Madhya Pradesh.

Unfortunately, there have been serious misunderstandings regarding the study. First, contrary to what is suggested in the comment, the fieldwork is authentic and the facts presented in the paper are accurate. Second, the paper is certainly not an attack on GoMP policies; indeed, due credit was given to the achievements of the Education Guarantee Scheme (EGS) and other reforms, especially in terms of improved access to primary education, although the paper focuses on insufficiently explored issues rather than on already well-publicised achievements – which is certainly natural in a research article. Third, indeed, the paper is essentially a case study aimed at raising general issues that further, more systematic research based on a large sample would benefit from investigating.

A large part of this reply will have to be devoted to clarifying the purpose, methodology and results of the field study, before issues regarding the interpretation of the results and key concepts underscored by Amita Sharma and R Gopalakrishnan can be further discussed.¹

Purpose of Field Study

The aim of the fieldwork was to observe in detail the functioning and management

of a small number of EGS and government primary schools in two areas typical of the settings towards which recent reforms of elementary education in Madhya Pradesh are targeted, namely, adivasi and dalit villages and hamlets. Further information was collected on the villages to understand the context in which the public school system operates. Fieldwork carried out in a few villages during a few months of a single school year can be expected to yield a representation only of these villages during these months. The paper proposes such a representation, based on facts and believed to be accurate, and raises a number of issues regarding the current state of the school system. The intention was not to compare EGS and government schools as systems. However, the similarities and differences that have emerged during the field study are mentioned in order to indicate areas which would need further exploration.

To what extent these issues are relevant to the rest of Madhya Pradesh and how they are to be seen in a dynamic perspective are questions which I cannot address directly. Therefore, it should be clear to the reader that the more general interpretations given in the paper, especially in the conclusion (section VII) are meant to be tentative and debatable. They are also hoped to provide a basis for further research – which would have to be more systematic and based on a larger sample.

A micro-study like mine is too modest a research endeavour for 'the credibility of a home-grown response to the educational challenge of reaching schools to remote villages and habitations in India' to be at stake, and attacking the policies of the government of Madhya Pradesh as such was never my intention. The paper was never meant to be read as a general and definitive assessment of elementary

education policies in Madhya Pradesh, which it is definitely not.

Methodology

(1) *Previous studies*: Previous studies of EGS to which I had access were written by Amita Sharma and R Gopalakrishnan or commissioned (I did not use the word 'sponsored') by the Rajiv Gandhi Shiksha Mission. As Jha (2000) explains, "Several professionals were requested by the project management to evaluate these [interventions, namely EGS and Alternative Schools] individually in different districts" (p 161). Most of these studies, notably Jha (2000), Kothari et al (2000), Sharma (nd) and Srivastava (2000) provide useful information on and perceptive discussions of the conception of the reforms and their implementation at an early stage: I never intended to 'dismiss' them.

Other texts belonging to this literature are partly promotional, which is why I wrote that "the literature circulated by the GoMP tends to mix information with promotion" (p 1855). Vyasulu (2000) himself concludes a paper titled 'In the Wonderland of Primary Education' by these words: "In this report there is little scepticism, scientific or other. This is best stated plainly. I have become an admirer of what I have seen. Let the reader, then beware!" (p 160).

(2) *Relations with Eklavya and independence of the study*: I contacted Eklavya as I was looking for an organisation which could help me to study schools in rural areas of Madhya Pradesh. Given their long association with the GoMP towards improving the quality of government schools and their knowledge of rural Madhya Pradesh, Eklavya seemed ideal partners for a beginning researcher. During the fieldwork, I stayed at Eklavya's offices in Shahpur and Dewas, was introduced by them to the teachers of the schools I studied, and discussed the study design and results with them. However, I was usually not accompanied by members of Eklavya when conducting the fieldwork, and contacted some of the respondents on my own. I was not funded by Eklavya but by Centre de Sciences Humaines (CSH), a Delhi-based institution which has no link to Eklavya. Amita Sharma kindly agreed

to receive me on January 1, 2002, before I started the main part of the fieldwork, and I carefully read the documents she then gave me; my paper is thus also informed by the GoMP's perspective.

I wrote the paper from April to November 2002, mostly in Delhi. Neither members of Eklavya nor anybody else co-authored it. I discussed my results with Eklavya; they made many comments and suggestions, not all of which were incorporated in the text that was published.² The conclusions are thus solely mine; they do not necessarily agree on all of them. I also received comments from academics and participants in several conferences in India and Europe. I sent my first draft to Amita Sharma and R Gopalakrishnan in September and October 2002, and the final version in November 2002.

Therefore, I think that my study fits the definition of an independent study, and represents "neither [the views] of Eklavya nor those of the government of Madhya Pradesh" (Notes, p 1868). I did not "overtly distance [my] observations from Eklavya" but felt that this independence had to be stated clearly, given the context created by

the closure of the Hoshangabad Science Teaching Programme in July 2002—months after I completed my fieldwork.

(3) *Relations with GoMP*: As mentioned above, I was received by Amita Sharma on January 1, 2002, before starting the main part of the fieldwork. I then sent the first draft of the paper to her and to R Gopalakrishnan, who made brief comments in an official letter sent to the director of CSH; I would not have failed to take their detailed comments into account whenever relevant while writing the final version if I had received them at that time. Amita Sharma asked in November 2002 and June 2003 for the names of the schools which I studied. I answered both letters, although I thought it was not appropriate for me to reveal these names.

(4) *Village names*: Indeed, many respondents agreed to answer my questions and/or let me observe their activities only to the condition that they would not be individually identifiable by the readers of my study. As mine is a micro-study written with the purpose of giving a very precise description of the functioning of each school, and as the schools visited typically

have few teachers, they would be identifiable if I had given the village names.

Further, a distinction has to be maintained between research and policy. It would be useful indeed to take measures to improve the functioning of several of the schools which I visited, but, as I explained to Amita Sharma in a letter sent by e-mail on June 23, 2003, "I think that it would be unfair and probably counter-productive to single out a few individuals who happened to be my respondents and sanction them only [...]. This would be unfair because these behaviours are not specific to the persons I interviewed, and counter-productive because no one would accept to talk to researchers if facing the prospect of being individually sanctioned in an otherwise unchanged system. The result would be the impossibility of basing policy-making on good-quality research. The distinction between a researcher and an inspector has to be kept clear [...]. Rather than singling out the very small sample of a study like mine, what is required is systemic action [...]; the usefulness of qualitative studies is then to indicate the kind of systemic issues which

arise rather than to point to a few specific instances of these issues.”³

I believe that preserving respondents’ privacy and anonymity through the use of individual or village pseudonyms is standard practice in social science research, especially when publication of research results may have negative consequences for the respondents.

(5) *Fieldwork*: The description of my fieldwork in note 2 of Amita Sharma and R Gopalakrishnan’s comment is inaccurate and misleading. Here is the number of days I spent in each of the six EGS and two government schools, located in seven villages, which I studied in detail: Shahpur 1: five; Shahpur 2: three; Shahpur 3: four; Shahpur 4: two (this school was the least accessible, and was found closed on my second visit; its registers suggest that it is very deficient); Tonk1 (EGS): four; Tonk1 (government): three; Tonk2: two (I had to limit my stay in Dewas in March 2002), Tonk3: two (this school as well seemed very deficient, partly because it then lacked a proper building – one was under construction). I spent whole days at each school whenever possible.

My activities included: Observation of classroom processes (in particular patterns of interaction between teachers and pupils), listing of available inputs, interviews of teachers and some pupils, basic tests of the achievement of grade-5 pupils. I spent much time collecting information from school registers, not only pupils’ enrolment/attendance registers and teachers’ attendance registers, but also mid-day meal registers, inspection registers or SMC/VEC/PTA registers when available. Data drawn from these registers are abundantly used in the study (e.g., Tables 3, 7, 8, 9, 12 and 13 of the *EPW* paper, and Leclercq, 2002, for more details).

However, I spent more time in the villages themselves than indicated above concerning the schools studied in detail. Indeed, I paid short visits to six more government schools and six private schools located in the same villages of Tonk Khurd block, and also interviewed persons working in CRCs and BRCs, observed meetings in these institutions, and interviewed parents and other villagers, including a few panchayat officials. Finally, I went to schools located in other villages, and interacted with a number of other teachers or villagers in formal or informal meetings; this allowed me to get further back-

ground information, even though this cannot be directly used in the study.

Facts: The facts on which the paper is based are drawn from the fieldwork conducted as described above, and are accurate. A point-to-point response to Amita Sharma and R Gopalakrishnan’s section “What is wrong with Leclercq’s facts?” is necessary but cumbersome, and hence given in an appendix, with its main points summarised here.

(a) *Identification of the village belonging to the sample*: Sharma and Gopalakrishnan’s identification of the villages belonging to my sample is inaccurate – for one thing, they mention 9 villages in their section ‘What is wrong with Leclercq’s methodology?’, and 10 in their section ‘What is wrong with Leclercq’s facts?’, while I studied seven villages. Indeed, there was some confusion with regard to some of the villages I had visited during a preliminary trip to Shahpur in February 2001. Their sample thus includes schools which do not belong to mine and excludes some schools which do; comparisons between their facts and mine are thus difficult. I am well aware that the difficulty originates in my refusal to reveal the village names, but I have no reason to change my position on this issue.

(b) *Textbooks, teachers’ qualifications, local residence and caste*: These facts are based on interviews with teachers; I have no reason to disbelieve their answers on these points. The discrepancies between Sharma and Gopalakrishnan’s facts and mine are due to the differences between the two samples.

(c) *Attendance*: My attendance data are drawn from pupils’ attendance registers, which are reasonably accurate in the schools under study (discrepancies between attendance observed during my visits and recorded in the registers are discussed in Leclercq 2002, pp 54-56). They are not directly comparable to the average attendance rates given by Sharma and Gopalakrishnan, although both sets of data are not inconsistent with each other in the schools common to both samples.

Interpretation of the Results

The results of my fieldwork pertain to Shahpur and Tonk Khurd blocks during the winter 2001-02: Sharma and Gopalakrishnan are right to stress that they do not provide a basis for judgments on the general situation of Madhya Pradesh and its dynamics. The conclusions given in section VII are tentative, as I write in my

paper: “Further research is needed to assess the situation of rural Madhya Pradesh as a whole and its evolution, but a general interpretation of these partial results [...] is possible” (p 1868). Perhaps I should have laid more emphasis on the word ‘interpretation’, and the fact that the validity of the analysis in terms of ‘resources, incentives, values’ and ‘quality, equity, sustainability’ depends on how representative my results are – which I cannot assess.

My results do point, however, to issues that have perhaps not been given enough attention in previous studies, are likely to arise in other areas, and may have an impact on future evolutions of the school system. These questions to are, of course, unlikely to be new to the persons in charge of education policies in the GoMP, whose information system can provide quantitative answers to several of them. However, I am convinced that future, more ambitious research would benefit from assessing the level of generality of these issues and that this exercise would be useful for policy-makers.

(1) *School deficiencies*: The schools under study were to a widely varying extent affected by deficiencies which are known to be frequent in rural north India (section IV), and which GoMP policies, notably, those concerning the management of teachers and parents-teachers relations have tried to address. Are the policies successful in improving school functioning? In that case, observed deficiencies would be residual; otherwise, the older patterns of teacher behaviour and parents-teachers relations would keep prevailing. Are there systematic differences between schools and villages that could explain the variety of patterns of classroom activity, besides factors like the individual motivation of some teachers?

(2) *Multigrade teaching and the heterogeneity of pupil population*: Interviewed teachers usually mentioned multigrade teaching as one of their main difficulties and indeed using graded teaching methods in primary schools which have less than five teachers is not easy. Heterogeneity in pupils’ family background (including language), age and attendance is another difficulty. These issues apply to all EGS schools and many government schools across Madhya Pradesh, and their implications are worth investigating even where having small schools in terms of teaching positions is a necessity because of settlement patterns. How do teachers adapt to

this situation? How do pupils cope with the same teacher for several years? What are the consequences of the limited scope for interactions between teachers within a school and thus for informal training? Are the resources provided by the school administration, parents, and local institutions (e.g. training sessions and meeting in resource centres) enough to compensate this lack? How do the benefits of graded teaching methods making integration into the mainstream system easier and those of non-graded methods making teaching easier compare? Is the current balance in the trade-off between reducing distance to schools and reducing the incidence and extent of multigrade teaching optimal, and are other choices possible? In particular, in larger villages where there are government schools and one or more outer hamlets have EGS schools, would it be feasible to combine the two systems to have larger schools thus avoiding multigrade teaching?

(3) *Teachers' conception of their profession:* Interviewed teachers still consider the former status of assistant teachers as a reference, and usually hope to be regularised; in many cases, the idea of the teacher as an employee of the panchayat or the local 'community' did not seem to correspond to their wishes, and decentralised administrative institutions were said to matter more than political ones (those involving parents and panchayat members).

How general is this situation, and what could explain variations in the extent to which teachers consider themselves accountable to their pupils' parents? Do the interests of teachers as local residents and as teachers converge or conflict? Does this actually have consequences on the quantity and quality of teaching?

(4) *Decentralisation and democratisation of society:* Fieldwork results suggest that administrative structures like the resource centres are more involved than political ones in the management of schools and the involvement of parents is still limited. Meanwhile, in a context of scarce attractive employment opportunities for educated young men and women, locally powerful individuals and groups may try to take advantage of the creation of new teaching positions for themselves. More generally indeed, the democratic potential of decentralisation may take time to realise, and the 'capture' of the new institutions by existing local powers is frequent, and to some extent unavoidable. Is there capture of educational decentralisation in Madhya Pradesh, and to what extent? If yes, is it likely to be transitory or permanent? Are parents of deprived social backgrounds for whose children EGS schools were created taking control of these schools and/or how much time will it take for them to do so? Is the creation and management of schools becoming a core issue in local politics and policies?

(5) *Village school systems:* The situation of primary education in Shahpur block is fairly straightforward. Villages are indeed small and quite distant from one another, so that in most cases children would not have easy access to other primary schools than the EGS or government school which exists in their village. In this block, distance used to be a crucial issue, and the creation of new schools, albeit small, a pre-condition for quality and equity issues to be addressed. The situation in Tonk Khurd block is much more complex. The three villages visited have as many as eight, five and five primary schools, respectively, and the eight private schools among them represent a large proportion of enrolment. This is the reason why privatisation is mentioned in subsection 6.3 of my paper. I am aware that most EGS schools are located in areas comparable to Shahpur block rather than to Tonk Khurd block, but the situation in Tonk Khurd block raises questions that are likely to be relevant to the analysis of 'mainstream' areas where villages are larger, whether their outer hamlets have EGS schools or not.⁴ The fact that government schools are not co-educational, the creation of additional EGS schools and in particular the development of the private sector do lead to a kind of fragmentation of the supply of primary schools to these villages.

How is the resulting equilibrium of the school supply determined? How stable is

Domestic Product of States of India: 1960-61 to 2000-01

The EPW Research Foundation (EPWRF) has just released the above publication. The volume, a first of its kind, presents long 40-year series on state domestic product (SDP) and also some available data on state-level capital formation. It also contains detailed descriptions of the history of SDP estimation and the evolution of its methodology; four separate notes contributed by the senior officers of the Central Statistical Organisation (CSO) constitute a coveted feature of the volume.

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it, and are schools large enough? Do schools compete on quality, and how is the latter defined in that context? How are children distributed between schools, and what is the role of family background and inequality in village society in determining this distribution? Who gets involved in the decentralised management of EGS and government schools, and how do these fare in the presence of private schools?

EGS Concepts and GoMP Policies

In their sections 'Is Leclercq's refusal to understand the context of EGS unintentional or deliberate?' and 'What are the deficiencies of Leclercq's key concepts?', Sharma and Gopalakrishnan provide a stimulating discussion of three important concepts, namely, the education guarantee, the EGS school, and the community. I feel that there is not as much disagreement between us as they write regarding these concepts.

(1) *Nature of the education guarantee:* Sharma and Gopalakrishnan define the nature of the education guarantee in EGS: "The nature of guarantee was determined by the needs and resources of the context as a start-up point of a school not as its final full-fledged and fixed form. [...] The guarantee was of critical minimum inputs for starting a teaching-learning transaction." [...] The guarantee is of inputs that facilitate a teaching-learning process. The manner in which the facility created gets used determines quality. The guarantee can be of *provisioning*, the *manner* of use is what evolves slowly as a process as new systems develop, learn from their experience and seek to act on it" (their emphasis).

All the schools I visited – whether in February 2001 or during the main fieldwork in 2002 – had indeed been provided the minimum set of inputs determined by the RGSM (despite a few delays or omissions), and almost all of them had even obtained their own building. I thus concluded (section 4.6, p 1862) that "In that respect, children are offered an 'education guarantee'".

I also agree with Sharma and Gopalakrishnan when they write that "quality is a *relational process* and not a *sum of inputs*, specially so in education" (their emphasis). Indeed, I devoted most of my description of EGS and government primary schools in section 4 to classroom activities and their outcomes (subsections 4.2, 4.3 and 4.4) and started my description of available inputs with the

pedagogic structure of schools – the numbers of teaching positions and enrolled children. I understand that the quality of a newly created school cannot be immediately guaranteed and has to evolve with time, but I think that, several years after the beginning of EGS and other reforms, it is possible to start investigating the relations between teachers and pupils and educational outcomes. It is because I felt these were deficient that I wrote that the guarantee is 'incomplete'. EGS was certainly needed as a first step towards establishing a universal school system; I think the second step should be to focus on improving the quality of the interaction between teachers and pupils, at least in the villages which I studied. This concern is not specific to EGS schools. It also applies to government schools, and to many private schools as well.

(2) *Dynamics of EGS school:* Sharma and Gopalakrishnan stress the dynamic nature of EGS: "The idea behind EGS's guarantee was to start a school in a time-bound manner, so that that responsibility is not postponed in the name of more and more attributes all of which may take considerable time to accrue. [...] The final solution is more investment in education, not just for the primary level but for the whole school cycle". I guess everyone would agree on these principles, and recognise that the speed at which schools were created under EGS and the targeting of the scheme towards adivasis and dalits are remarkable. I never underplayed this, nor meant that the state would have 'renege'd' 'its responsibility for basic education through EGS. Indeed I wrote that "Access to education has improved through EGS, especially in Shahpur, and visited schools are functional" (subsection 4.6, p 1862).

The point that I wanted to make when writing that "EGS shalas are classes rather than schools" (subsection 4.1, p 1858) was simply that in villages which have other schools, such as those studied in Tonk Khurd block, the impact of the scheme is better understood in terms of the number of classes open, than in terms of the number of schools created – as government schools and private schools have heterogeneous enrolment levels that may be much higher or lower than those of EGS schools, and an increase in the number of schools does not inform on the increase in the total capacity of the school system. Besides, many of the EGS schools which I visited had only one teacher, and were single-class schools at the time of my visit, even

though they are supposed to evolve into larger institutions.

Indeed, Sharma and Gopalakrishnan underscore that "the guarantee did not mean that nothing more would accrue to the school after it", and the information they give on recent measures taken to strengthen EGS schools answers some of the concerns expressed in my paper. The increase in resources devoted to each school, the provision of larger buildings with toilets and drinking water, the recruitment of a second teacher in the larger schools and the greater emphasis laid on pre-service qualifications and in-service training all contribute to improving the potential for teaching in EGS schools, and also correspond to concerns expressed by the EGS 'guruji's' I interviewed. This does not detract from the validity of the concerns expressed in the paper, as these applied at the time of the fieldwork, and it remains to be investigated to which extent the measures announced are contributing to solve them. It is a matter of debate whether the direct impact of higher salaries on the motivation of guruji's will be as large as the negative impact of their low salaries used to be, but, besides political considerations, giving them a salary comparable to that of other 'local teachers' is welcome on equity grounds. Furthermore, teaching well in an EGS school is very much a full-time occupation, and I think it is preferable that guruji's do not need to "have a source of livelihood other than [their] occupation as a teacher".

By its very nature, my fieldwork could yield only static data, and makes it difficult to investigate dynamic issues precisely. This does not mean that I do not understand the dynamic dimension of policies like EGS. Indeed, EGS and government primary schools tend towards the same resource levels and management structure, something which I could observe on the field: "Similarities between visited EGS and government schools are more striking than dissimilarities. [...] Members of resource centres would usually remark that all schools have the same curriculum now [...] There would be no systematic difference" (section 4.5, p 1862). This is confirmed by exam results for the years 2001-02 and 2002-03. However, the current functioning of the EGS and government schools which I visited is deficient, and it is not clear that the increase in available inputs, even the increase in the number of teaching positions, will be enough for these deficiencies to be resolved. An important

dynamic issue is whether all public schools are converging towards the earlier, well-established functioning of government schools or whether the new paradigm envisaged by the GoMP, that will better guarantee school quality, will emerge on the field.

(3) *Concept of community*: Contrary to what Sharma and Gopalakrishnan suggest, the 'community' is not a 'key concept' in my paper. Indeed, the word 'community' appears only six times (introduction to section IV, subsections 4.1, 5.3, 6.2 and 6.3) and always between quotes, i.e., when referring to its use in RGSM documents. I am indeed reluctant to use this concept which is ubiquitous but rarely defined in the so-called 'development literature', and always seems to be referring to "something out there, a ready-made entity, a quantifiable unit", as Sharma and Gopalakrishnan write.

The conception underlying my paper is that there is no pre-existing 'community' in Indian villages as far as education is concerned; as elsewhere, indeed, access to literacy and education is a key source and outcome of social inequality and hierarchy. A conclusion of a host of studies of the deficiencies of government schools in north India is that the lack of collective action at the village level is a key factor. A 'community' has to be *created* if it is to get involved in school management, for example. I thus agree with Sharma and Gopalakrishnan that "A community comes into being in the pursuit of a common agenda. The postulate of consensual action evinced through a collective, however rudimentary, creates a community" and that 'signs of imperfect relationships do not deny the necessity and validity of structures that bring into relief both these tensions and need to act together.'

Now the question is how initiatives taken by a democratically elected government are understood by its citizens. The communities of interest which used to prevail in villages which had no school or whose schools were dysfunctional still exist; whether the creation of a school and therefore the emergence of a new community of interest, namely, parents of children enrolled in that school changes this power equation is a fundamental question. I understand that GoMP policies like the creation of Parents-Teachers Associations seek to facilitate the emergence of collective action. In the villages which I studied, I felt that collective action was yet to emerge – which does not mean this will

never happen, nor that it has not happened in other villages.

I think that research on the politics of access to education and how it is affected by decentralisation reforms seeking to empower parents and panchayats will lead to the elucidation of the relevance of the concept of 'community' and how 'communities' emerge when they do.

Conclusion

The aim of the paper was to provide a factual description of the schools studied in Shahpur and Tonk Khurd blocks, to understand the functioning of the school system in these villages, and to identify issues which may be of more general relevance, i.e., to Madhya Pradesh as a whole and in a dynamic perspective. At least two other studies of the same state reach strikingly similar conclusions, especially on relations between teachers and parents, although they consider government schools and not EGS ones: Rashmi Sharma's (1999) study of 'shiksha karmis' and the National Institute of Advanced Studies' (2002) report on Khategaon block of Dewas district [see also the papers on Madhya Pradesh in Govinda and Diwan, 2003; Govinda 2003; Noronha 2003 and Raina 2003].

I believe that investigations of the questions listed will be useful both for academic and policy purposes and larger-scale research be conducted.

Appendix

Facts

Identification of the village: I conducted fieldwork in four villages in Shahpur block of Betul district, which together had 3 EGS and one government school, and three villages in Tonk Khurd block in Dewas district, which together had three EGS schools, seven government primary schools (not co-educational but for one of them, hence their number) and eight private schools.

Sharma and Gopalakrishnan provide a list of nine villages, six in Shahpur block and three in Tonk Khurd block. In Shahpur block, there has been a confusion between the villages studied as part of the main fieldwork in January 2002, and a few of 14 villages (with 10 EGS schools and four government schools) which I had briefly visited in February 2001 as part of a preliminary trip, and described in a distinct short paper (Leclercq, forthcoming).

Among the eight visits mentioned in Sharma and Gopalakrishnan's note 2, 4 were done during that preliminary trip and were intentionally short, as my objective then was to visit a reasonable number of schools within a few days, so as to gain background knowledge; one was done during a preliminary trip to Tonk Khurd block, and the other three were much more detailed than Amita Sharma and R Gopalakrishnan suggest. Among the 10 villages they mentioned in their section 'What is wrong with Leclercq's facts?', five belong to my sample, three were visited only as part of the preliminary trip, and two were not visited as part of the detailed study of schools – they appear neither in Leclercq (forthcoming) nor in the paper published in *EPW*. This makes comparisons difficult; I am well aware that the difficulty originates in my refusal to reveal the village names, but I have no reason to change my position on this issue.

Textbooks: My facts are based on interviews with teachers. Teachers in Shahpur mentioned a delay in the delivery of all textbooks, two EGS teachers reported having received incomplete sets of textbooks, and one said she had not received enough books for all of her pupils; meanwhile, other teachers said they had received enough free textbooks for all their pupils, although in several cases parents said they had had to buy some and included the cost of textbooks in their estimates of the costs of schooling. Given that all pupils finally had textbooks, I accept that the cases I report may be exceptions due to the difficulty of distributing textbooks to so many schools.

Attendance: The attendance figures Sharma and Gopalakrishnan quote from my paper and the other ones they give are not comparable. While they give average attendance of all pupils over a month, I give in Tables 7 and 8 (and 12 and 13) the proportion of children whose individual attendance over a month or more was below or above a given threshold. Indeed, the same average attendance level can result from different distributions of absenteeism. For a teacher, having 80 per cent of pupils who come to school every day and 20 per cent who never come is not the same as having 50 per cent who come every day and 50 per cent who miss 40 per cent of school days, although aggregate attendance will be 80 per cent in both cases; these are the kind of questions I wanted to investigate. Now in schools visited in Shahpur block at least, there is a significant

proportion of children who attend less than 50 per cent of school days. Such irregular attendance cannot but affect achievement levels, and further adds to the heterogeneity of the pupil population teachers have to deal with. Allowing these children to remain enrolled is certainly a better policy than excluding them from the school system; how absenteeism can be reduced and whether teachers and parents are sufficiently aware of its consequences are relevant questions here.

It turns out that the monthly average attendance figures provided by Sharma and Gopalakrishnan are consistent with my own – both being drawn from the same registers – although I do not have figures for all months, as totals had sometimes not yet been computed by the teachers, and I did not have the time to compute them when this was the case.

Educational outcomes: The three EGS schools I studied in Shahpur block had opened in 1997, and their first batch of pupils had reached class 5 in 2001-02; a few pupils were also enrolled in class 5 in Tonk Khurd block, although the schools had opened only in 1998 or 1999.

I could test basic literacy and numeracy levels of pupils of class five (and sometimes other classes) in five of the six EGS schools and the two government schools studied in detail, as well as one more government school and two private schools. I tested the children myself and but cannot confirm the achievement levels I mention in my paper.

Exam results mentioned in subsection 4.5 do not concern an EGS school but the decades-old government primary school of Shahpur 2, and are drawn from its registers. Meanwhile, remarks about examinations in subsection 4.4 apply to Tonk Khurd block, as specified in the text. Examination results for the year 2001-02 were, of course, not available while I was doing my fieldwork in the same year. It is reassuring to see that the few children who have already reached grade 5 in EGS schools are doing quite well in board examinations, although, unfortunately, this does not invalidate the results of the basic tests which I did: The two evaluation methods are not the same.

Teachers' qualifications: What I wrote in subsection 4.5 (p 1861) is that assistant teachers in my sample 'have higher qualifications than gurujis', not by rule (section 2.2, p 1856: 'completed higher secondary schooling is required for all categories') but de facto. I admit that the

difference is not dramatic, as half of the eight gurujis appointed to the six schools I studied in detail had studied or were studying in college (at the BA or BEd level but for one of them, who had an MA). The primary school mentioned by Amita Sharma and R Gopalakrishnan is not part of my sample.

Teachers' local residence: Of the nine teachers appointed to the three EGS schools and the one government school studied in detail in Shahpur block (four gurujis, two shiksha karmis and three assistant teachers), one (the teacher of Shahpur 3) lives in the same village, and the others in neighbouring villages belonging to the same gram panchayat. Sharma and Gopalakrishnan are not referring to the same schools. The important sentence here anyway is: 'With one exception, this does not involve travelling long distances' (subsection 5.1, p 1862). Indeed, the distance from their place of residence to the school where they teach is not an issue for eight of these nine teachers.

Teachers' caste: Of the four gurujis whom I interviewed in Tonk Khurd block, one is an SC woman, one an OBC man, and two are rajput men. The point here is not that these figures might correspond to the general situation in the block or the district, but that in these schools, there is still social distance between the teachers and their pupils – only one teacher, the SC woman, lives in the SC settlement where she teaches; other teachers live in other parts of the villages. The same situation may prevail elsewhere, as according to the figures for the whole district of Dewas provided by Amita Sharma and R Gopalakrishnan, 59 per cent of teachers do not belong to SCs or STs, and caste does matter in local politics.

Teacher recruitment: Both the 'local community', who proposes suitable candidates, and a block-level board, who appoints the first of them, are involved in the recruitment of gurujis: "The local community proposes a panel of names for the guruji to the village panchayat along with the demand for school. The village panchayat forwards the demand and the proposed panel to the block panchayat. At the block level, the CEO Janpad scrutinises and verifies the proposal of the village panchayat within 10 days of receiving it and submits a report to the Block Panchayat Education Committee. The Block Panchayat Education Committee approves of the proposals if found valid and approves of the first candidate in the

community panel. In case the first name is not approved, then the reasons have to be recorded. Under no circumstances will a person other than that proposed by the community be appointed" [Sharma, undated: 29-30]. Contrary to what my paper may be mistaken to imply, the recruitment procedures for shiksha karmis and gurujis are distinct.

Teacher behaviour: The parts of my text quoted in Sharma and Gopalakrishnan's section 'Could there be a bias?' are based on direct observation of school activities. For example, it is a matter of fact that most teachers slap a few children everyday, and that teachers' attendance registers do not always give accurate information on teachers' attendance.⁵ I do not think there is anything 'native' (rather than universal) in these behaviours; indeed, although the context is very different, comparable behaviours happen in France, where teachers' absenteeism was a hot political issue in the late 1990s. Incidentally, the announcement of decentralisation measures in Spring 2003 sparked a conflict between teachers and the French government, bringing education back to the centre stage of French politics. **EPW**

Notes

- 1 Readers interested in a more detailed account of my field observations are referred to Leclercq (2002), a much longer version of the same study.
- 2 In particular, they have their reservations on the comparative statements between EGS and government primary schools.
- 3 The necessity to distinguish between inspection and research should have led me to refuse to write comments on school inspection registers, which are official documents not guest books. The first comment quoted by Amita Sharma and R Gopalakrishnan was written on February 23, 2001 (not 2000), during a *preliminary* trip to Shahpur block, which was short. This school is not part of the sample on which the paper published in *EPW* is based; it is probably comparable to the school of Shahpur3 which I describe as 'a good example of what a motivated guruji can achieve' (p 1860). The second comment was written during a *preliminary* trip to Tonk Khurd block, which was short as well. This first positive impression was qualified by further observation of the same school in February 2002. The third comment concerns the teacher who appeared to be the most committed of all those I interviewed. Further, when asked by a teacher to comment on her school, I found it indeed difficult to write everything I had in mind, as Amita Sharma and R Gopalakrishnan admit, and focused on the more positive aspects of the schools visited.
- 4 Even Shahpur and Bhoura, the two largest

villages in Shahpur block, have private schools.
5 As for the 'GoMP's position towards school quality', readers are referred to subsection 6.2 of my paper.

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