

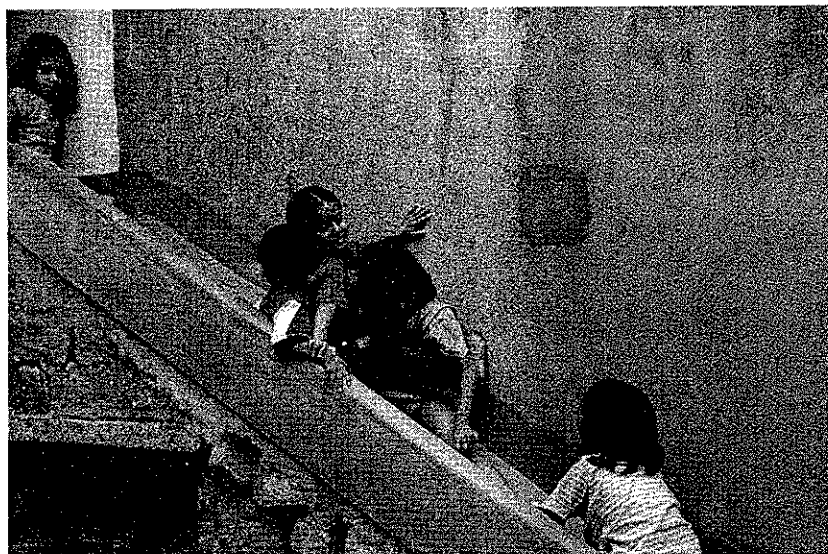
CFL Newsletter

Issue Nine
Spring 2003



There was an invitation tacked on the bulletin board. It was in the unmistakable handwriting of some-one under nine years old, and it announced that the Saralas and Bilwas were having a Tree house-warming. It also mentioned something about who was and who was not invited, but a number of us disregarded that bit and went over to the Junior school at the appointed time.

Arrows of crushed chalk powder on the ground directed us to their cool and shady backyard. A small delegation of munchkins invited us to be seated on the rocks or leafy ground beneath. Others handed us banana leaf plates, with tiny sugared tamarind balls and large chunks of ramphal fruit (plucked from trees around school). They gave us cool water to drink. We ate and made small talk, and then one of us asked if we could see the Tree house. 'Look up!' they yelled; and suddenly all decorum was flung to the four winds, as they clambered up the branches and wedged themselves into the small spaces of their new tree house. We oversized adults were permitted to climb into the house 'two at a time only!', and so we did.



Working at CFL

When CFL began in 1990, the staff body consisted of around ten adults, who, between them, did all the work necessary to keep the school running: teaching, driving the old school Ambassador, fabricating the geodesic domes for classrooms, doing secretarial work and cleaning.



The staff felt responsible for all aspects of the endeavour. We were clear that we would not look for people merely to fill slots. Rather, every new adult would come in to be a part of a community interested in questions of education relating to the wider issues that surround us. In any case, hiring employees for non-teaching duties was neither affordable nor necessary, given the relatively small size of the school.

In 1993, the school shifted to the four-acre Shibumi campus. Here, in



spite of a gradual increase in student strength and infrastructure, we found we could manage in the same style as before. The only difference was that we now needed a full-time watchman and a driver for our van; we could no longer make do with the trusty Ambassador!

The present campus at Varadenahalli represents a more dramatic shift in the scale of things. With twenty acres and eighty-five semi-residential individuals, the question was whether we could continue to do everything ourselves. At present, we are

managing the campus with seven full-time employees — three maintenance assistants, two kitchen assistants, a driver and an administrative assistant.

These non-teaching staff did not begin with any specific interest in education or children. But every effort is made to bring them into the community, with the result that they are as much a part of the place, the activities and the friendships as anyone else.

A new entrant

Any application from a person interested in joining CFL is given careful consideration. The school primarily looks for a compatibility in



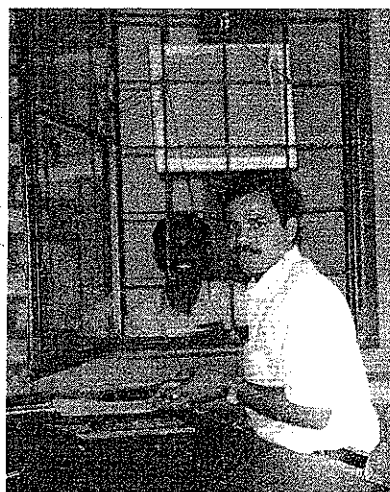
terms of educational philosophy and an openness towards fundamental questions about life and living.

What does this compatibility consist of? Our educational philosophy is not exclusively concerned with academic results or even vocational skills. Rather, we

would like to ask whether a school can be a place where teachers and children learn together about life and relationship. There is a deep psychological conditioning that constantly reinforces the idea that we are isolated individuals pursuing our self-interest. The central challenge of education, for us, is to question this conditioning as it manifests in our daily lives and in society as a

whole. If a potential staff member has these questions close to heart, we would invite him or her to spend a trial period of a term or a year at CFL.

One of the important questions that face us is the optimum number of full-time adult staff that the community can support. Given the non-hierarchical nature of the enterprise, there is eminent sense in keeping numbers small enough so that all of the staff can be a real,



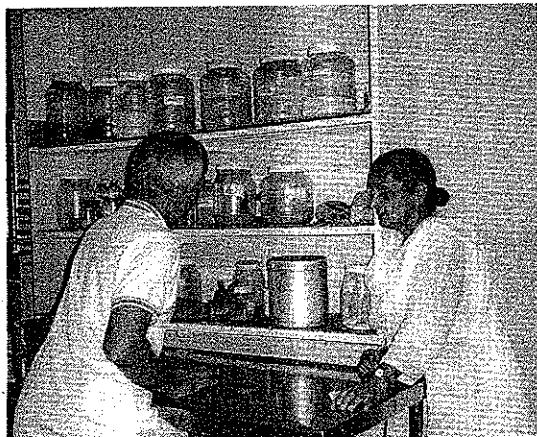
active part of the decision making process. Further, in a smaller group, the energy of a dialogue or discussion is more focussed. Naturally,

financial considerations also play an important part in limiting staff numbers. Given all these factors, we have come up with a tentative estimate of about twenty full-time adults as the optimum number.

The issue of new entrants raises some interesting challenges and questions. Are there any objective criteria by which to gauge the potential of new staff? Should CFL have some kind of "orientation programme" for them or would this run against the intent of the place? So far, such measures have not seemed necessary. But as the school moves on, these become pressing issues.

How our kitchen works

In the CFL kitchen we do as much of the work ourselves as we

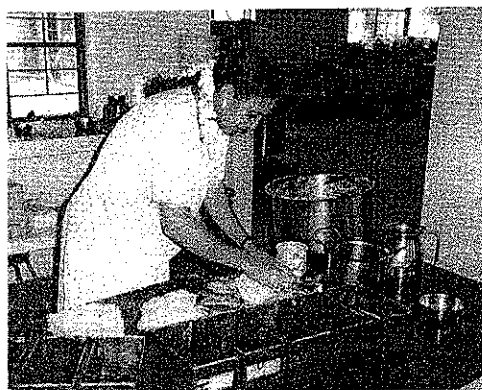


includes chopping vegetables, preparing meals and snacks, serving and doing all the cleaning up. Despite the hard work and long

possibly can. "We" includes the students, staff and a few volunteer parents (this year they are Ajopa, Sara, Bharathi, Vani and Nalini); the work

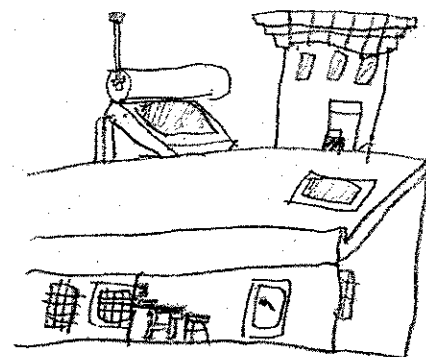
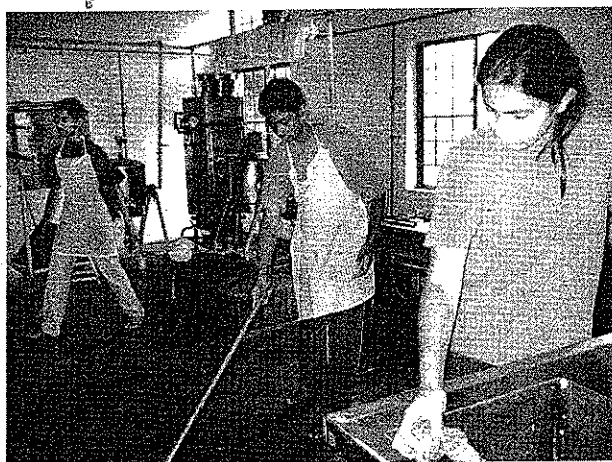
once we've heard a senior student say, "Well, thank God, if all else fails, I can always get a job making idlis on the roadside!"

The cuisine is generally Indian, with recipes from Kerala to Assam. But we've also enjoyed authentic Chinese or European food, thanks to the expertise of one or another volunteer cook. Our cooks themselves come in different flavours – relaxed, confident, nervous, spicy, overworked. We have maintained a standard of nutritious food by avoiding excesses of oil, salt, spice and sugar, and by including wherever possible unrefined/fresh foods.



If you're thinking that this must make for unexciting fare, you're wrong! Right from the start, CFL food has been tasty and healthy – yes, it's possible. Perhaps part of the secret lies in training the taste buds to enjoy and appreciate healthy food. To our surprise, we've noticed that even six year-olds come with conditioned tastes and strong likes and dislikes in the area of food. But we are all served a

little bit of everything, even if we don't like it, and wastage is not allowed. Happily, most of the children (and adults!) become less rigid about food preferences, and come to appreciate a wide variety of foods. hours involved, this decision has turned out to be for the best. The food has a variety and home-cooked flavour that would not otherwise be possible. Besides this, we've found that children are more appreciative of the effort involved in getting a meal on the table, and willingly spend the time and effort required to clean up after. Many have become quite skilled at various kitchen chores, from the simple to the fairly complex. More than



Afternoons at CFL

Every afternoon, the children break up into activity groups, depending on their interests. We have been able to offer a small number of these activities (pottery, art, sewing, land work, music and drama), from which each student can choose two. Perhaps it is this element of choice, occasionally tempered with suggestion, which contributes to the lively and involved atmosphere in each activity.



Sewing

Radhika has been teaching various aspects of sewing at school for years. Some time ago we acquired a sturdy foot-pedal sewing machine, with the result that children are learning tailoring as well as embroidery. They've made pencil and spectacle cases, and smart shoulder bags. It's especially encouraging to see so many boys in the sewing room. Within minutes, even the most notoriously restless and mischievous ones have settled down quite



amiably to their embroidery samplers. Their heads bent over the cloth, they discuss neatness, new stitches and colour schemes, and cluck approvingly over each other's work.

The Sanctuary

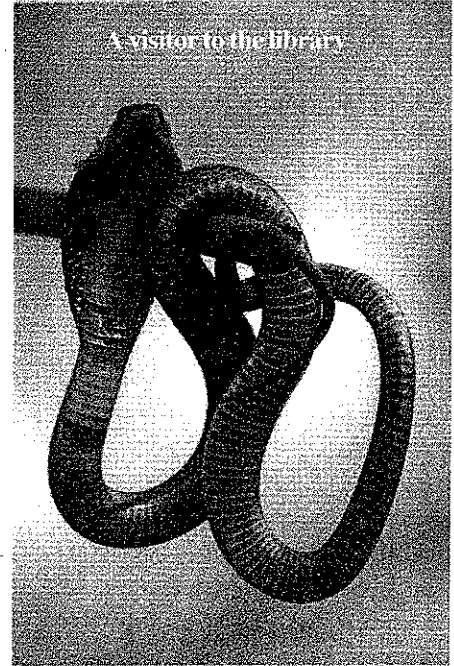
This activity has been conducted by senior students for over a year now, with occasional assistance from a

teacher. The lower half of our campus, an area of around ten acres, has been

left untouched so as to allow birds, insects, reptiles and small mammals to continue to inhabit the place. Not many feet walk on the narrow path that runs through it, and we are usually careful not to tramp noisily down there in any case. Wild indigenous plants also overrun the area, and all this forms an inexhaustible wealth of observable phenomena.

The Sanctuary activity group (thirteen students in the age group 9 to 17 yrs.) spends three to six hours a week studying various natural habitats and processes. They

A visitor to the library



make notes and sketches, sharing their findings with each other and with the rest of the school. Children have made detailed studies of spiders, ants, grasses, snakes, butterflies, wildflowers, birds, and sometimes supplement

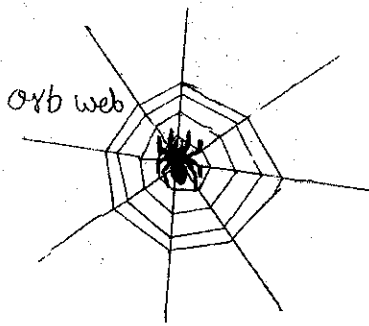


their observations with reference work in the library. They've gone around felling the eucalyptus trees on campus because these are destructive to the soil. They pluck the custard apples that grow wild and in great profusion around campus. Last term the group constructed a sturdy *machan*, a viewing place made of logs and strong rope, above the pond in the sanctuary.

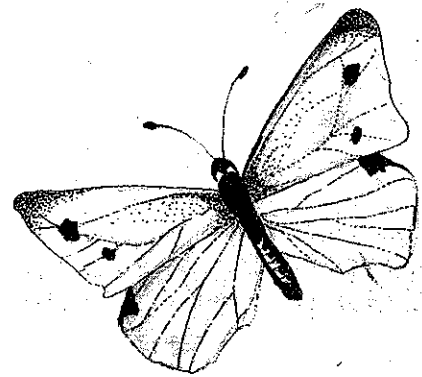
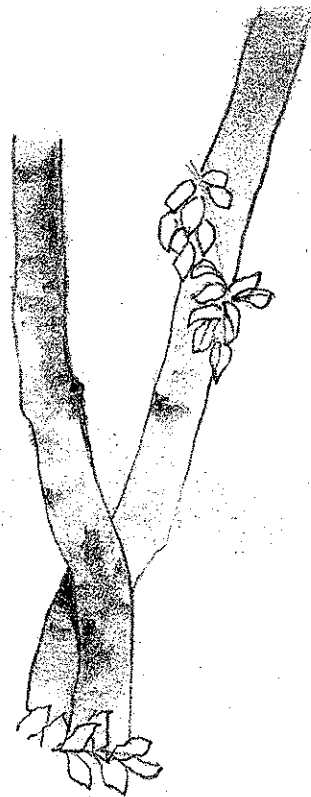
The youngest students (six to eight years old) have also been maintaining nature journals.

Paper-making

This was an activity initiated by two older girls. They began with paper pulp just to get a feel for the process and the basic equipment (deckle and mesh). This progressed to dying the paper, adding flowers, and trying several variations to get good quality paper. They moved a step ahead and tried to make paper with kitchen waste such as corn husks, cabbage and banana peels. The corn husk paper turned out very well, but some of the others were too weak, and stank besides! The experimentation continues.



We went to the dining aeriya and we saw some ball sort of flowers that were rare to me. They had poky sorts of thorns. There were three balls wick had flowers wick were orange. The flowers were like velvet and the leaves were very silky. Ther was a huge big leaf at the bottom of the stork. And the stork had lines.



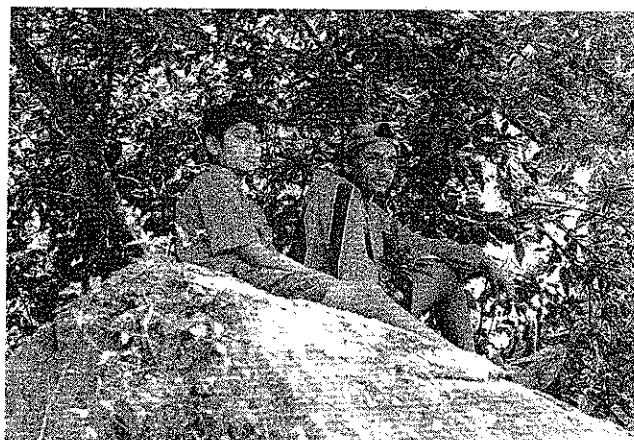
A red water lapwing, a little green bee eater. A quail was flying from the peanut patch and hurt itself. The common drongo, the leaf bird. A Brahmini kite was chasing a Black Winged kite. The coppersmith was calling. Watching a sunbird. An orange spotted dove, a blue faced Malkhoa. The red water lapwing calling at night.



A week of trekking

As a break from our regular October pattern, we did not make trips to different parts of India, but instead visited destinations closer home. We explored places around the large rock-hill Savandurga, and other hills just outside Bangalore. The students and teachers set off in four vertical groups on different day treks, returning by

had climbed a thousand steps on the outside of the hill to reach the same temple. It was unforgettable.



And yet, more striking than the actual adventure was the way the children helped each other, willingly and patiently, through the whole

experience. At times like these we are reminded of how important it is to us to keep CFL small. Excursions for which the whole school can travel in a couple of vans and sleep together in one large cave (as we did that week) bring about a special sense of connectedness among us all, and this to us is invaluable.

Our sports programme

The sporting scene at CFL continues to thrive, with table-tennis, football and volleyball taking centre stage as usual. We have the luxury of a large TT room that can accommodate not one but two tables comfortably. And recently we've gone a step further and installed beautiful lights in the room, so now we can play at any hour of the day or night. Very professional!

Of course, we're lucky to have an expert TT player among the staff to guide us through the ropes. The same goes for volleyball, where

students have practised hard to acquire the basic skills. These include not only the ability to set and smash but the ability to come up with complex numerical positional codes to bamboozle the opposition - and one's own team-mates.

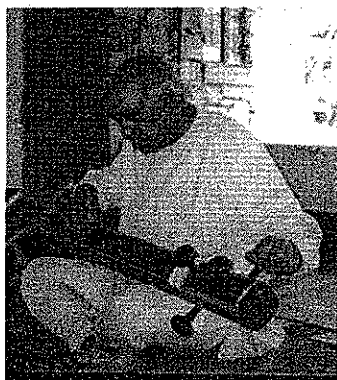
We have an exciting new acquisition - a cricket mat to go with a full cricket kit. There are some hard-bitten veterans as well as some timid Tamalas and Palashas battling it out on the wicket. Cricket is a fledgling sport at CFL at the moment, but it promises to become big very soon.

The major sporting event of the term was of course sports day, celebrated with much joy and élan. Students, staff, parents and guests participated in a glorious confusion of events: a TT tournament, volleyball and football matches, an obstacle course and more. Inevitably, everyone double-booked themselves for different games taking place at the same time. On a separate occasion, we visited the Valley School to play some matches, and they duly visited us too. We hope to keep this kind of interaction going, not only with Valley School but with other schools in Bangalore as well.

evening to exchange notes around a welcoming bonfire. On one day, all of us (60 students and the adults) went through a fairly gruelling two and a half hour walk, if it could be called that, through a complex and extraordinary system of caves in a hill. Squeezing ourselves through tight spots and tricky passages in almost total darkness really stretched us all to our physical limits. Every twenty minutes or so, we would emerge into small clear spaces, with chinks of blue sky showing above. Then we'd plunge back into the dark cool secret tunnel ways. We pushed on silently and steadily, and just when we were ready to drop with exhaustion, we felt cool water under our feet, and heard familiar but unexpected temple sounds. A few more steps and we were blinking in strong sunlight, right in the middle of a busy group of devotees! We had reached the temple at the very top of the hill from *within* - what a sight we must have presented to the others, who

Dhrupad workshop

Many of you know Baha-ud-din Dagar, who has been coming to Bangalore for the last few years to teach *dhrupad*, generally accepted to be the oldest form of North Indian classical music, to a group of interested staff and parents. In July this year, we were fortunate to have Baha-ud-din's uncle, Ustad Zia Farid-ud-din Dagar, stay on campus to conduct a *dhrupad* workshop. The Ustad represents the 19th unbroken generation of artists in the Dagar tradition, and it was with genuine excitement that we hosted him at CFL. We knew that we would come away with an increased appreciation of the subtlety of the



(that's right, *a.m.*) to have cold baths and prepare for the day's music. Singing went on from 4.00 a.m. to about 6.30 a.m.; the aim was to sing a single low note for most of this time, in order to

strengthen and stabilize the voice. Separate men's and women's sessions went on after breakfast and for several hours in the late afternoon and evening. At these times we learnt various *dhrupad* compositions in the ragas *Bhoop*,

Asavari, *Bhairav* and *Megh*.

The atmosphere in school was dramatically different during these five days. Many of us were living and breathing music and were happy to let all other activities fade into the background. For those of us not so intensely involved, the workshop was nevertheless a window into another world. It showed us what being in contact with a creative artist really meant.

Meetings on campus

For the past several years, CFL has been receiving donations and support from the Kumari L. A. Meera Memorial Trust based in Kerala. In the first week of the year 2003, the Varadenahalli campus was used to host the annual Kumari L A Meera Frontier Meeting in Physics. Around thirty research scientists and students from all over India attended the conference, and enjoyed their brief stay here.

Earlier in the year, the Alternative Schools Network held their annual

three-day meeting at CFL. They are an informal group of like-minded individuals active in the field of education, primarily in the southern states of India. This year, they discussed issues related to the teaching of history.

We were very pleased to offer the campus for these gatherings, and hope to have more such exchanges in the future.

Visitors and staff changes

The last year has seen its share of changes, comings and goings. Among the staff, Shashidhar Jagadeeshan is on a year's sabbatical. He is teaching Mathematics at Syracuse University in the U.S. Kabir Jaithirtha has left to work on a two-year project for the KFI based at the Valley School, Bangalore, to develop a teacher training programme for all the Krishnamurti Schools. Meena Pandey and Rajini Kaul, whom we introduced last year, have moved on, Rajini to Mumbai, and Meena to pursue her interests in Montessori training in Bangalore.

Venkatesh Onkar, a former student of CFL, joined us as a teacher colleague in June. He

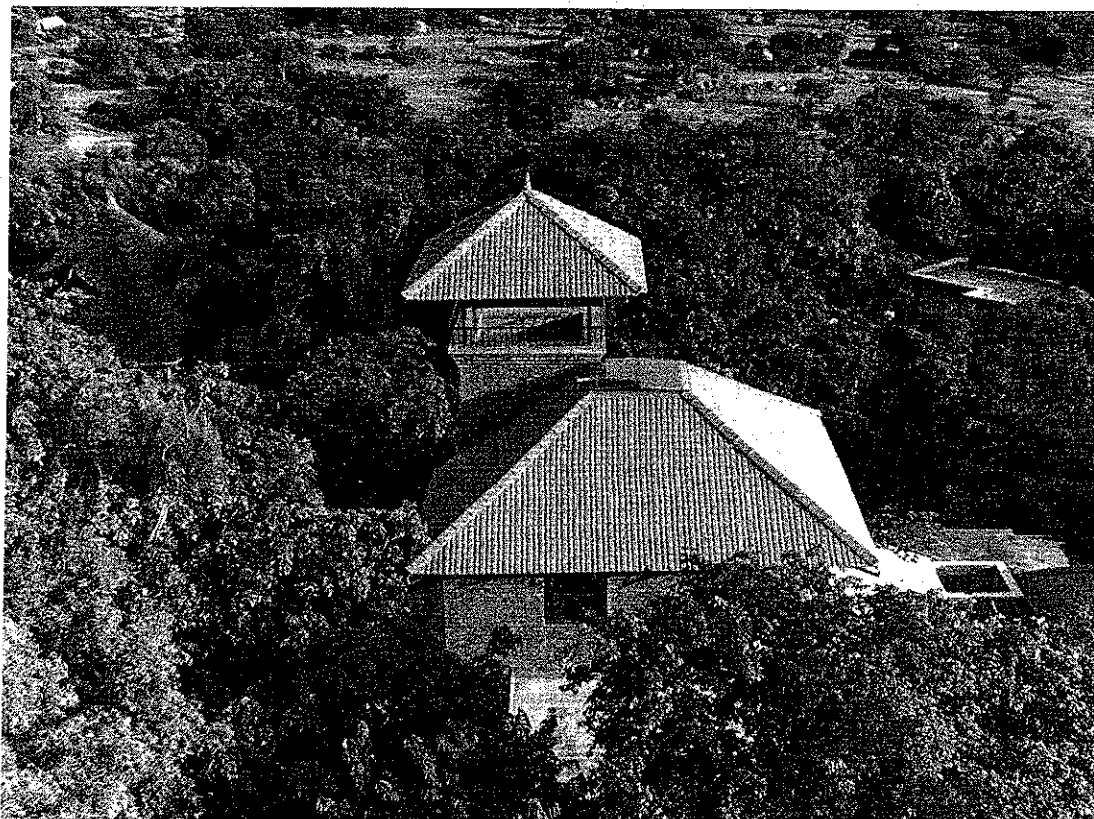


music, but we were unprepared for the sense of power and depth that the Ustad brought to teaching even a group of beginners.

The daily musical routine that he demanded of the participants (senior students and staff) echoed the routine established at the *dhrupad* gurukul in Mumbai, which is under the Ustad's guidance. Much to some of the students' and teachers' astonishment, we rose at 3.30 a.m.

Gerard at work





air just behind it. Many trees begin to sprout their new leaves, so that against the dull brown background there is also a bright fresh green.

In spite of the increasing heat, though, it is also the season of 'flus and colds. We speak to each other these days, it seems, in coughs and sneezes separated by sniffs. Never mind, soon it will be summer proper and we'll be feeling well enough to complain about the blazing sun!

finished his M.A. at Fordham University, New York, and here at CFL he has taken on the middle school English programme. Bulbul Hasan, a fresh graduate from a college in Bangalore, joined CFL in June for a year as a post-school student. She has spent time in several areas of CFL activity, from making idlis to teaching Saralas.

Stefi Barna, a member of the staff at Brockwood Park, spent a month at CFL early last year. A group of students from the Oak Grove School in California, and from Brockwood Park in the UK, visited. They lived for a few days with our students in the homes.

Gerard Bayle, a close friend of the school and a frequent visitor, came again. He worked with Gopal on a full version of the play *Copenhagen*. It was presented in Bangalore and in Rishi Valley and was very much appreciated. During

his stay, Gerard took a theatre workshop for students and teachers at CFL. The threesome of the cast of *Copenhagen* was completed by Isabell Brand. She is a trained teacher of Yoga and "Rolfing", an approach to body-work and awareness, which she introduced to the CFL staff. Jake Alexander and Dulcie, students of music and theatre from the UK, spent three weeks in school in November. They worked on drama and mask-and-puppet making with the middle and junior school.

You may have noticed that this year's newsletter has come out a few months later than usual. Instead of the 'Winter' issue, we've dated it 'Spring 2003'. But does Bangalore really have a spring? These days, it is winter at night and summer in the day, which one could argue averages out to spring! No rain-soaked spring, this, but instead a parched, brown season with the hot summer

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