



Seasons at school

New Year's Eve is quiet as usual on campus. In a week, the children will be back, and 60 pairs of juvenile feet will be humping up and down these quiet steps and paths. It's still chilly at night, the stars bright, clear pinpoint reminders that our world is too restricted to mundane human matters. In the daytime, especially under the sun, it's already getting quite hot. We're in winter's wake now, and summer is only a few weeks away.

Summer at school means dry ground, dry leaves, dry grass. The children have to be careful about snakes leaving their dry holes in search of water. Things don't look so lush and green any more, and you can see the curious shapes of the trees, every bare branch outlined. The land is beautiful in its brown sparseness. As summer progresses, the air begins to smell hot, heat rises from the ground and radiates from the rocks and envelopes you in a dry embrace. The younger ones seem not to have noticed that the temperature has just gone up 10 degrees in the sun. They run around in the blazing heat, mostly without caps, getting a dusty tan. In the hostels, children are beginning to drag their mattresses to

the terraces and roofs – it's much cooler outdoors at night. Little mango flies make their appearance now, the kind that will fly in and out your mouth as you speak. They make math problem solving just that little bit harder, especially when you're staring open mouthed into space waiting for a solution to strike you.

A few days before the term ends, in late March, the *honge* trees start sprouting new bright green leaves – then small lavender coloured flowers – and these start to fall in thick carpets on the ground below. The little children gather the flowers and shower them on each other, and anyone else they feel like. The neem trees are giving out new leaves too, and already the green is returning to campus. Red is provided by abundant, juicy watermelon – surely a stroke of genius by the god of seasonal fruits. Just when the juniors are showing the first signs of wilting, and we are beginning to think we can't take much more heat, it's time for school to close. The children and their bags are packed up, everyone waves to everyone else, and the vans take off in clouds of dry dust.

Who knows what happens to the

children during their vacation? Before we know it they're back in school, taller and broader and grown in many subtle ways. Perhaps they've traveled, spent time with cousins, learned new things – but one thing is certain. They did all their holiday homework in the last weekend before school reopened.

Very often, the first real monsoon rain falls in that first week of school. This is the moment we've all been waiting for. The children run madly around getting soaked, water dripping from their hair and clothes. This joy of getting completely wet through in the rain is so specially a child's trait – when we grow older we head for shelter, but at this age they head for the rain. As the weeks pass, the ground turns to slushy mud, and some paths become slippery. Now the juniors' pants have brown bottoms. With the rain the campus gets that washed look, clean green. And the sky, too, has never looked bluer than right after a good rain chased away by sunshine. Our youngest students are having a discussion on why the sky is blue. Actually it isn't a discussion; there aren't any competing theories. It's blue, they're all agreed, because

it reflects the blue of the sea. And why is the sky above our school blue when there isn't any sea around here, you ask? They give you a withering look – Puddles, of course. How could you be so silly?

The rocks, which you might have thought are the only things that remain pretty much the same through seasonal changes, are transformed by this rain. From a distance, their colour changes from matte grey to ethereal silver. The huge monolithic rock behind our campus begins to cry, white waterfalls of tears running down its broad silvery back. Now the children have to be careful of snakes leaving their flooded holes for safety! And the rain has brought mosquitoes in droves, as well as those short lived flying ants. One evening, we watched as a nest in the ground opened up to release these rain insects, one by one. Each would rise vertically into the air, its first flight into the world, joyous ascendance, but SNAP! a clever pair of mynahs criss-cross the air catching the unsuspecting flies about fifteen feet up in

the air as they emerge. Another night we all watched, fascinated, as a lucky frog sat by a light outside the dining hall, and ate and ate and ate the rain flies till it looked as if it might burst. We had to leave before it quit eating.

Monsoon means other things too, like sore throats and runny noses and chest congestion. Classes are punctuated by sneezes and coughs, frequently interrupted by nose blowing. Flu season is upon us, and hardly anyone escapes. For some, this one cold will accompany them right through the season, for others it is a quick and complete recovery. Monsoon also means frustration for the students and teachers who clean floors. Many students run around without any footwear, which means of course that when they enter a room, it's like they forgot to take off their shoes. Muddy tracks on a freshly mopped floor are the saddest sight, because you know that you'll never get to keep that floor clean till the rainy season is well and truly over.

And then it is – over. It doesn't go out as spectacularly as it came, there isn't a day you can later point to as the 'last rain' because one forgets things like that, but gradually it dawns on you that, yes, it's over. The days are getting shorter, and evening Quiet Times, when children would watch the sunset, are suddenly being spent in twilight or near darkness. In the misty mornings, nearly everyone is getting out of bed even before the sun, which can make you feel truly virtuous. The air is colder, we all pull out our sweaters – it's winter. Most indicative of all, classes and meals and chatting and tea drinking all gravitate toward every available patch of sun.

At night, the crescent moon is now oriented as a smile – the sky is an enormous inky black eyeless smiling face. A kind of benediction, when we stop long enough to receive it.

Our children and the real world

Is CFL an idealistic utopian bubble isolated from the values that the real world holds dear? Are our children too protected from harsh realities? This is not merely a rhetorical question [asked by some hypothetical "anxious parent"]; one of the key concerns of the adults in the place, both parents and teachers, is to question and challenge the terms of our engagement with the world, with social processes and with individuals. This questioning is one of the ways of assessing our own sense of responsibility for our environment and the social and political events that go on around us.

The posing of the question itself contains some problems. One of the problems we encounter is of course the term the "real world." Which real world do we mean? Primarily, perhaps, the real world of middle class Indian education, competition and achievement, the professional world that represents, to most of us, security, order, meaning. Or maybe it is the real [some might say real-er] world of poverty, deprivation, suffering that afflicts most of humanity today. Or we might mean the real world of our own emotions and their imperatives. Can we expect our children



to engage deeply with all of these complex and clashing realities? Or do we only want them to cope, take care of themselves and their interests while muddling through life the best they can?

Of course our children are protected—from brutality, from crushing judgement, from the vagaries of arbitrarily exercised power, from the extremes of the physical environment. Such a basic sense of "protection" is obviously the starting point of an education that has meaning for the

child as well as ourselves as adults. This of course is not to deny the efforts of those who wish to secure the well-being of the child at a much more basic level—that of everyday sustenance and health. But the scope of our visions and questions is very different, and addresses the most naked and powerful drives that the human psyche throws up—the drives of pleasure, pain, insecurity and fear. From these there is ultimately no protection.

With regard to the "real" world of pro-



fessional achievement, it is clear that this represents a very small fraction of human experience and expectation. To get caught up in fulfilling the dreams and visions of this reality seems, ultimately, somewhat narcissistic and self-indulgent. Our children need to acquire skills and an education appropriate to their interests and abilities, and no doubt these are conditioned by social background and expectations. However, we feel it is wise not to enter and feed this loop of achievement and success. We would like our children to be skeptical about the imperatives of this drive and the glittering careers and security it seems to promise—a glitter which is also tantalizingly out of reach and difficult to achieve.

It is perhaps more meaningful to engage with the second tier of what I had defined as possible "real" worlds: that of the apparent physical and social suffering around us. By no means do we want our community to be one of do-gooders. Rather, we would like our children to learn to look at the nature of the human crisis in a compassionate yet practical and clear way, while at the same time questioning their [and our] own lifestyles, assumptions

about the material world, about consumption, about social structures and the environment. This kind of awareness and involvement comes naturally when we experience different lifestyles and challenges than the ones we are familiar with. This is one of the purposes of the long excursions that the children go on every year. It has also been the drive behind the senior school programme, with the view towards a socially driven learning.

In the midst of the planning and structuring, however, we do not lose sight of the fact that the most basic learning that can happen is regarding ourselves, our conditioning, the conflicts in our minds and the social expression they have, the nature of our hopes, desires, ambitions and frustrations, and about what it means to live a fundamentally deep and peaceful life. Learning, in other words, about our own emotional imperatives.

In a recent dialogue class, a child asked, with some frustration, what is this learning and why should I do it? This of course is the problem: learning about oneself cannot be defined, for as subjects of our own enquiry we are forever in flux,

and there is no end to learning. The other difficulty is that such learning, by its nature, cannot have a goal. The moment we point ourselves towards a goal, we are no longer interested in this mysterious self-enquiry, but rather in what we can achieve and become.

It is important to recognize that if such a process of what we call "learning" is initiated, the question of protection from the real world assumes a different significance. The question becomes: how can I respond to situations in an intelligent manner? The situation may be one of intense hostility or conflict, corruption or dilemma, but can I respond to it with integrity while learning about my own imperatives, the way I take sides, the assumptions that I make, the stereotypes and emotions that fill my brain? If this kind of learning can take place, then we are perhaps learning to meet the real challenges of life rather than defining our boundaries vis-à-vis "real" and "protected" environments.

The craft mela

The primary aim of any mela in CFL has always been to bring a sense of joy, colour and fun to any theme we explore. The possibilities in a mela on craft were thus enormous, and our problem was a serious embarrassment of riches. Every aspect of our social and cultural lives is enriched by craftwork in some fashion or the other, and it was a pleasure to make our own sudden discoveries regarding some previously neglected lamp or keychain tucked away in the corner of our homes; or to watch a complex narrative emerging from some simple and beautiful paper puppets. It was watching the familiar becoming transformed into the magical before our eyes.

In the fun of this engagement, several other questions began to emerge. For instance, what is the difference between "craft" and "art?" Can't objects of utility

have a beauty quite apart from their function? Or intimately integrated with their function? Another fascinating question was regarding the human "instinct" for aesthetics and decoration, design and function, from the beginnings of human civilization to the present day. At quite another level, we asked: who does craftwork? What are the social arrangements that make craft possible? Children began to wonder about the differing role of men and women in the world of craft. We began to think about the markets for craftwork, and the livelihoods of the people so intensely engaged with different crafts. All these different dimensions began to blend and play together in our minds and though all of them may not have had concrete expression, they still added to the richness of the experience.

Given the richness of the theme, we

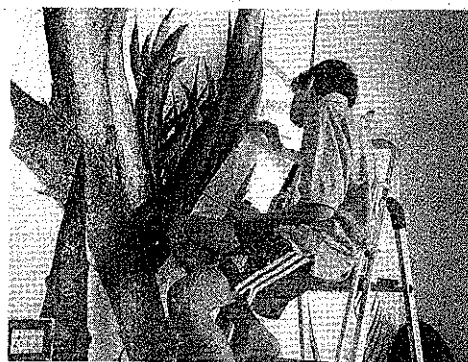
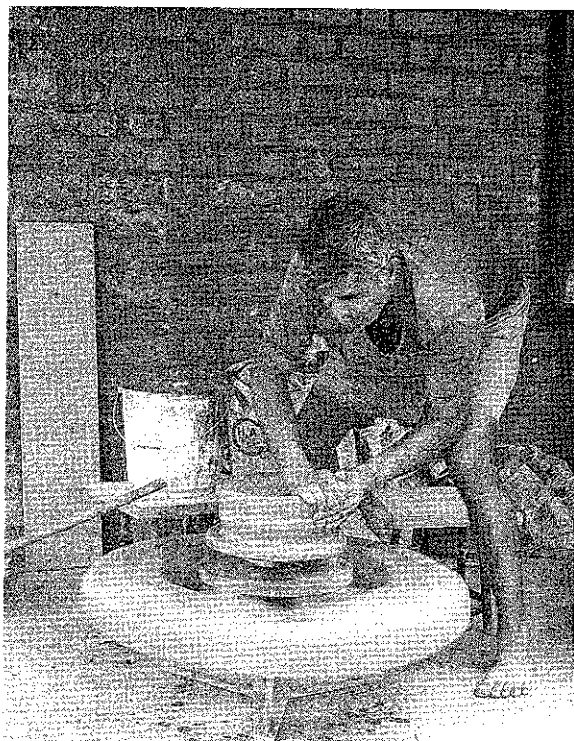
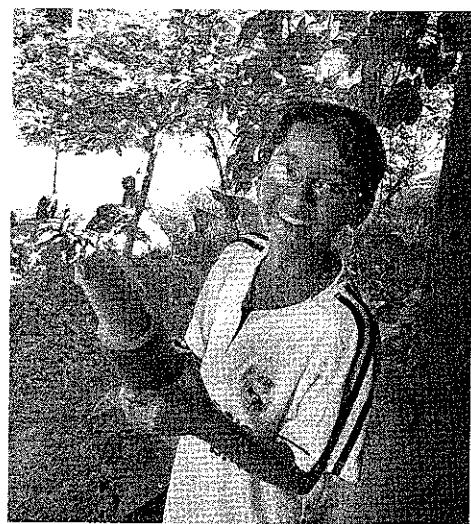
tried as far as possible to organize our year around the world of craft. Many of the year's excursions, for example, involved visiting places known for interesting or significant work to do with weaving, printing and other processes. Children and teachers got the chance to either participate in or observe these processes very intensively, and their learning was correspondingly rich. We also got various artists to give presentations in school about the nature of their work; these included architects, potters, weavers and others. These presentations were a window into the immensely complex and fascinating worlds that the artists participated in. Finally, we had many local craftspeople come and hold workshops in the school on pottery, basket weaving, quilt making and other local techniques. These really gave us the chance to get a feel of various skills in a live and intimate fashion.

The buildup to the mela was hard work. All classes came to a crashing halt as the frenetic preparations for the mela built up over the last two weeks. The big day on which all our work was displayed was packed with fun and activity, and all our friends had the chance to participate in some of our creative craft activities. And finally, as always, when the stalls and shows were taken down and everyone breathed a sigh of contentment and relief, the sneaky feeling arose once more—*wouldn't it be fun to start all over again...*





Centre For Learning would like to thank all the individuals—parents, friends, well-wishers—who helped to make the mela a meaningful and successful experience. It would not have been possible to construct such a rich and multi-dimensional process without the unstinting generosity of all these individuals. The craftspeople from the area around Magadi gave us valuable insights into their world through the workshops they conducted. We would also particularly like to acknowledge the support we received from Chitra, Roshan and Shashidhara, and to thank them for their role in the mela.



Fundraising programme

Over the past year, we have initiated a fundraising programme in order to raise money for a building programme (a middle school building, a guest house and staff accommodation), and for a scholarship fund. We are happy to report that the fundraising endeavour has been successful, thanks to the generosity of several individuals and organizations.

The building programme involves creating two structures: a middle school building and teacher/guest accommodation. Initial plans for constructing these have begun as this newsletter goes to press.

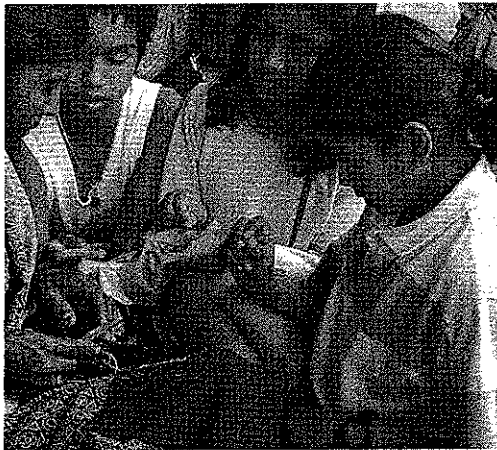
Souvenir release

To celebrate 15 years of education at CFL, and as part of our fund-raising endeavour, we released a CD of songs and a souvenir on 28th August 2005 at our campus.

The occasion was marked by a talk, "Preparing the Soil," given by Mr Arvind Gupta, a well known science educator and toy maker, currently at the Children's Science Centre, IUCAA, Pune. Mr Gupta's energy and inventiveness were evident as he spoke with passion of his experiments with science education and his work in spreading educational material.

The souvenir, which was released by Mr Arvind Gupta, contained articles by CFL staff and students on many aspects of education in general and of the life and history of CFL. The CD, released by Mrs Kamala Subramaniam, was a compilation of many of the songs we have sung in assembly over the years—folk music from all parts of the country, and chants.

It was a lively and memorable morning, with children, parents, staff and other invited guests gathering with a lot of energy, colour and goodwill.



Excursions

In the December excursions, most groups were closely involved with craft work of some sort in keeping with the theme of the mela. Some groups visited an NGO, Charka, close to Shimoga in Karnataka, where they did block printing and dyeing. Children also visited Sandur Kushala Kala Kendra in Bellary district where they worked with Lambadi women on embroidery, dyeing and cane work. Another place they visited was the Zero Waste Centre in Kovalam, Kerala, where they worked with paper, cloth and coconut shells. Seniors went north to Shantiniketan, where they did some preliminary work with batik; embroidery, tribal seed jewelry, weaving and pottery. In Orissa they learnt appliqué work and patachitra (traditional painting).

Many individuals helped us with accommodation and resources during

these excursions, and we would like to thank all our well-wishers who enabled our excursions to be smooth and enjoyable. Thanks also to the parent volunteers who accompanied the teachers and gave valuable support.

Smt Lalith Rao

Smt Lalith J. Rao, a Hindustani vocalist from the *Agra Atrauli gharana*, gave a concert at school on December 5th. Before the evening concert, she spent an hour explaining to the students and teachers the basic idea of a *raga*. The concept of a *raga*, so central to Indian classical music, can be extremely complex and subtle. It must have been a real challenge for Lalithji to plan a talk on it for such a mixed audience (6 to 66 year olds!). She rose to the occasion, beginning with the evolution of the voice box in humans, exploring the question 'what is a musical sound?', and demonstrating the 12 notes of the Indian scale. We were invited to think of music as a form of communication, closer to speech than to art, which was a very interesting idea. She distinguished folk from classical music and explained that the latter requires years of training to learn the necessary 'grammar'. A *raga*, we saw, is at its simplest a set of chosen notes sung in a particular way. This forms a frame, within which improvisation must take place. This she demonstrated both

visually (using dots on the blackboard, and joining them in various ways) and in song. We also learned that there are several sets of *ragas* sharing the same notes, yet clearly distinguished by their treatment. She told us something we are not likely to learn anywhere else – that 'Baa Baa Black Sheep' is sung in the *Bilawal raga*.

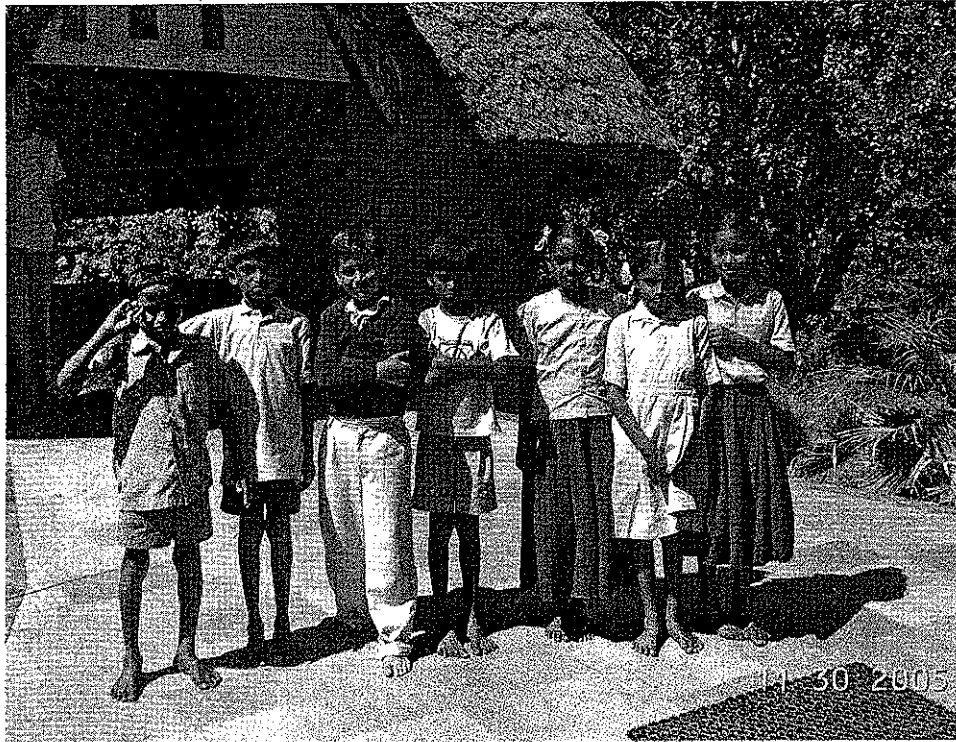
Although she has not spoken to a school audience before, the CFL teachers would like to certify that she would make an excellent teacher.

The evening concert was equally enjoyable. We heard *raags Yaman, Khamaj and Bhairavi*. The delicious food, perfect weather, good music and appreciative audience made for an unforgettable day.



English and Portuguese music

Ruth and Kaman, parents of the school, organized a musical evening in the school in March in which they [and a group of friends] performed Elizabethan and Portuguese music. We would like to thank them all for coming all the way to our campus with their fragile instruments [which included a Portuguese guitar] and for performing such lively and entertaining music.



Varadenahalli interaction

This year's interaction with the children of the village primary school included two activities. One was a series of basic, 'survival' mathematics classes with the fourth and fifth standard children, covering topics such as length, weight, money and time. Two of our senior students were fully involved in developing and teaching each class, using simple materials and hands-on activities. The course has been documented and can now be repeated and refined over the years. For the craft mela, CFL's Palasha 2s taught embroidery to the second and third standard children from the village school. A lot of enjoyable learning happened between the threading and the knotting. On Mela day, the Varadenahalli children had a stall of their own to display their work and interact with the visiting crowds, which they handled quite admirably!

Senior school programme: our vision

Young adults from the age 16 -19 seem ideally poised for many aspects of learning. They are ready to think about many of the questions that have been raised during the earlier part of their schooling and are also better able to articulate their responses. This is the age where academic rigour can happen and they can begin to explore their interests keeping future vocations in mind. Emotionally they are ready to respond to the various crises facing the world: environmental, social and personal. Physically they are capable of many challenges.

In response to these observations, we plan to revert to a three year senior school programme starting from June 2007 [The most recent batch went through a two year programme]. In the meantime students will have a 2.5 year senior school programme starting in Jan and ending in June (this has started with the existing batches and will also apply to current Parijathas [10th grade] who appear for their IGCSE in Nov 2006).



The programme will emphasize:
physical fitness and flexibility
rigour and excellence in academics
ecological awareness and literacy
social awareness and literacy
dialogue and discussion based on responses to these issues
discovering and pursuing one's interests

One idea is to split the 36 week year into 10+2+10+2+10+2 weeks. The 10 week block will have a rigorous programme covering academics, physical activities and working with one's hands housed in school (much like the current programme) and the 2 week slots will be used to explore intensively issues relating to the environment, social sensibility and individual interests.

People

Keerthi Mukunda and Michael Little [and their son Jalen] have returned to the USA after a two-year stint at the residential campus. We wish them joy in their life and work in Amherst, Massachusetts.

Krishna and Gita have had twins, Aditya and Amrita, who have just celebrated their first birthday on campus.

We would like to welcome Manjunath back to CFL. Over the years he has worked with the school in many areas, and in the coming year he will be involved with administrative work, the sports programme, and his ever-popular story telling.

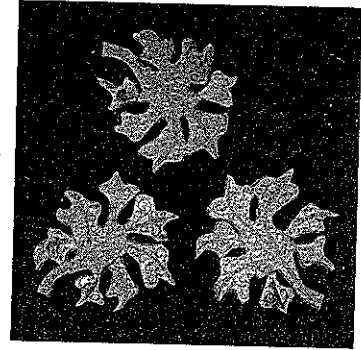
As usual, many parents—far too many to individually mention—have been volunteering in many areas in the school: the kitchen, the library, academics. We would like to warmly thank them for their very valuable involvement with our work.

Conference

Centre For Learning is hosting a conference, **Educating for a Sane Society**, in late December 2006.

We view the conference as a means of bringing concerned individuals in both formal and alternative educational contexts together in order to question the frameworks of education as they are commonly conceived, in the light of what it means to create a "sane" society. We hope that the different participants in the conference—speakers, workshop presenters—will bring differing but powerful visions of what is educationally possible in our complex world. We are inviting both individuals and organizations to share their efforts in understanding the relevant issues. We are also inviting young people who are interested in education to show them that this is an exciting and rewarding field of work and a possible career.

CFL's own educational experience of the past 15 years has yielded several insights into meaningful and creative learning environments and curriculums. Further, our experiment with CFL as a totally teacher-run school has taught us a lot about consensual decision making and relating in non-hierarchical structures and contexts, and we hope to share all these experiences and insights at the conference.



Centre For Learning is looking for committed individuals who feel that education is the key to the regeneration of self and society.

We are looking for people interested in working in the following areas:

Middle School: We are looking for people with skills in Science, Mathematics and English to work with children between the ages of 10 and 14.

Senior School: We need people competent in teaching Environmental and Life Sciences at the Senior School level.

While the above are the specific skill sets we need at the moment, we are primarily seeking individuals interested in finding out what it means to live "sanely in an insane world."

Contact details:

Please send a brief résumé and a detailed statement of purpose describing why you would like to work with us to our mailing address (see right):

or as an e-mail attachment to info@cfl.in (sub: Teacher Application).

Donor Information: CFL is a registered charitable society. Donations to CFL are exempt from income tax in India to the extent provided for under Section 80G of the Income Tax Act, 1961. If you wish to avail tax exemption in the USA, please email us for details.

Can you help us with our mailing list? If you would like to receive more copies of this newsletter or have friends who would be interested, please write to us.

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