



Teachers, Learners

As many of our readers might know, CFL is looking for young people interested in being teachers in an environment committed to learning and self enquiry. As we thought about what kind of person we would like to invite to be a part of the school, we as educators also began to wonder about our own educational paths and journeys: how, in short, we became teachers ourselves. From there, it was a short step to describing our own current perceptions of our work. What follows is one such account written to give a feel for what makes the adults here tick.

I am a school teacher. My workplace is a twenty-four acre campus outside Bangalore. I have no boss, no minions; instead, my colleagues and I work on an equal footing. This is not as simple as it sounds; even without a structural hierarchy, the dynamics of power and dependency often take hold. It takes a great investment of energy to keep this a truly cooperative workplace. My current clients include young adults grappling with their potential identities, budding adolescents with a whole new range of interests and precocious nine-year-olds who are good at looking innocent. I enjoy conveying

my passion for my subjects to my energetic students. I don't indulge in comparative evaluation, and I don't punish them (though I am often sorely tempted!). They challenge me daily about my habits, intellect and appearance. In turn, I encourage them to make the school their own, creating an atmosphere of responsibility alongside playfulness. This is a space that allows, even demands, scepticism, a questioning of external systems and structures as well as of one's own beliefs and identities.

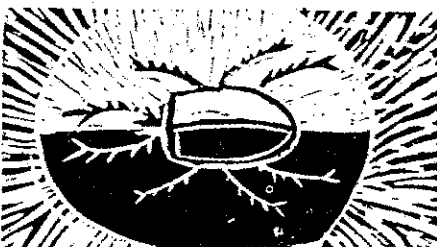
How did I get here? When I completed my graduate studies, I naturally had several options.

One was to live the life of an academic: financially secure, moving up the ladder, seeking recognition from society at large. Or I could find a job that marketed my skills the best. But I had always been interested in learning about the 'meta' questions of life: the nature of conflict and of the self; the shifting nature of consciousness, the relationship between individual and society. I wondered if my chosen vocation would have a connection to my questions, or whether these latter would slowly become peripheral to my life. The most burning questions become 'youthful idealism' as we grow older. I realised



then that I wanted to work with these issues concretely, in real situations, making them a part of my life and work.

A creative school environment does offer this potential learning to a teacher. Such a setting can focus the emotional and social self in sharp and unrelenting relief. Adults are willing to play by the unwritten rules of safe relationship—"let's not rock the boat"—but children are not. They are frank and unpredictable, and do not fit into convenient roles. They force you to re-examine your rusty rules and your safe conventions. However, traditional schools are so tightly structured that they allow too little chaos to spill over and learn from. The school I would join had to be one that paid close attention



to the balance between freedom and discipline for students and teachers.

I could describe myself as working at a small, English medium school catering to urban middle class children, for less than a market salary! So why am I here, instead of at a school for the underprivileged, or at a school that would pay me handsomely for educating the super elite? One important answer is that I want to be part of a broader definition of education, not one that merely guarantees a 'well-rounded individual', but one that brings in my 'meta' questions in such a way that I can grow and the students in my care will benefit.

The school, as most readers might know, is run by a group of twelve to fifteen individuals who make all decisions collectively. Without the spurious comfort of a headmaster or management committee to lean on, there is no sense of "us" versus "them"; there is no one to complain to or about. In my areas of responsibility (teaching, mentoring and administration) I enjoy a great deal of autonomy; at the same time, I am naturally answerable to my colleagues. This is an area that can generate powerful forces of conflict as well as cooperation. The idea is not to overcome others' points of view by argument and persuasion, but to listen to each other until a common decision emerges—or we drop from exhaustion. This is the process of dialogue that carries us in unpredictable yet meaningful directions and feeds the activity of the school.

The curriculum at CFL in-

cludes of course an emphasis on the outdoors, on hands-on activity, intimacy with nature and a process- and skill-based approach to learning. In this way, we are superficially similar to many progressive schools. But there is a crucial difference. Our curriculum is not an end in itself; rather it is a patient examination of all aspects of our lives that we encounter. If that sounds too grand a statement, let me give an example. When a student here studies mathematics and learns to appreciate the beauty of the subject, she is also learning about fear, motivation, resistance, pride, disappointment and the entire spectrum of possible human responses to any situation. She is learning the difference between confusion and clarity, and also how her images of herself and others influence her perceptions. These complexities are usually pushed under the carpet in order that children may single-mindedly pursue the narrow goals that we as adults set for them. But these very complexities are the stuff of our daily lives, whether we recognise it or not, and cannot be ignored; in fact this patient investigation is vital, we feel, for the well-being of the individual and the wider group.

If this sounds so far like an idyll, it is most emphatically not. There are, of course, inner (and outer) struggles and doubts. When I look around at my peers, I see them achieving success and recognition, and I am not immune to feelings of envy and insecurity. This, actually, is the whole point; I don't believe that mere



Events and Programmes

Yakshagana

In January 2008, a *yakshagana* team, *Tharikita Kala Kammata*, performed at our campus. The theme they played out was *madhura manikyā*, a story about a girl breaking out of traditional roles and conventions. The evening was beautiful and moving and was enjoyed by the CFL community as well as Varadenahalli village.

Varadenahalli Interaction

This year, the staff and children of CFL have had, as always, close interactions with some groups from the Varadenahalli school. CFL students have worked with the children from the village on topics as varied as math (through games and puzzles), English, time and art. Needless to say, the interaction was both fun and meaningful.



external circumstances, the daily familiar structure of work and relationship, in an enquiring environment or otherwise, can shield us from pain and everyday *angst*.

So: what is life like here in the present? Given the challenges of the enterprise, it is difficult to sum everything up in a simple package. Life here is as life ev-

erywhere: by turn unpredictable, gut-churning, simple, exhilarating. With the vital difference that here is a possibility to turn the movement of living on its own head and question its patterns, both individual and social, in a deep way. To those contemplating such a journey, I would simply say: come on in. The water is fine.

Tamala trip to Wayanad

The Tamala group (11-12 year olds) visited the Gurukula Botanical Sanctuary in January for a period of 10 days. It was the first trip for them as a group and it was a valuable and intense time; they had many questions about the natural world and our relationship with it as well as our place in it. Swimming in the river, long silent walks in the forest, sketching, coffee picking, working at their books and on astronomy, stargazing and singing on the tower: they left the Sanctuary already eager for their next visit!

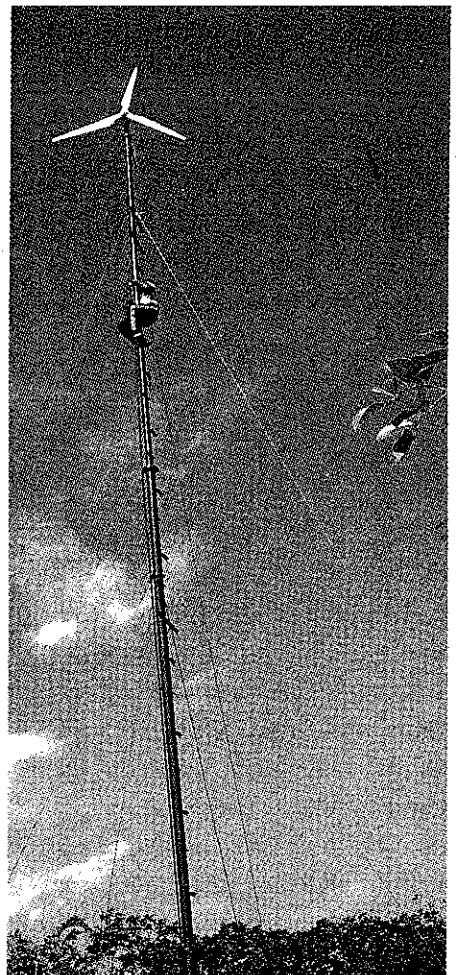
Alternative Energy

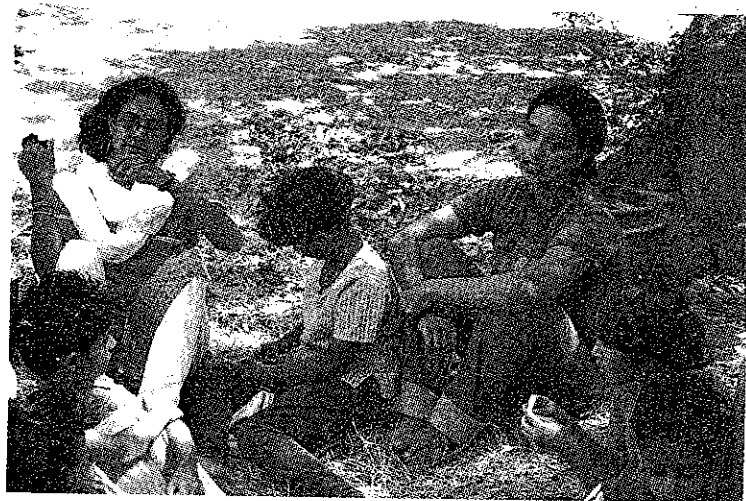
For many years, we have been concerned about our energy consumption patterns, and both adults and children have thought hard about energy use in various contexts. As a result, several concrete changes have come about on campus.

In March 2008, CFL commissioned an alternative energy system for our computers and for lighting the hostels. We have installed a hybrid solar-wind power system for the computers (yes, there is actually a *windmill* on campus!); lighting for the hostels will be supplied by a 2 kilowatt solar power pack. The sourcing and

installation were done with the help of the Mitra Foundation. We would like to thank Adarsh, Shailendra and Seema for all their help and support.

The installation of the windmill was a particularly exciting process, with the whole school pulling hard to erect the pole! The job was ultimately done with a lot of sweat and ingenuity!





Astronomy Mela 2007

Varadenahalli offers us brilliant winter skies. The night air rings like crystal and the stars are cold, sharp and close. After dinner, groups of children and adults gather to watch and learn about the cosmos.

Almost directly overhead is the giant square of Pegasus the winged horse, and nearby floats the Andromeda galaxy, home to billions of stars, visible as a faint blurred patch in our binoculars. To the north-east lies Perseus, and to our excitement we spot Comet Holmes, a gassy blob, in the swirl of his cloak. Orion rises majestically in the East; the Orion Nebula is visible as a green wisp in his dagger. As he rises, Cygnus the Swan sets in the west, with its brightest star, Deneb, 60,000 times brighter than our Sun, dipping through the mists of the horizon.

Our *mela* this year was on astronomy. As usual, we undertook many different kinds of activities: experimentation, mapping, navigation, art, craft and drama. And, of course, watching the night sky. Here is a sampling of the various

kinds of projects we were involved in.

As a combined group the juniors performed a play with the planets as the main characters; they wrote the script themselves and worked hard designing the sets and costumes! Smaller groups learnt about the size and scale of the solar system ("if the Sun were a pumpkin, the Earth would be a mustard seed 50 metres away"); they did spray paintings of the nebulae and the big bang; some were involved with recreating the lunar surface using a whole room and plaster-of-paris! They invented their own myths and legends about the constellations and illustrated them; some worked with painting, others with collages, still others with tie and dye... the cup runneth over...!

The Tamalas (11 and 12 year-olds) did many projects over the year. They used the position of the sun to create detailed maps of the campus; the moon figured in their plans as well, as they made precise lunar calendars and worked hard on understanding (and explaining) the phases of the moon. They thoroughly

familiarised themselves with the night sky and the abstract concepts used in navigating it, and gave a guided tour of the universe to all night visitors in the final term.

The Palashas and Ketakis (13 and 14 year-olds) worked together for this year's *mela*. They began by performing various interesting experiments with very simple equipment in order to estimate the distance of the sun, the rate of rotation of the earth, the amount of energy reaching our planet from the sun and so on. All of their results, whether accurate or not, were very interesting and gave scope for much further thought and investigation! They then moved on to working in our assembly hall, treating it as a kind of celestial sphere; they painted detailed representations of the zodiac constellations on the walls, while positioning a model (revolving) earth at the centre.

The seniors too split into different groups and worked on different projects. Some studied spectroscopy and what the light from distant stars tells us of their chemical composition; others



made a model celestial sphere and used their knowledge of electronic circuits to plot the courses of the planets across the

heavens; many were absorbed by their roles in an adaptation of Bertolt Brecht's *Galileo* (performed

with the kind assistance of Gerard Bayle). Artwork, chartwork...the seniors had their hands full.

Our *mela* would not have been possible without the help of many individuals both within and outside the CFL community.

We thank Dr Prajval Shastri, Prof Biman Nath, Prof G Srinivasan and Anil Ananthaswamy for coming to CFL and talking to us on a wide range of topics.

Our thanks to the Indian Institute of Astrophysics for giving us the opportunity to visit and attend lectures.

Roshan Sahi once again helped us with art work and glazing for the *mela*; we are grateful for his assistance.

We would particularly like to thank Shashidhara Adapa and his team for setting up the stage on the day of the *mela* in threatening weather conditions!

General Studies Programme

The senior students have, as in past years, been working intensively on their General Studies Programme, which looks at themes and topics in an interdisciplinary manner as well as integrating them with personal study, observation and hands-on work.

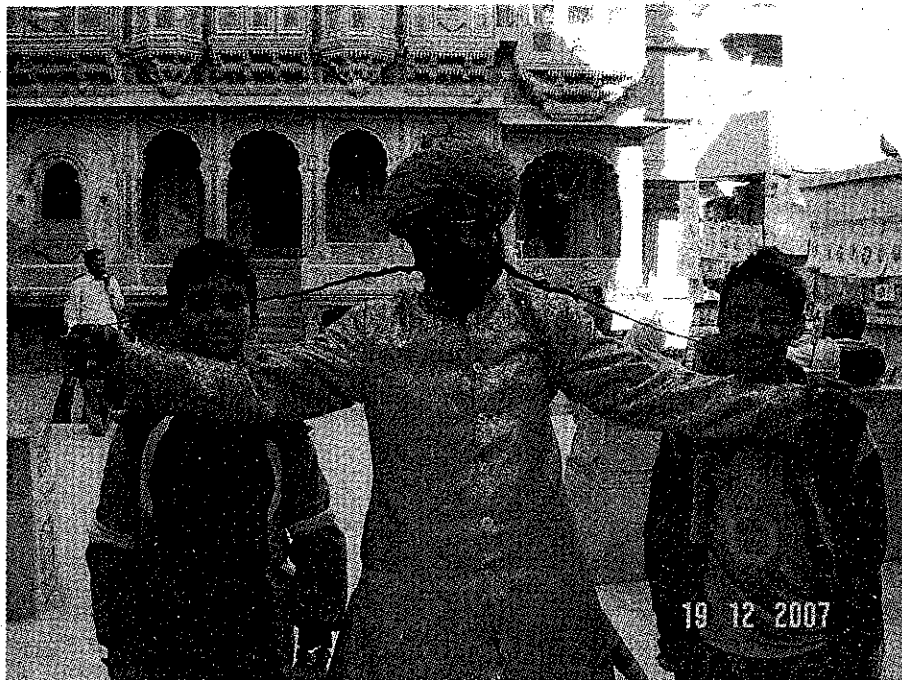
During the first term, the General Studies Programme revolved around the overarching theme of Human Migration. Students encountered a range of material in the form of documentaries, oral histories, short stories and narratives through which they derived an understanding of the roots, nature and consequences of different forms of migration. Dr Uma Ramakrishnan, from NCBS, gave a talk at the school on early human migration.

Amongst the themes studied were: early human migration, the Indo-Pak Partition, cross-border migration in South Asia, new immigrants in the US, economic migration in India and displacement due to large development projects.

Students also met migrant workers in South Bangalore, listening to and learning from their life stories.

In the second term, the senior school continued to deepen their understanding of various nature and campus-related studies they had undertaken the past year. These included observations of butterflies, wildflowers, birds and ants. The students also documented their studies in detail.

Dr Ravi Chellam, an authority on Asiatic lions and the current director of ATREE (Ashoka Trust



for Research in Ecology and the Environment) spent a day in the school and gave a fascinating talk on his work and experiences in the field of conservation.

In the final term, the students from the senior school worked on studying energy usage on campus and on exploring alternative energy sources. They focused on consumption in three key areas: the kitchen, transport and electricity in the hostels. One group worked on making bio-diesel using waste cooking oil and *bonge* oil.

Excursions

As in previous years, all the children of the school travelled far and wide to many parts of the country and gathered many rich experiences and insights.

The Sarlas visited BR Hills and Honnemardu near Sagar in the Western Ghats. At BR Hills, the children encountered, in the tribal people of the area, a wholly different culture and way

of life. At Honnemardu the highlights were of course water related activities and sports. The Bilvas visited the Chikmagalur area and stayed at a coffee estate. They watched the picking of coffee beans and the manner in which the beans are processed; they also visited a *sufi* shrine, did plenty of trekking in the area and went on a forest safari.

The Tamalas and Palashas travelled as a group to Rajasthan and visited many of the old cities: Jaipur, Bikaner, Pokhran, Jaisalmer and Jodhpur. They explored old forts, palaces and museums, sampled the excellent food, went on camel rides and experienced the glorious peace of the desert.

The Ketakis' trip took them to the north-east: to Nameri National Park where they went on some forest treks; to Kaziranga, where they experienced elephant rides and jeep rides, and watched rhinos and buffalo; to Shillong, where they visited the Don

Bosco Museum for Indigenous Tribes, and Cherrapunji, where they met a real live king!

The Parijatas and Mallikas visited the Narmada valley in Madhya Pradesh and the Chambal Wildlife Sanctuary in Uttar Pradesh as well as the Sanchi Stupa near Bhopal.

They found interacting directly with the children living in the Narmada valley and staying

under their roofs a very powerful experience. In the words of one of the students, the trip was a "great combination of social, historical and environmental experiences."

The seniors (Champakas and Sevantikas) travelled in Arunachal Pradesh and Assam. After an 18 hour delay due to a train accident, they reached the Eagle Nest Sanctuary; trekking in the flame-

red forests they saw and heard many unusual bird species (and encountered freezing temperatures!). In Kaziranga the high point was a sighting of the hoolock gibbon, the only Indian ape species. Of course, they went on elephant rides through the grass and fog and mist and had a thoroughly fun time.

Comings and goings

Lalitha Manjunath will be on a well-deserved sabbatical this year! She plans to work on pottery and to be involved with other activities in educational contexts. She will be sorely missed!

Nishwath has been working with the junior and middle school this past year and will be moving on to other educational ventures from the coming year. We wish her all the best in her endeavours.

Boopathy joined us at the beginning of the last year but unfortunately personal circumstances have obliged him to return to Coimbatore.

Krishna Kumar was with CFL for six months in 2007-2008, helping in the area of mathematics. He has now returned to Patna, his hometown.

Roshni was involved with many groups in school, working mainly on art and pottery. She has left to continue her studies in art.

This year *Gerard Bayle* was with us for an extended stay in early 2008. As usual he interacted with several groups and worked on drama-related activities and skills. He was also instrumental in directing Brecht's *The Life of Galileo* (a

Many individuals—parents, friends, well-wishers—have helped in innumerable ways to make our excursions more meaningful and comfortable. Some have offered accommodation; others have helped take care of student groups; still others have provided contacts and vital information. Our thanks to all of them.



production by the seniors that was eventually enacted during the *mela*, and in directing a Kannada play for the middle school. We thank Gerard and hope that he will visit us again next year.

Dr Venkatesh conducted an intensive workshop on electronics for the Ketakis in the first term. We thank him for his involvement.

In 2007-08, we again had some students from Brockwood Park stay with us. Olivia and Julia were with us from September to December 2007, studying some courses (art, literature, psychology) and plunging into the life of the school. It was fun having them on campus.

We would like to welcome some new staff this year! Shabari Rao, a former student, will be on campus as a part time teacher working with the junior school and teaching dance. Welcome back! Thejaswi Shivanand has joined as a full time staff member. His areas of interest are biology, environmental studies and land work (and Indian classical music). He will be working with the Ketakis (14 year-olds) and the seniors. Rina D'Souza has a background in Montessori training, and she will be engaging with the juniors.

Many parents have volunteered in crucial areas in the school, particularly in the kitchen as well as in conducting workshops. We would like to thank them for their energy and support. We particularly thank Pooja for her help with the stage backdrop on the *mela* day.

We are looking for committed individuals who feel that education is the key to the regeneration of self and society. Our areas of need are:

Senior School: Our Senior School programme combines the rigour of studying various fields in depth with the leisure to explore and reflect upon important questions. We need individuals competent in teaching Mathematics, Chemistry and Economics at the Senior School level.

Kitchen: Our vegetarian kitchen is unusual because it is run by teachers, parent volunteers, students and a minimal staff. We need a person who has a flair for managing such a kitchen and looking after its overall needs.

Library: The CFL library is special in being an open library, with an emphasis on users being responsible for resources. The rules and conventions of library interaction evolve out of a sense of co-operation, consideration and care for the community as a whole. We are looking for a librarian interested in this approach.

Sports: At CFL, all students play games irrespective of their prowess at it. Our attempt is to convey the joy of physical movement and the special skills involved in each game. We need a person to run such a programme.

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 resume and a detailed statement of purpose describing why you would like to work with us to the mailing address or e-mail id at the bottom of the page.

Campus: Village Varadenahalli, Magadi Taluk,
Ramnagara District, India.
Phone: +91.80.774 8048 / 774 8049

Mailing Address:
545, Banagiri Nagar,
Banashankari 3rd Stage,
Bangalore 560085, India
Email: info@cfl.in
Website: www.cfl.in

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