



The coronavirus has created a unique situation in human consciousness. Everybody's life is in turmoil to varying degrees. Some have fallen ill, some have lost livelihoods, some have lost loved ones. Yet the greatest challenge it has thrown up for all of us is a tremendous uncertainty. We don't know how long it's going to be with us and what it's going to do to us. It has disoriented our lives and completely disrupted our ability to forecast the future.

Before the pandemic struck, even though life was always fundamentally uncertain, we could still make pictures of the future, make plans, and enact them to the extent that our ability, luck and social status allowed. We would complain and blame, and constantly refine our pictures, never asking questions of the bases of our pictures, or indeed of the picture-making habit itself!

Krishnamurti spoke throughout his life about how the unique human ability to make such detailed pictures and enact them in space and time is leading us astray. He pointed out that thought, which essentially maps reality, and is rooted in time and in the past, is inadequate in meeting life. A brain which is not caught up in the illusory yet tantalizing world of images and fantasies acts from a different ground: a ground

of what he termed compassion and intelligence.

Life is always in flux, dynamic, and cannot be captured by thought. We may not argue with this intellectually, and yet the inadequacy of thought doesn't seem to hit us—until now, perhaps! Thought seems to provide us enough of a sense of certainty to manage daily life. We are deeply uncomfortable functioning from a space of completely not knowing, and the virus is bringing us face to face with this discomfort. Every day, what we think we 'know' is being overturned.

We may be telling ourselves that uncertainty will last only so long, and we will grit our teeth and hold out. Yes, the invention of a vaccine, based on scientific thought and knowledge, will indeed bail us out of the pandemic. Post-pandemic, life may appear to be 'back to normal', predictable. Many thinkers and writers are urging us not to return to a pre-virus status quo, in terms of lifestyle, economic activity and narrow-mindedness. We would ask, if we have glimpsed that life is fundamentally uncertain, can we abandon our deep faith in picture-making?

*The fact is that life is like the river: endlessly moving on, ever seeking, exploring, pushing, overflowing its banks, penetrating*



*every crevice with its water. But you see, the mind won't allow that to happen to itself. The mind sees that it is dangerous, risky to live in a state of impermanency, insecurity, so it builds a wall around itself...*

*J Krishnamurti, Think on These Things, Ch 17*

This extended pause has urged us to wake up in another sense: to re-explore the meaning of education and schooling.

A few good writers are commenting these days on how inadequate online and remote teaching is, since the whole point of teaching is relating, face to face. They emphasize the importance of the whole body experience. Still others say that there are more important things we should be talking about than the dry topics of a syllabus. For example, we should be talking with students about suffering, the political and social scene, instead of algebra and other academic concepts.

At CFL, both these dimensions have always been at the heart of our education. In fact we have gone a step further for 30 years, to say that at the heart of our education is an understanding of ourselves, because external situations and challenges have their roots in each of our psyches. Going along with this intent, we have kept certain features central to our education: small numbers, affectionate non-authoritarian relationships, dialogue, teachers-as-learners (when it comes to understanding oneself), and contact with the natural world.

Being a school, we teach a regular school curriculum, which we approach with both excitement and responsibility. Some features—a skills- and thinking-based curriculum rather than a content-based one; only languages, math and projects till the 9th standard; a bare minimum of scheduled classes for 'subjects'—ensure time for plenty of other activities, including contact with nature and work with our hands.

And now we come to the current situation. We cannot open school and have our usual full lives together. But maybe we can continue the learning and the conversations; at least we'll try. So each school has to make this decision, of whether and how to engage with their students during the next few months.

To us, our curricular goals, both prior to and during this particular crisis, remain valuable and central. Human suffering is not new, and the quest to understand it and our complex minds remains as vital as ever.

Below is an extract from *The Coronation*, by Charles Eisenstein.

*For most of my life, I have had the feeling that humanity was nearing a crossroads. Always, the crisis, the collapse, the break was imminent, just around the bend, but it didn't come and it didn't come. Imagine walking a road, and up ahead you see it, you see the crossroads. It's just over the hill, around the bend, past the woods. Cresting the hill, you see you were mistaken, it was a mirage, it was farther away than you thought. You keep walking. Sometimes it comes into view, sometimes it disappears from sight and it seems like this road goes on forever. Maybe there isn't a crossroads. No, there it is again! Always it is almost here. Never is it here.*

*Now, all of a sudden, we go around a bend and here it is. We stop, hardly able to believe that now it is happening, hardly able to believe, after years of confinement to the road of our predecessors, that now we finally have a choice. We are right to stop, stunned at the newness of our situation. Because of the hundred paths that radiate out in front of us, some lead in the same direction we've already been headed. Some lead to hell on earth. And some lead to a world more healed and more beautiful than we ever dared believe to be possible.*





## Understanding learning difficulties

Over the years, we teachers at CFL have been educating ourselves about 'learning difficulties' that students have, primarily academic. Discussions amongst ourselves, sharing relevant readings, attending workshops, and having contact with professionals in this field have enabled a growing awareness and learning in this realm.

As we all know, the phrase 'learning difficulty' (not to mention the word 'academic!') is fraught with the possibility of misunderstanding. We could say that there is no such thing as a learning difficulty; rather, schools pose peculiar demands for particular children. However, it is noticeable that the process of learning, say, in math or language, is not easy for some students. Without judgement and without stigma, we aim to meet the child's way of grasping concepts, and scaffolding their learning so they can enjoy and apply certain skills. Indeed, any time we have approached remedial educators over the years, it has been to assist us in our daily teaching rather than for categorization purposes or only for assessments.

In our daily work with children, we generally have a sense of how they respond to our teaching. Here are some questions we ask ourselves: Is the child understanding and learning? Is she able to engage adequately with the educational material? Are there gaps and if so, what are they? Is there avoidance in certain learning areas or a sign of anxiety? How confident is she? Is the child making relevant connections between lessons? In looking at questions such as these, we sometimes sense a struggle in certain children related to learning in specific areas. These struggles seem to have an emotional content too for the child and both need our careful attention.

In daily learning, a child also seems aware of not just her skills and abilities but also the lack of them. She is aware that she finds a particular task easy, tiring or difficult and also that the same task may be experienced by her peers as quite the opposite. This is important for an adult to keep in mind while we find ways of reaching out. Trying to assuage emotions by explaining that all of us are good at some things and bad at some others does little to help the child with what she is experiencing. Feelings associated with self-worth seem to work in subtle and complex ways. While we can perhaps never be sure of what exactly children feel comforted by, it is affection for the children and the knowledge of what defi-



nitely causes harm that seems to guide our responses to all children in general. In this sense, we do not have a special pool of strategies that we adhere to in our response to children who struggle with academics.

We see that children have a sense of each other's difficulties and they can be sensitive and supportive towards one another. Daily interactions between them lends innumerable opportunities to learn about one another and discover each others' interests, abilities and skills.

The difficulties a child experiences become apparent to us not just in comparison with other children in a group. Teachers do have broad learning goals for each age group and a teacher is likely to think 'by now the child should be able to...' These goals are based more or less on what a child at a particular age is capable of learning (in our context at least) and they can also be somewhat flexible. There are definitely times when a teacher would wait patiently, almost certain that in a few months to a year, the very concept that a child finds challenging now will be grasped then. It can be a pointer to a learning issue when the same difficulty persists even after sufficient learning support has been extended.

For example, when we notice a child of eight read haltingly, a conversation with parents helps us find out when she was introduced to letters and sounds, if she has learnt to blend sounds in words and if she is familiar with reading phonetic and non-phonetic words. If there has been a delay in this exposure, or if the child has until now had very little exposure to print, her lack of reading fluency may be attributed to these circumstances. In such a case, both parents and teachers help the child build basic skills for a few months. In



the course of these months, one generally expects a growth in learning; the child, having learnt to associate sounds with letters, will learn to blend sounds and read words, will figure out that some words don't have to be broken up into sound units but rather just read as a whole. She will use the knowledge acquired so far to read sentences and comprehend. What is taught is being assimilated and built on, for further learning. However, it is possible that such an assimilation is not happening, even after a teacher has tried different approaches. The adult may also notice that the child finds it very challenging to recall what was taught, even though it may have been taught recently. The child may find herself facing similar challenges repeatedly.

Other than these 'academic' hurdles, some children find it very difficult to sit at a task for a stretch of time. Their attention wavers and they may be restless or may even sit quietly, finding themselves having done little work by the end of the class. Again, this may not be an occasional occurrence, but rather, a pattern when the child engages in certain areas of work. Learning is therefore compromised when the child finds it hard to pay attention when a lesson is being taught or when work is assigned. There are also children for whom the act of writing can be burdensome. It tires them to write, and an adult can observe how effortful it is for them as soon as they put pen to paper.

Since children are quite aware of their areas of struggle, they may avoid parts of academic work that bring their difficulty to view or that cause fatigue and a drain in energy. Adults working with children need to be alert to these lest it is attributed to 'laziness' or simply not 'putting her mind to it'.

Inconsistent responses by the child, who may unexpectedly recall what has been taught, or will even indicate a clear understanding of a concept, makes assessment a complex problem. We now know that this inconsistency needs further observation and consideration. When parents or teachers work with the child one-on-one, we see that a sudden spike

in the learning curve is possible. We observe this routinely when there are concerted efforts made by parents and teachers to give individual attention to the child.

Adults working with children need to be alert and mindful of how children engage in the learning environment. Certain physiological conditions that children have will show in class and these can hinder learning too: errors in written work, for example, while copying from the board, may be due to an eyesight issue which needs to be addressed at the earliest. These are common in children and need to be discerned by the adult as they are no cause for concern. Children experience confusions as they learn, but as they grapple with these by questioning and clarifying, it seems to pave the way for understanding.

When a teacher picks up signs of learning issues in literacy or numeracy, discussions follow with other teachers who engage with the group of children. Conversations amongst the teachers helps us think together, often giving us some clarity and direction. These discussions also throw light on whether the child faces similar difficulties across learning areas. Our attempt is to ensure that the child's needs are met without delay.

In order for all adults to be on board with a plan of what will follow, open communication between parents and teachers is important. An assessment of the child's abilities by a specialist is most often the next step. This can sometimes be a difficult decision for a parent, given the fear of labelling the child or the impact of the assessment experience or having to explain to the child the process of the assessment and why she needs it. Usually, the specialist is someone familiar with the way our school functions and with whose approach we are comfortable. We know that children benefit from early interventions in the case of learning issues, and we therefore try to arrive at a time frame for the next course of action.

An assessment by a specialist tells us if there is indeed a difficulty and details the nature of it, also making specific recommendations to the adults working with the child. A



dedicated time for remedial work is often recommended. This one-on-one remedial work is done by adults trained in the field, and the process requires all concerned adults to be in regular communication with one another. The programme is reviewed periodically to see how the child is benefitting. It goes without saying that children are different in their responses to additional academic demands and drill work. While some can put in hours of hard work, a few others will work with anyone but their parents, and there are still those who can find the quickest way to escape tasks!

We have seen that with support given to children at the right time, skills improve, and thereby, confidence too. However, children who find certain aspects of learning challenging most likely continue to meet the same challenges as they grow up. The support therefore from the family and school environments is that of understanding their struggles and patiently meeting their needs.

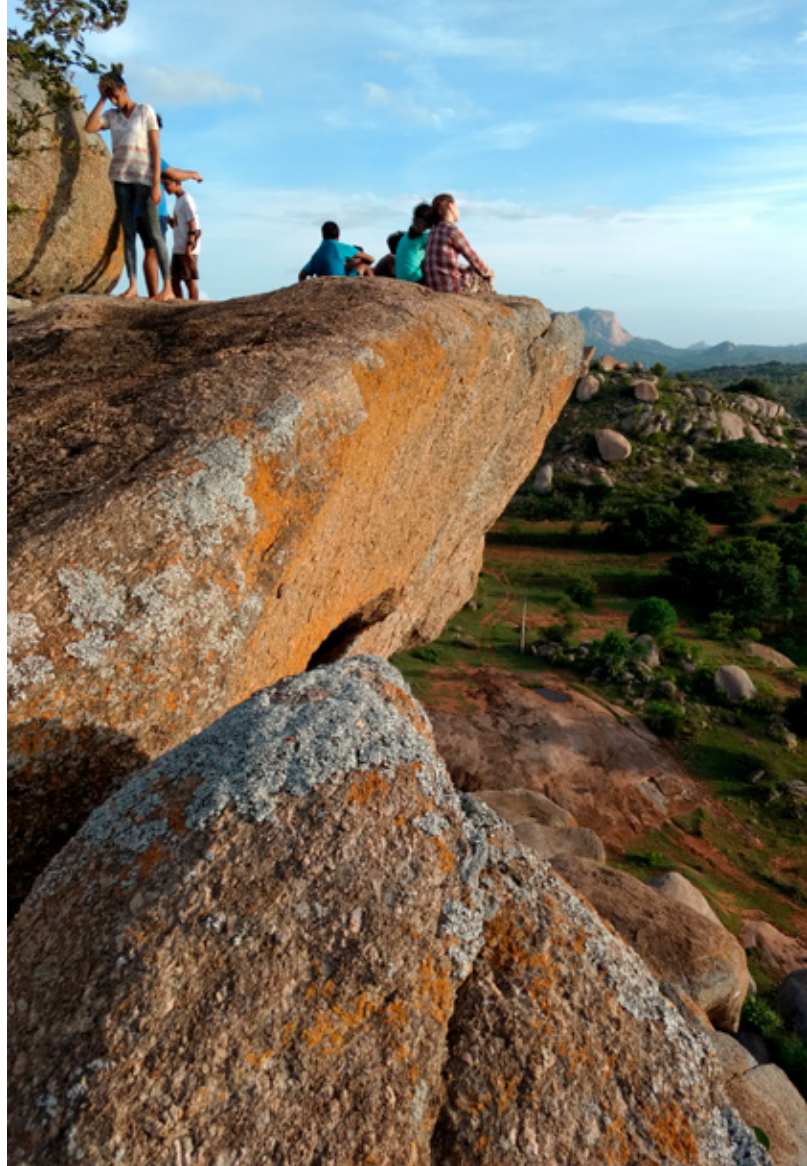
We take learning concerns seriously and act responsibly as adults. However, we do not see students through the lens of what they are capable and incapable of. Since this doesn't define our relationship with children, we find that we are able to provide them with the nurturing space they need. Building numeracy and literacy skills form a significant part of a school's responsibility, no doubt, but, as educators and adults caring for children, we can continually examine the psychological underpinnings that shape our ideas of a 'successful' life.

### Let's talk about sex

"Learning" about something could include perceiving a process and then talking simply and honestly about it. This kind of learning excites us in our conversations and curricula at CFL. However, not everything is equally available to view. Some processes are harder to observe within oneself and express as an individual, especially those that have great moral weight and provoke social anxiety. Feelings of desire and sexuality are obviously in this realm.

The word sexuality has different meanings in different languages and in different cultural contexts. The following definition of sexuality in a publication by UNESCO captures in essence how we see the subject in our conversations with children.

*'Sexuality' can be understood as a core dimension of being human which includes: the understanding of, and relationship to, the human body; emotional attachment and love; sex; gender; gender identity; sexual orientation; sexual intimacy; pleasure and reproduction. Sexuality is complex and includes biological, social, psychological, spiritual, religious, political, legal, historic,*



*ethical and cultural dimensions that evolve over a lifespan.*

(From the *International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education* published by UNESCO, UNAIDS, UNPFA, UNICEF, UN Women, WHO, 2018)

It is important to understand one's own body and observe the feelings that come up rather than suppress and control these. At CFL, our everyday conversations with children, however banal, have a shade here and a tint there of vital questions pertaining to this human condition of feeling and being. Ask any student, and they would somewhat lightheartedly say that the 'CFL-ly way' is all about questioning and understanding the 'self' and the 'other', looking at 'social constructs' and internalised cultural 'conditioning' and all that. These visible and invisible forces that impact our behaviour are a constant subject of our conversation.

Sexuality is one of the most powerful forces we encounter biologically and psychologically in life. It plays out in all our daily lives emotionally and socially too. Learning about sexual and reproductive health (and rights), about responsible living and well-being is learning about oneself. It is





important that school is a place for such a process.

Enquiring into matters of sexuality, desire, love and friendship happen through dialogues with each other. We invite students to an open-ended observation, refraining from making strict rules of behaviour to be simply obeyed in subservience. We do have norms, explicit and implicit, and a lot of the behavioural dynamic is determined by a strong culture of the place and the times.

Over the years, in the process of framing a sexuality education curriculum across the age groups (which is a 'work-in-progress' almost always), we have realised that it is very 'culture-specific' to CFL. No already-existing curricula or ready-made prescriptions would suit us in our educational endeavour.

Talking about sexuality with young people of different ages is not always easy. One cannot assume a stance of conclusive understanding from which one speaks about the matters of the body and mind. A fresh look every time with children in this process of dialogue is inevitable. It is simple to lecture on the body and feelings and sex, but it is something else altogether to listen and inquire into children's pre-occupations and questions slowly and carefully. Keeping the questions pertinent rather than providing (or hastily arriving at) sophisticated theories is the approach we appreciate. And needless to say, we must adopt this approach for ourselves as adults through these conversations with children.

There are innumerable ways to enter the conversation on sexuality with children at school. We have amongst ourselves

as teachers identified resources that can help: children's literature and popular reads, news articles and movies, publications on sexuality and reproductive health and so on. These are all made available to children in an age-appropriate manner or used in our talking. Conversations may happen anywhere, at any time, even though there are formal ways in which we introduce them in our dialogue classes. They may informally (but seriously) happen over a meal or over study time or in any other class too. This attempts to make the subject talk-able and normal in the processes of schooling. Not to say everyone manages to speak freely and fearlessly all the time, but surely there are continuous attempts to lessen awkwardness or embarrassment when the conversation emerges between teachers and students. And exasperated eye-rolling, quick exchange of embarrassed glances, spine-stiffening, and facial muscle tensing with raised eyebrows are all also part of the atmosphere now and then; a teacher has to be patient and light-hearted to engage with this!

Often we meet with guilt and confusion, feelings of okayness or not-okayness, self-remedies of indulgence and abstinence, while reflecting about sexuality and social mores around it. These mixed feelings seem to constantly challenge the simple observation and understanding of the feelings. There is no workaround. We have to stay with observation of all the conditioning that has gone into shaping all of us. This is an essential part of sexuality education. Rigid sexual identities and gender definitions, making an unwarranted problem of our biological experiences, living with fragmented and inadequate ideas of morality and social respectability, can only lead to feelings of righteousness and divisiveness, creating the 'normal' and the 'abnormal', the acceptable and the outcast, creating inequalities and oppression. A good education must throw light upon the divisive impulses of the individual, and a good sexuality education must free us from divisive lines we draw based on sexuality.

Our overall response to children and their questions on sexuality comes from acknowledging the importance of it in the human experience while trying to find the 'right place' of this in the whole of life. While sexuality education curricula that are culturally relevant and well-written are already available from across the world, we use these to inform and add to our approach of self-inquiry. We see sexuality education as part of the central objective of learning about oneself in a wholesome way. We cannot fathom the complexity and the marvel of sexuality in life if our approach to it as human beings becomes fragmented, if we look at sexuality as a separative experience with a limited view of the individual. Observing sexuality as an experience amongst all other experiences teaches one a lot more about the experience and the experienter.

## Comings and goings

Two individuals, long associated with CFL, are re-defining their regular involvement with the school. Radhika Neelakantan joined CFL in 1993. Biology, art, craft and needlework are her passions and soon she had converted many students to feel the same. Creating art of exceptional quality in her own work and reaching out with love and passion in her interaction with every child – a heady combination and that is Radhika! We all wish her days of contentment and hope that will include frequent visits to CFL. Thejaswi Shivanand, or Theju as he is better known, joined us in 2008. His nature walks and scientific bent of mind, his keen interest in all living beings including plants and his serious engagement with music were appreciated by all and inspired many. Now his love for books and reading are taking him to new pastures. We all wish him well and look forward to his interactions and continuing friendship with the CFL body.

We welcome two new teachers this year. Radhika Chhaparia is a graduate from Azim Premji University (APU), and she is interested in working with the junior and middle school groups on a wide variety of themes: math, language and library. Rhythm Parikh is also from APU and is interested in literature and the humanities.

We had several visitors from many different schools (both teachers and administrators): academic heads from Orchids International school, Bangalore; a group from Blue Mountains School, Ooty; teachers from a consortium of schools in Kozhikode; a group of educators from Turkey, and finally, representatives from I am a Teacher, Mumbai, who run the library there.

As usual, our library was a hub for visitors during the year. We had visits

from the librarian team at the Indian Institute of Human Settlements, Bangalore. Two Teacher Foundation teachers observed junior school library classes. Madhuri Ramesh, an author, shared with middle schoolers her interactions with the Kadar forest-dwelling community, and her stories put together in 'Speaking to an Elephant' and, 'Walking is a Way of Knowing'. Two visitors from Lightroom Bookstore in Bangalore, came for the day. Several members from Seed to Sapling, an organisation which works with teachers, visited and spent time in the library space. Tanisha Kedia from Shikshakolam visited to understand the library.

Indu Prasad from the Azim Premji Foundation spoke to the teachers about the wider educational context in India, and we learnt a lot from her talk. Ravi Chellam interacted with the community and shared his work on Asiatic lions in Gir Forest.

For the senior school General Studies Program, Dr Akkai Padmashali, a prominent trans activist, spoke to the students on questions of gender and identity. Ms Sanasuman also visited; she runs an organization called Swatantra which works for transgender welfare on the right to education and employment opportunity. Arvind Narrain from ALF talked with the senior students on the framework of the Indian constitution.

Several other friends also visited through the course of the year. Ajinkya Shenava, a former student interested in culture studies and arts, stayed for a fortnight and interacted with students through theatre and poetry activities and a general studies session on gender. Madhavan, our young friend from Marudam, Tiruvannamalai, spent almost an entire term and was very much a part of the life of the school, working

with landscape projects and other activities. Kenneth Wakefield, from New Zealand, a visitor with an interest in education and ecology, was with us for a few days. Ipsa Jain, a science illustrator, gave an assembly presentation on the nature of her work. Salil Dogra, a teacher from Kalker Sangeeth Vidyalaya in Dharwad, shared his musical interests with us during an assembly. Vena Kapoor, an educator from the Nature Conservation Foundation, visited us briefly.

Seema Purushothaman from APU visited along with students to understand sustainable aspects of the CFL campus. Ashwin Prabhu, formerly a teacher at The School KFI, stayed at CFL for a few days gathering material for a book on Krishnamurti's vision of education. Eva, a young student from Russia, spent several months at CFL, learning English and being a part of the community. To deepen our friendships with the APD School, with whom we interacted in the mela last year, we hosted a two-day program for their 7th grade class with three teachers. It was a great pleasure to have them with us.

As always we were delighted to host our old friends and regular visitors this year. Maggie and Andrew Alexander have been collecting material on education from many schools around the globe. Derek Hook performed his stories in assembly to the delight of all. He also brought a friend, a professional jazz guitarist and musician, Mike Walker, who joined in the storytelling presentations and had a night music session with those students interested. Gerard as always worked across age groups on theatre activities, for several weeks.





### Friends of CFL: a fund-raising appeal

For the past few years, we have been introducing our micro-charity fund-raising idea, the “Friends of CFL” programme, to our newsletter readers. This past year, we were very successful in this effort and we have managed to meet our target. We are sincerely grateful to each and every individual who has supported us.

To explain to our new readers: CFL has consciously chosen to work with a ‘deficit budget’. Each year we offer unlimited and uncapped scholarships to any of our families who request them. Therefore, every year there is a gap between the running costs of the school and the contribution from parents. This makes CFL accessible to any student whose parents are serious about a different kind of education and who wish to join us in our philosophical exploration. The scholarship model has worked well all these years.

We have two sources to cover the annual deficit: the income from our corpus (endowment fund) and the generous donations we receive each year from well-wishers and friends. So far we have managed to meet our scholarship needs each year quite successfully, thanks to the considerable time and energy spent by several individuals in the community (parents, alumni and teachers) towards raising funds.

For the year 2020-21, we anticipate that we need to raise a sum of Rs 20 lakhs (approx US \$ 26,200) to help meet our deficit.

If we have 400 “Friends of CFL” each donating a sum of Rs 5,000 (approx US \$65), we can cover our deficit for the year.

If you are interested in joining the “Friends of CFL” programme, please do contact us by sending an email to the address below with “Friends of CFL” in the subject box. Thank you very much for your support.

**Donor information: Centre For Learning is a registered charitable society. Donations to the society are exempt from Income Tax 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. For more information, please visit <https://cfl.in/support-us/how-can-i-help-cfl/>**

We are trying to correct spelling and other errors in our mailing list. Could you drop us an email at [info@cfl.in](mailto:info@cfl.in) to point out any mistakes in your mailing label?

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