

Reflections

The Shola Fellowship Meeting Dec 2008 at Devbagh, Karwar, Karnataka

After the freedom shola in the Himalayas in the summer of 2008, it was the island of Devbagh, off Karwar, Karnataka, that beckoned the group in the winter of 2008. Organizational adolescence (yes, the thirteenth meeting) had come to demand a look at ourselves, in respect of our Shola years, also about how we reflected on “life” past, present and future, and what was it about the people and world around us. The blue canvass of the sea on one side of the island, was the colour to the freshwater brought by the River Kali and its tributary on the other side, the young meeting the seasoned and deep. We watched sunrises amidst the morning nature-walks, drew future visions on paper under trees, washed our lethargy away in the shallow afternoon tides, told stories and discussed life into the sunset punctuated by strumming of the guitar and white waves in the dark of the night.

Day 01: Dec 25 2008 – Getting there and winding down with the sunset on merry x-mas

It was an interesting way to converge at Devbagh this time. Thanks to persuasion of our friend Kunal¹, we had booked much in advance for a change. In a break for the normal run up to Shola, it was too many rooms and cottages chasing too few participants this time! Devbagh is located off Karwar town (Haveri Taluka of Karwar district) in northern Karnataka – this is an island developed and maintained by the JLR; and you can see a few other islands too nearby most run by private operators, a couple being private islands.

The shola folks made the most of it even while getting in there. One big gang drove from Kotagiri via Kerala northward to Karwar – the log reads: 22/12 – Kotagiri-Palghat-Kannur (363 kilos); 23/12 – Kannur-Mangalore (734 kilos) → 24/12 Honavar; 25/12: Kumta-Ankola-Karwar.

[ANY PHOTO OF JETTY AND BOAT?]

Another car-load descended from Goa having come from Delhi a few beach-days ago, and one group drove from Bangalore, picking up another group from Hyderabad en route! As we arrived in batches at the JLR jetty, motor boats ferried us across in the 10-minute ride to that mysterious-looking island.

The disembarkation point is like the mouth of the island and hides more than tells what is inside. You walk through the winding path to come into the open but long corridor lined by cottages on your right, playing your vision through trees to the diner gazebo while your left eye spies the sea-beach all along narrowing down to merge into the skyline somewhere behind that diner.

[2-3 PHOTOS OF DINING HUT, LOG HUTS, AND SEA BEACH....]

After the usual tea, and quick initial dip into the sea for some, the group settled down around the rescue watch-tower on the beach, guitar, snacks, fluids and all. The evening began with introductions of participants, old and new, recapitulation of what the fellowship was, and some reminiscences of the Sholas past (See Annex 1).

¹ Kunal was with Keystone till mid-2008 after which he joined the Jungle Lodges and Resorts (JLR, a Joint Venture of Karnataka Forest and Tourism Departments with private operators) that manages many resorts in Karnataka including the Kali Resort at Dandeli where the Shola Fellowship met in 2002, and Devbagh where we were to descend in the winter of 2008.

Expectations and thoughts at the moment of the beginning:

The group members focused thereafter on what was on top of their minds, and what they could see as expectations from this gathering. The responses were varied:

- Reliving the chemistry – “shola-enu”
- Want to learn more about myself (revert to questions circulated by Pratim before the meeting)
- Knowing more about the earth
- Impact of travel on people and landscapes
- Interesting addition of value to life, via a mix of leisure and activities
- Holidaying while thinking about something new, intellectualizing
- Change: how to reconcile to change within and outside, how to accept change
- Not sure about expectations but look forward to something interesting
- How to live on this earth responsibly
- How we relate to change
- Theme not so important, nor any set expectations – important to meet and spend time together
- Come of old-age, interesting time in life to reflect
- Time for own self, and quality time with children
- Go to an environment that is congenial to thinking
- Come to a group of gifted people where there is tremendous goodwill
- Come to meet all others annually as usual
- Want the meeting to be interactive
- Coming to a moment in life – the “sea”
- Spend time on the beach and in the sea!

It was time for dinner for the tired group, and then sweet sleep after days of travel and hours of chatting and zzzzzz. Before that of course, that scrap of an account from a participant:

Found in one of the Frontline² Shola Notebooks: A sideline about the sideys!

“25.12.08- First Day

First some gitaring then some of som uncell’s lechers The some drinks then some claping we also whent to the beach and had fun Then someone spoke, then Ruils type of set up a bat and rest none then people past food then I drunk some 7up I ate some thing and that was some popcorn, and the beach was beautiful then some women were up side down on a chiar then uncell som started a lecher again everyone at some snacks and it was relly dark then I was on top, but there were some rulls and I could go far and it was....”

Reuben

Not unexpectedly, there are no entries for the days after.

[SEE IF THE PAGE FROM THE NOTEBOOK CAN BE SCANNED FOR THE ABOVE RATHER THAN THE TYPED MATTER – MAY LOOK BETTER]

² A young person, usually a child of an adult shola, enjoys privileges of being called and treated as a “Frontline Shola” in return for depressed levels of animated innocence, occasional good behaviour, keeping relatively quietly to themselves while desecrating paper and writing resources, and getting less than thrice into trouble within an hour by the clock.

Day 02: Dec 26 2008 – Reflections in the sun and the sea

The day began with a Nature Walk that some adults and most of the children's brigade participated in. Some adults joined in whereas others were resting well to prepare for the day ahead full of discussions and action.

a) The Big Five Questions of Life at this moment

The main exercise of the day was to answer the five main questions that had been circulated by Pratim in advance of the meeting. Seemingly simple, these questions sent participants reflecting and ...finding that some of these questions were not simple at all!

1. The two successes that I am proud of

After some individual work, people shared many successes that they were proud of:

- Starting and running/ sustaining my organization
- Friendships and relationships that I cultivated and maintained with ease
- Completing many of the errands and work that keeps getting piled up
- Struck a good balance between my work/professional, family and personal lives
- Was able to force or impose personal values on the organization I work for
- Was successful in concluding negotiations in a nice manner
- Maintained a variety of relationships in family, as a parent, at the work-place, etc.
- Was finally able to make an academic break-through
- Was able to live through very difficult times and got out of all that – with fortitude
- Managed to be a good and uncomplicated human being
- Was able to shift from a private sector corporate culture to an NGO sector corporate culture
- Proud of my role in nurturing my organization, and making it a platform for many
- Stuck with a discipline I did not like pursuing but still managed to finish
- Climbed a difficult Himalayan pass in one day
- Finally, managed to get married!

2. What humbles me? Why?

The factors that humbled us ranged from the predictable to the somewhat rare:

- Supreme folly that I / we can conquer nature – and the mis-placed sense of bravado in apparently defying nature for short periods or in small locations
- Awesome power of the sea
- Power of the ultimate in spite of advances of mankind
- Perfection of nature and children being born as a wonderful evidence thereof – the ultimate in design of raw forms
- Generosity of the poor – we have so much yet we may be so petty
- People who handle hardships and pain and the way they handle life
- Children – they are free and do what they want
- Children – their questions are very direct
- Old people e.g. grandparents who go through so much in life – and are always reliable and there for us
- The beauty of nature, and the power of death
- Adivasis, biodiversity and poverty....

3. What appears easy to me but I find difficult in practicing / accomplishing?

This took some thinking but was for many a familiar terrain! Here is what they said:

- Getting organized!
- Bringing up a child
- Achieving personal goals
- Dealing with stress and not taking it out on others
- Reconciling rational thinking with emotional non-acceptance
- Disjointed communities –bringing them together
- Achieving the image of greatness, looking good and acting holy
- Being consistent
- Keeping fit!

4. In what aspects of life do I feel confused? Why?

This one was not confusing at all since people were not confused or totally confused:

- Reconciling my lifestyle, world-view, relationships with what I think I believe in – lack of courage and conviction perhaps?
- How I live with and how I feel about the environment
- Being hungry to achieving more, yet being satiated that I do not really achieve enough
- Have enough of what is happening in life but what to do next in life?
- That “science” and “rationality” has all the answers – cause being “mental” or being seen to be rational is seen to be a higher benchmark compared to other faculties, processes, approaches
- Why do we need money? Yet cannot do without it?
- What to do now that I have freed myself of my old responsibilities
- I have no confusion at all!

5. One sentence to describe me to a stranger / new person

Brace yourselves for this one – large-arc swings of vanity and humility coming....

- Invisible man
- Seriously crazy
- Energetic, proactive / bully, fun
- Likes the good things of life
- That talented, skilled, compassionate, multi-faceted person (hmpf!)
- That loud and bossy girl
- That guy with glasses
- Typical middle-aged, stressed-out, over-weight man

{Also over-heard were wanna-be titters of

- Little Tsunami, nice guy, hot-hot-hot! Snigger, snigger....}

b) Nature Walk Presentation

After the afternoon dip into the sea after lunch, it was beach volleyball for some, a quiet snooze for others, and long beach walks for others. But then it was tea, and soon the falling evening gathered people around the watch-tower in front of the beach.

The young shola gang had prepared a presentation on their experiences in the nature walk earlier in the morning.

CHART PAPER EXHIBIT: MAP OF DEVBAGH ISLAND

[WHERE IS THIS? I CANNOT SEE THIS IN THE CHART PAPERS SENT. PLEASE SCAN AND PUT THIS IN – ELSE PUT IN ANY OTHER GOOD PANORAMIC PHOTO OF THE ISLAND]

Rustam set the geography of the island, Reuel was to narrate the first part of the Nature Walk and the sightings of flora and fauna, and finally came Reuben with the concluding part of the walk. Adults were impressed and resolved to rise early next morning and do this walk.

c) Journeys in Life

Then, the watch-tower at the beach asked members of the group to recount the important journeys in their lives that seemed to have made a difference, touched them in some more than usual way. The journeys were of relationships, the human side, nature and the world out there.....Members told stories and journeys about and in:

- Ethiopia, Abyssinia and Eritrea
- Mizoram
- The Andamans and the US
- Genetics
- Life in the film-making world
- Surviving in the cold deserts of Ladakh
- Elephant-scare in the Joda mines in Jharkhand
- Home stays in Ladakh – social exclusion in some societies and restrictions of entry into houses
- Women waiting at night in a remote road corner in Chhattisgarh

As the stories thrilled and scared listeners and remembered the strange and quaint for the narrator, all of us grew more and more aware of the special place of journeys in our lives. Were they a mix of the simple and the complex in our lives? Were they our new ways to deal with our selves, others, and the world around? Did they change us or we coped with them?

The group retired with these stories and thoughts.....

[PHOTOS OF THE BEACH TO BE INSERTED IN THIS SECTION]

Day 03: Dec 27 2008 – Discussion on descriptors of the world

The day began with a Nature Walk for most of the adults who were asleep the morning before. Realizing their filial responsibilities, the Frontline Sholas who had done the recce round and presentation the day before, also accompanied the adults and showed them around Beyond what the guide could explain. There were other people, tourists, cameras and ignoramuses amongst us....but the wading in the water, the crabs, the sand and

While the Frontline screamed and went off to do adventure water sports, the frightened adults pretended to be doing serious work, and serious work they did, as an exercise in twos:

What are three main descriptors of the world according to you? The map or the core of the world as you understand it...three most important or essential elements which you will use to describe the world including your own self in it.

After working in twos, teams came up with their depictions on chart papers. Each chart-paper was presented to the whole group:

[CAN YOU HAVE THE CHART PAPERS SCANNED AND INSERTED AFTER EACH GROUP?]

Group 1: Mathew and Rinky

The main descriptors of the world are:

- Self and need to know about others and spirits
- Me in relation to others and nature
- Balance of self and others
- Need for monetary resources

Group 2: Sajju and Rajiv

World Descriptors are:

- i) Relationships;
- ii) Nature or environment; and
- iii) Our interaction with nature

Group 3: Sneha and Sachin

The main descriptors of world according to us:

- i) Nature / environment;
- ii) personal relationships, routine, work;
- iii) {Not directly affecting us} politics, economy, government, social organizations; and
- iv) Experiences gained through travel

Group 4: Sonia and Pratim

Said their world comprised:

- i) Rural / traditional set species;
- ii) City life – new environment, ecosystem;
- iii) iii) people out of ii) above who are seeking alternatives – “jumping genes” in the three zones

And the Jumping Genes arise from: a) Disconnect from nature; b) consumerism; c) desire to return to nature

[PR CAN WRITE A BOX ITEM FOR THE JUMPING GENES CONCEPT? WILL BE VERY GOOD I THINK]

Each of the presentations were discussed and debated by the group. This was to also give a lot of food for thought.

The evening was again filled with music, songs, stories, jokes, and then retreat from the gushing waves to the quiet of the rooms. (Some rooms had wildlife inside and offered some more nocturnal excitement – also thumbs down to the maintenance management of the resort!).

Day 04: Dec 28 2008 – Discussion on the web of life

A fresh group started the concluding day of this Shola. This Shola had no singular theme but many elements:

- A Nature Walk
- Personal recounts / stories of journeys
- The Big Five Questions
- The exercise on the descriptors of the world

[PHOTOS REQUIRED TO BE INSERTED IN THIS SECTION]

The question before the group was what, as a result is emerging? Individually, participants set out to answer the question:

***Go through what you have shared –what is converging?
Why? Where do these lead us?***

We came up with the following thoughts and reflections:

- * Human relationships – changing environment / nature - determinants
- * Importance with friendships as a success
- * Confusion of sorting out personal issues and questioning at different stages in life
- * Do we act a lot on pre-conceived notions?
- * Over the years, are we trying to live up to image of ourselves that others have of us (or think they have of us)?
- * Different people come together to make a film – life is like that? A multitude of supplementary roles?
- * There is a shift from earlier Sholas in that focus this time is on the personal – “me” and “us” rather than “others” and them”
- * There is a realization of presence of old people and how they are a part of our systems
- * I am feeling confident, but self-centred?
- * The limits to thoughts and our capacities are being realized; just as we are getting comfortable with ourselves?
- * Travel enables one to learn so much

* Looking outward to looking inward – I had expected “concrete” theme discussions but this is “different” but not yet “cathartic”

* Outward “non-work” beginning of a new cycle for me – beginning of another cycle after 12 years of Shola. Of looking at the world and ourselves – *through our own eye*. Also, old-age, resilience – exceptions of others. What do we want to explore in the future?

* What is within us (immanent) and yet outside us (transcendent)

* We relaxed, and were not “output”-oriented

* There is a freshness of thinking and energy

Some of the points further discussed by the group included:

* Was the element of “time” adequately captured in our discussions?

* Relevance is a key question in determining what we describe our world as?

* Humans’ driving energy to live, know, innovate, and create ...drives us beyond survival?

* Does everything get determined by environment and natural processes?

* What roles do perceptions and curiosity play?

* How do we explain conflict?

* Is economic rationale the only measure to describe and govern the world?

* Does level of energy describe how societies and communities deal with themselves and the world? Like counter how societies collapse (after Jared Diamond’s book exploring that theme), ask how societies live and sustain themselves?

* May be useful to do this exercise after six or twelve months and see what changes and what endures.....

Feedback and what we take back from this Shola

Folks share what they were taking back as also some of their feedback on the gathering:

* Sense of ease after being myself with friends. Talking and reflecting aloud without having to find a definitive answer, so important for many of us at this time

* Mind is still cluttered (like perhaps when I joined Shola) but may be we will have answers when we enter the New Year 2009

* Felt like half of my being sees a part of my partner and child and they do not see

* I realized I had become over-confident (when I realized my vulnerability to the powerful sea)

* Still going through conflict of emotions though there were discussions – still felt good that we met

* Good time to catch up and go through a natural phase of winding down, ennui, and swim and play and walk (away from work, phone and e-mail); saw a sense of openness; lots of experiences and raw material of life there; so many changes over 10-15 years of people in Shola

* Realized the human element; dealing with “externalities” during discussions was an interesting challenge

* Liked the beach, the star-filled clear skies and of course this idea of jumping genes

* Met a lot of new people and got a lot of new ideas

* Had a great time, got to draw from the past ten years of Shola – not what I expected but still great!

* I liked the beaches!

[PHOTOS REQUIRED TO BE INSERTED IN THIS SECTION]

Planning the Next Shola Fellowship:

The regional/state break-down showed we had organized one meeting each in the states of West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh, and Rajasthan; two meetings each in Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh and Uttarakhand; and four in Tamil Nadu. Therefore, it was suggested that the Shola ought to move to new locations beginning the winter of 2010.

Suggestions that were received with oohs and aahs included:

- Train ride on the Buddhist circuit of the Indian Railways – for a different experience
- Srinagar in Kashmir
- Locations in Maharashtra e.g. Ganapatiphule, Ratnagiri, etc.
- North-east e.g. Tawang Valley
- Lakshadweep Islands
- Andaman and Nicobar Islands

Less preferred locations but still suggested included:

- The Rann of Kutch
- Pondicherry
- North Bengal
- Patna-Gaya-Rajgir
- Bastar

It was suggested that the timing should be same as earlier years i.e. in December-January. The theme it was decided will be dependant on the location of the gathering.

[PHOTOS REQUIRED TO BE INSERTED IN THIS SECTION]

The Shrikant Joshi Fellowship

The group made use of the time available on day 1 to also discuss the progress of the Shrikant Joshi Fellowship and the management of the fellowship:

* It was proposed that two needy but deserving students from the school where SJ studied, be supported financially. This was later changed to support one or two students from tribal schools in Kotagiri for ease of management. This could be up to Rs. 25,000 but would initially be much lower. A simple criterion (topper of class from tribal background) was necessary.

* It was proposed that a group be funded annually to the tune of Rs, 75,000 so that the amount is not very small. This amount could be reviewed in later years. Chau volunteered to find and develop a proposal for a group in North-eastern India for the FY 2010 fellowship. Rupa suggested that she may be able to suggest groups for FY 2011.

* About Rs. 25,000 was proposed for an annual meeting to bring all grantees, present and past, together with Shola Fellowship members and share experiences, and provide an avenue to interact with and build a long-term “fellowship” around the Shrikant Joshi Fellowship themes and partners. The first meeting was proposed for Hyderabad to bring together all grantees and select SF members - Rupa volunteered to organize this meeting in June/July 2009.

HAPPY BIRTHDAY SNEH!

Yes, it was a special day on Dec 28 to celebrate Sneh's birthday – cake, wine, songs.....!
[PHOTOS REQUIRED TO BE INSERTED IN THIS SECTION]

Annex 1:

What's the Shola Fellowship?

The Shola Fellowship is a network group of concerned (about each other and the world around) people (not professionals or organizations) who are primarily friends and come together annually to spend some time with one another with families. They come from different backgrounds and fields of endeavour and hence there is variety to thinking and talking about life, world around, own selves.....The Fellowship is not a formal entity, just a powerful binding spirit, with a core at its center, and regular and irregular invitees who join in each meeting. The strength of the group is our will to be part of an adventure, to think, experience and create - and then transport bits and sparks into our lives.

The fellowship was born in the Sholas (pristine natural rainforests of South India, thus called the Shola Fellowship) in 1996 when a few of the group met in Northern Hay, Kotagiri. The Fellowship met thereafter annually in different parts of the country and over time, meetings were organized around varied themes, usually not related directly to the work of participants, yet in some way, of interest to and touching them in their lives.

<PR: SOME SELECT THUMBNAIL PHOTOS OF OLD SHOLA MEETINGS?>

The Thirteen Shola Gatherings

1. 1996 – All about *Nilgiris*, at Northern Hay, Kotagiri, The Nilgiris, Tamil Nadu
2. 1997 – Assorted Themes again at Northern Hay, Kotagiri, Tamil Nadu
3. 1999 – *Lifestyles* at Chand Paata Lake Resort, Shivpuri, Madhya Pradesh
4. 2000 - *Livelihoods* at Bamboo Banks, Masinagudi, Tamil Nadu
5. 2001 – *Spirituality* in a freezing Almora, Uttarakhand
6. 2002 – *Wealth* at the Kali Resort in Dandeli, Karnataka
7. 2003 – *Fear* at the Dhola Maru Hotel, Jaisalmer, Rajasthan
8. 2004 – *Creativity* in the Sundarbans, West Bengal
9. 2005 – Nature and Networks at Bangithapal TN-Kerala border and Kotagiri, TN
10. 2006 – *How societies change* at Pragati resorts, ex-Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh
11. 2007 – *Space* amid the tigers of Bandhavgarh, Madhya Pradesh
12. 2008 Summer – *Freedom* at Ranikhet, Uttarakhand
13. 2009 Winter – *Reflections* at Devbagh Island, off Karwar, Karnataka

Annex 2: The Sholas

[PR: PLEASE INSERT PHOTOS WHEREVER AVAILABLE – PHOTOS OF PEOPLE FROM DEVBAGH IS AVAILABLE, ELSE OLD OR OTHER PHOTOS, AS IN CASE OF FOLKS WHO WERE NOT PRESENT IN THIS SHOLA GATHERING]

Frontline Sholas

Reuel and Nathaniya John, Kotagiri

Simran Kukkila, Hyderabad

Rustam and Rubin Chaudhuri, Delhi

Missed you:

Rituraj and Rishiraj at Kolkata/Madanapalle

Other Sholay

Pratim Roy

Snehlata Nath

Mathew (John)

Sajju (Annie Mathew)

Rupa Mukerji

Chau(dhuri), Ajit

Rinky (Sriparna Ganguly)

Rajiv (K. Raman)

Som(nath Sen)

Missed you:

Kukki(la), Ramakrishna at Hyderabad

Ranjan (B. Verma), wife, Manisha, and daughter Hrishita at Delhi.

Ramaswamy, V. and Rajashi Mukherjee at Kolkata

Pramod (Pant); Lata (Pant) and Nidhi at Delhi

Shabnam (Ramaswamy) at Murshidabad, West Bengal

Dr. SK “Uncle” and Madhuri Chaturvedi “Aunty” at Delhi

Will miss you always:

Late Shrikant Joshi: the Quintessential Shola we meet in our memories.