

A for alternative, E for environment

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The campus of the Sholai School | Photo Credit: Ian Lockwood

Nusrat Fateh Ali at assembly and furniture repair: Sholai is not your average school

“Get off the bus at Perumal Malai and start walking downhill; we are just 6 km away,” said the email, already promising freshness and fun. And Sholai School kept that promise. Surfing the net, I had learnt of a school that has a river running through it and grows organic coffee and avocados. What had struck me instantly was that the school said it was not connected to the grid; in other words, it generated all the electricity it consumed, either from solar panels or from micro hydro energy. I knew I had to visit. Nestled in a valley near Kodaikanal, where macaques munch on jackfruits and elephant and gaur make occasional forays, the school follows an approach to education that’s inspired by philosopher J. Krishnamurti. The idea is to encourage children to enjoy learning, while teaching them to be environmentally and socially responsible. Set up in 1989 by social anthropologist Brian Jenkins, Sholai is also known as the Centre for Learning Organic Agriculture and Appropriate Technology. **Sixty students** Unusually enough, the school has only around 60 students; the majority are from Tamil Nadu, some from the adjacent village. A few come from other states and other countries too. The day begins with an unconventional morning assembly. There’s a lot of different music—one morning we listened to Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan punctuated by bird calls. This was followed by eye exercises led by a different student every day. We closed our eyes tight and opened them, blinked and looked alternately at two objects—one near and the other far. We moved our hands clock-wise and



anti clock-wise, our eyes following.

On a couple of mornings I stumbled upon students practising music and dance lessons before assembly began. One day, I joined a group that had been assigned the task of waste segregation. Students and teachers sorted out waste collected from the campus. Some was sold, while some was put to use creatively—to make a bean bag, for instance. The idea was to involve the children in all activities on campus and to enable learning by doing.

Learning by doing

The hours are split into activities. During ‘agriculture time’, students and teachers grow vegetables. ‘Engineering time’ has them designing, creating and repairing furniture and the occasional shed. One afternoon the students made an ingenious stand for their guitars. Most of the wood they use comes from trees within the campus. There is an on-campus dairy too. The school adheres to a time-table but there are no physical rooms allotted for classes. The teacher-student interactions are informal and take place at multiple open and covered spaces around the campus. Teachers and students are treated as equals—during one class in a laboratory, the teacher played music after asking the students if they were okay with it. Sholai follows the Cambridge curriculum, but teachers invest more on individual study topics rather than rushing to complete the course. EVS or environmental studies class found the older students inspecting a bund in the elevated parts of the campus. The rains were around the corner. Ian Lockwood, writer-photographer and educationist, writes in his blog of the importance of water management in Sholai: . “The school uses surface water from streams, collects rainwater, and also has wells such that they are free of any government water supply.” As I looked at their EVS textbook, I realised that the students were learning more from life on campus. The book appeared outdated. First published by

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