

Sathuvalli Mohanraj and Shreesh Chaudhary (Eds.) (2024). *Infinity in a Nutshell: CIEFL 1957-2005*, LG Publishers Distributors, pages 240, ISBN: 978-81-969489-7-9 (Hardbound), Rs. 895.

Reviewed by Achla M. Raina

When did you last see a book on an educational institution invoking Hamlet in its title? *Infinity in a Nutshell: CIEFL 1957-2005* does so as it celebrates the remembrances of a collective that graced CIEFL in some of the most productive years of its life. The book has a feast of human emotions to offer—pride, nostalgia, belonging, regret, appreciation, gratitude, longing, and many more, unravelling as you turn page after page of its 31 chapters strung together into an engrossing read. In the process, an institution comes alive in its material form with spacious buildings and sprawling lawns. As the physical and social spaces drift past, an abstraction embracing the spirit of institution building, and perhaps, of nation building, unfolds in all its possibilities. One of the most frequently encountered words in the book is ‘family’. The word embodies an institution whose members have long been siblings and have come together one more time for a reunion under the canopy of this book. Very few institutions in India evoke a strong sense of oneness among its members. Going through *Infinity in a Nutshell*, you know that CIEFL is one of them.

Like other academic institutions of excellence in post-independence India, CIEFL began as a hope, a dream, and, in the words of one of its illustrious members, a campaign. The campaign was for an educational institution that would negotiate the challenges of a nation just born to evolve an educational system matching up to the best in the world. Founded in 1958 as the Central Institute of English (CIE), the institution was one of the ‘temples of modern India’—a phrase used in the context of the newly founded IITs—that shaped the vision of educating India’s educators. CIE lived up to its promise and subsequently evolved into the Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages (CIEFL) in 1972 with the mandate to nurture teaching and research in English and foreign languages and literatures. In 2006, CIEFL received the Central University status and was renamed to English and Foreign Languages University (EFLU) by an act of the Parliament. Today, EFLU has its main campus in Hyderabad and two regional centres in Shillong and Lucknow established in 1973 and 1979 respectively. The university’s

mandate is for advanced research and training in English and foreign languages including Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Spanish, Italian, Russian, Japanese, Korean, Persian, and Turkish, in the areas of teacher education, literature, linguistics, and interdisciplinary and cultural studies.

Archiving the life of an educational institution presents many challenges. The most formidable of these is pitching the voice of the narrative. *Infinity in a Nutshell* navigates this challenge by adopting a multivocal perspective. The first forty-eight years of the life of CIEFL are enframed through the remembrances of some of its most distinguished alumni and faculty reclaiming their shared legacy through the pages of this book. Each chapter has a distinct voice of its own and each chapter tells you as much about the narrator as about their subject. If one may use the term that defines a CIEFL alumnus, each voice is a *participant* in this archival effort. Perhaps, even this is not without its built-in symbolism. Nearly all the chapters in *Infinity in a Nutshell* reminisce about an academic institution whose students are its *participants*. The nomenclature underlines not just a spirit of a non-hierarchical co-existence but an entire philosophy of education in which learning proceeds through mutual participation. Perhaps, it also epitomises an approach to governance where decision-making does not proceed from top to bottom; the Participants' Association, as the student body at CIEFL is called, has a loud and clear voice too. Even the archiving exercise under discussion here is a participatory one, with the community voices churning out their very own versions of the institution's history.

Some of the abiding values that the chapters under discussion foreground are academic freedom and integrity and in the words of one of CIEFL's illustrious alumni and later, faculty, "autonomy and trust". Many of the voices in the narrative recall these values in their own distinctive ways. The epithet, "Mecca of ELT in India," chosen for CIEFL by one of the contributors, clichéd as it may sound, is a metaphor for the single-minded intensity of a single-discipline institution. The academic programmes make the finer-grained distinctions between the enabling courses, equipping courses and orienting courses, each type imparting learning with a different outcome. At the same time, there is enough room for the learning that would come from spaces outside the classroom, from the dining hall, the canteen, the playground, and the hostel corridors. You see a governance structure built on the best practices

around the world, be it the rotational headship of a department or a gender-neutral residence for students. One of the contributors describes his journey as one from hesitancy to liking to advocacy, summing up the layered relationship that CIEFL has had with her alumni. Memories of the contributors bring alive to the reader, the faculty members, the fellow-students, the librarian, and the cook alike. While Dr. Ramaiah, the librarian, is a source of advice on reference materials, Mr. Swami, the chief cook at the hostel mess, is found giving tips on health. The latter is remembered as attributing his own good health to the fact that he does not eat mess food! It is heartening to see the narrative offering glimpses into the rich contributions of teachers and students, and also of the non-teaching staff, the invisible back-room boys and girls so critical to the life and growth of academic institutions. Above all, you get a glimpse of the CIEFL method, the inscrutable CIEFL method, which at the same time is tangible enough to become the banner under which the *CIEFLians* define themselves.

Most contributors speak of their CIEFL experience as a life-changing one. If nothing else, the institution appears have imparted a distinctive sensibility to the CIEFL community. With as many as 31 different voices in *Infinity in a Nutshell*, all of them speak with one sensibility. Perhaps, this is the inscrutable CIEFL 'method'. And if there is one enduring gift that the institution has handed to its students, faculty, and non-teaching staff, it is a membership badge for life. This sense of oneness with the *alma mater*, somewhat atypical in the Indian context, nurtures the collective psyche of its members with the promise of a life-long engagement, an infinity in a nutshell!

Some images running through the book linger long after you have put it down. Professor Bansal's phonetics classes, lives of campus children who can walk into any open door, the open doors that also welcome students, hungry for food and ideas, and the *behalfism* of Mr. Swami, the chief cook, lighting *agarbatti* at the local temple on behalf of the students. One would have liked to see the book free of editorial blemishes, which it by and large is, barring the one in the title line at the top of every even page. The pictures are a treasure trove though the plates could have been brighter.

My personal favourite is from the collection of Haikus under Chapter 12 (page 90):

gossamer cocoon
nurture sluggish scholars
to grow coloured wings.

One cannot but think of so many of those scholars, sluggish or not, who have grown coloured wings and have gone on to fly under many different skies.

If there is one perspective that a book so richly multivocal seems to leave out, it is that of the community of language teachers across the country that CIEFL, now EFLU, has time and again reached out to. As a reader growing up in the India of the 1970s, I remember teachers of English who spoke of that one life-changing workshop at CIEFL they had attended at some point in their professional lives. These were teachers from small-town India, who had had their language teaching abilities enriched at a linguistics workshop or a short-term language teaching course conducted as part of the institute's outreach. The vision of CIEFL at its inception—a pathbreaker in English language pedagogy in post-independence India—does find a resonance in these voices as well.

Achla M. Raina is a former Professor of Linguistics, Indian Institute of Technology Kanpur.
achla@iitk.ac.in