Reward Project Site Visit Report

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Site Visit Report

- **Compiled by Shivashankar Halan**

Site Visit Background

I have been involved with Asha UFlorida and its projects since 2008. I am a native of the state of Tamilnadu and also have been the project steward of an Asha UFlorida project FORWORD in the Kanchipuram district of Tamilnadu since 2008. Reward is also situated in the Kanchipuram district so when Asha UFlorida was approached for funding part of the budget for 2013-14, I volunteered to review the project. Fortunately I was also visiting the FORWORD project during my visit to India for a site visit and thought I could utilize the opportunity to visit Reward too and understand the project in person. So I got in touch with Mr.Sridhar and arranged to visit the project on June 3rd 2013. Since I was visiting during the summer I was not able to see the actual functioning of the project or the schools (since summer vacation was in progress) and was only able to meet with the founder trustees of Reward trust and have a discussion about the project, its functioning and challenges. Nevertheless the visit was a highly beneficial one as I learned a lot about the project, its history and also the current challenges facing the project.

When I visited the project I also took along with me Ms.Shiamala Baby – founder director of the FORWORD project that I steward. I thought it would be a good opportunity for Ms.Shiamala Baby to visit another project and hopefully create a collaboration between two Asha Projects that have been working for quite some time in the same district.

Reward General Background
(From ashanet.org)

Reward trust is working on upgrading government schools in the Kanchipuram ditrict. The trust upgrades the selected govt school to the next level by paying the 40 – 50% of the mandatory Public Deposit Fund (Rs 2 lakhs for Higher Secondary upgradation and Rs 1 lakh for High School upgradation). The trust then generates the remaining money from the village public, philanthropists of the village etc by the Parent Teachers Association

(PTA) of the respective school. Once the school is upgraded, the govt based on its constraints and priorities appoints teachers for the school. Initially a principal and a few teachers are appointed. Then over the years other teachers are appointed. Till such time the local PTA has to appoint and pay ad hoc teachers so that the students do not suffer. Reward trust places new teachers via the PTA in this interim period till the govt makes the appointments. The trust also gets local support to build classrooms and other infrastructure for the school.

Currently the project supports 52 teachers over 25 schools and thereby reaching out to 7500 students through their efforts.

Report

On June 3rd, I first reached Tambaram on the outskirts of Chennai in the morning and met with Ms.Shiamala Baby of the FORWORD project at the project's head office in Tambaram. From there we travelled via road to Kalpakkam where the Indian government's Madras Atomic Power Station is located. The Reward project was founded and is run by scientists working in this Atomic Power Station. My meeting with the project's trustees happened at the residence of Mr.Sridhar who is the founding trustee of the project and the primary contact of the project for Asha. We reached his house around 1pm and were treated to lunch after which we discussed the project.

Over the course of the next 4 hours I discussed the project with Mr.Sridhar his wife Kalavathi (who was also a trustee of the project) and two other trustees. Also joining our discussion was Ms.Shiamala baby and one of the Reward appointed teachers who happened to join us by chance for a part of the discussion.

History:

My first question to the trustees was about how this Reward trust happened to come into existence. Mr.Sridhar informed me that for the past 3+ decades (started in 1987 long before Reward came into existence) he has had students from the villages surrounding the Atomic Power station reside at his house and get higher secondary and collegiate education. When he and his wife witnessed the poor state of the schools and more importantly the lack of opportunities for higher education in the area (beyond primary and middle school), they began to literally adopt children from the surrounding areas who were interested in continuing their education and have them stay at their house for the duration of their study and provided for their education and day-to-day expenses completely. In this manner they have been supporting at least 2-3 students every year for the past several years. Even when I was there I was introduced to one student who was staying at their house and pursuing a degree in dentistry. This was how they got involved

in supporting the education of under-privileged children in the area. He mentioned that once one of the students who was staying at their house had performed exceptionally well in the state board exams and this led to an article in a newspaper about their efforts and this led to wide publicity for their cause. This led to more of his colleagues from the Atomic power station also adopting students and supporting their education.

From Left to Right: Mr.Sridhar, Mrs.Kalavathi Sridhar, Ms.Ananthi - another trustee of Reward and Ms.Shiamlabay of the FORWORD project

After reading about their efforts in the newspaper article several agencies and individuals came forward to support their efforts financially. At that time the group had been carrying out these efforts at a personal level and with their own personal budgets and did not really need financial backing for the same. But as the support increased they decided to think about other ways to utilize this support and financial assistance to improve the education infrastructure in the surrounding areas and that is how the project of Reward was born. They decided to focus on upgrading the schools of the surrounding region to make higher secondary education available in the region.

Functioning

The primary functioning of the project is to upgrade the government schools in the surrounding regions and appoint teachers for these schools (for the upgrading) until a time when the government is able to appoint teachers of its own. Usually the government has its own procedures and qualifying exams which government teachers have to pass in order to serve at a government school. And there is generally a dearth of government teachers especially for the higher grades. This being the scenario the government came up with the scheme where the local Parent-Teacher Associations (PTA) can upgrade the school on its own by paying a guarantee amount and then appointing teachers on its own and maintaining them until a time when the government can appoint teachers of its own. This is the scheme that Reward is utilizing in conjunction with the PTAs at the schools. So to explain the working of Reward in simpler words they hire and pay the salaries of teachers for government schools that do not have teachers currently until the government appoints teachers of its own.

Currently the project supports 52 teachers over 25 schools and thereby reaching out to 7500 students through their efforts. The average cost of supporting a teacher is Rs.1,00,000 (One Lakh) per annum (~ USD $2000) and the total budget comes close to Rs.50,00,000 per annum.

Even as you read this very simple description of the project the first question that would pop up into the minds of readers might be this: "_Why is this project trying to do something that the government is supposed to be doing?_"   This was the same question I had even before I visited the project.

The significance of Reward trust does not lie in what they are doing but how they are doing it. On the outside, it might seem to be just a case of financing teachers where the government cannot and we might lose interest in the project thinking about how the model cannot be scalable. But looking at the functioning of the project establishes that this project is not just about financing teacher salaries but actually a demonstration of how effective our government schools can actually be if the teachers were well selected, monitored, motivated and rewarded. For us volunteers who are often faced with the question about whether the Indian government school machinery can be fixed to graduate smart, capable and highly achieving students, this project stands as a testimonial that efforts in the right direction can definitely produce great results.

So how is the Reward project successful in improving the quality of education in the government schools and how do they go beyond just financing the salaries of the Reward appointed teachers and create a difference?

The answer is that the project has its own model for **recruiting, monitoring, motivating** and **rewarding** the teachers that they appoint. And they have demonstrated that this model is successful through the results that the teachers have produced over the past several years in terms of student's performance in the state board exams and other custom academic tests conducted by the project itself. I will discuss each of these dimensions briefly below:

Recruitment:

The Reward trustees are completely involved with the process of recruiting the teachers for the schools. As soon as they observe a necessity for a teacher in a particular school they start working with the PTA and the headmaster to appoint a teacher for the school. The trustees sit in on the interviews that select the teachers for the Reward appointed posts. It is important to point out that they cannot expect to find highly qualified individuals with excellent education background to appear as candidates for these interviews. If they had a good solid background they would probably be teaching at a private school that pays better or be at another government school where the work load in much lesser. So they have to select the best of what they are offered. Even so, they try to identify the candidates who are motivated and who would be ready to put in the best effort to educate the students.

Monitoring:

This is probably the most important part that contributes to the success of the project. The project has very high standards for the teachers that they appoint. These teachers are made to work much more than the other government appointed teachers in the same school. They are required to attend frequent training session organized by Reward project that is conducted by both trustees of the project as well as other resource personnel from other areas who volunteer the time. In these training session they are trained on several different aspects of education and their own areas. They also attend sessions with other Reward-appointed teachers where they get to share their experiences and brainstorm and come up with ideas to more effectively teach their students. If they have any questions about the subject matter that they are teaching these training sessions offer a good opportunity for them to clarify these doubts and even learn about newer topics.

The teachers also have to constantly update the trustees about the performance of the students and also their functioning. This includes performances of the students in the term exams conducted in the school as well as other tests.

SMART TESTS: Every year the Reward project team conducts a SMART test in subjects like Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry and Biology. These tests are modelled after national academic intelligence tests and are meant to test the ability of the students. The exams are put together by the Reward project trustees. The teachers are the first set of people who actually have to take these tests. This acts as another mechanism by which they can test the quality of the teachers that they have appointed. Once the teacher's answer sheets are corrected by the trustees then the top x% of students from each school take these tests as well and the top performers among the students are awarded every year (The funds for these awards are actually from the trustee's pockets and not from the Asha budgets).
Sample test : http://www.ashanet.org/projects-new/documents/590/QEDNov112.pdf

Summer Projects: During the summer each of the teachers has to do a summer project in their area of teaching. This is basically an in-depth study of a particular topic in their area and a report at the end of the summer about what knowledge they have gathered. For example a teacher of Botany can do a project about different plants growing in that region or a language teacher can do a project about the etymology of words and letters. I was shown some of the project reports made by the teachers from previous years and I was amazed by the amount of effort they had to put in.

When looking at all these efforts it looked like each Reward-appointed teacher was putting in at least twice the amount of effort put in by the government appointed teachers (at least in terms of time required).

Motivation and Rewards:
The teachers are constantly motivated to perform better. Since there is someone that actually cares about their progress and performance the teachers are constantly encouraged to put in their best effort. Also they understand that they can keep their jobs only if they perform better every year and so the complacency that sets in with most government teachers does not happen here. Teachers who perform better are actually rewarded with better salaries over the course of time so they know that their financial returns are also based on their performance. Also they understand that this job is a stepping stone for them. They understand that there is a value addition happening to them by sitting through the training sessions, taking the extra exams and doing the summer projects and so they are actually becoming more employable. As a result some of the teachers actually get better jobs at other schools of institutions and leave eventually but while they work here they are motivated by the fact that they are becoming better teachers every day,
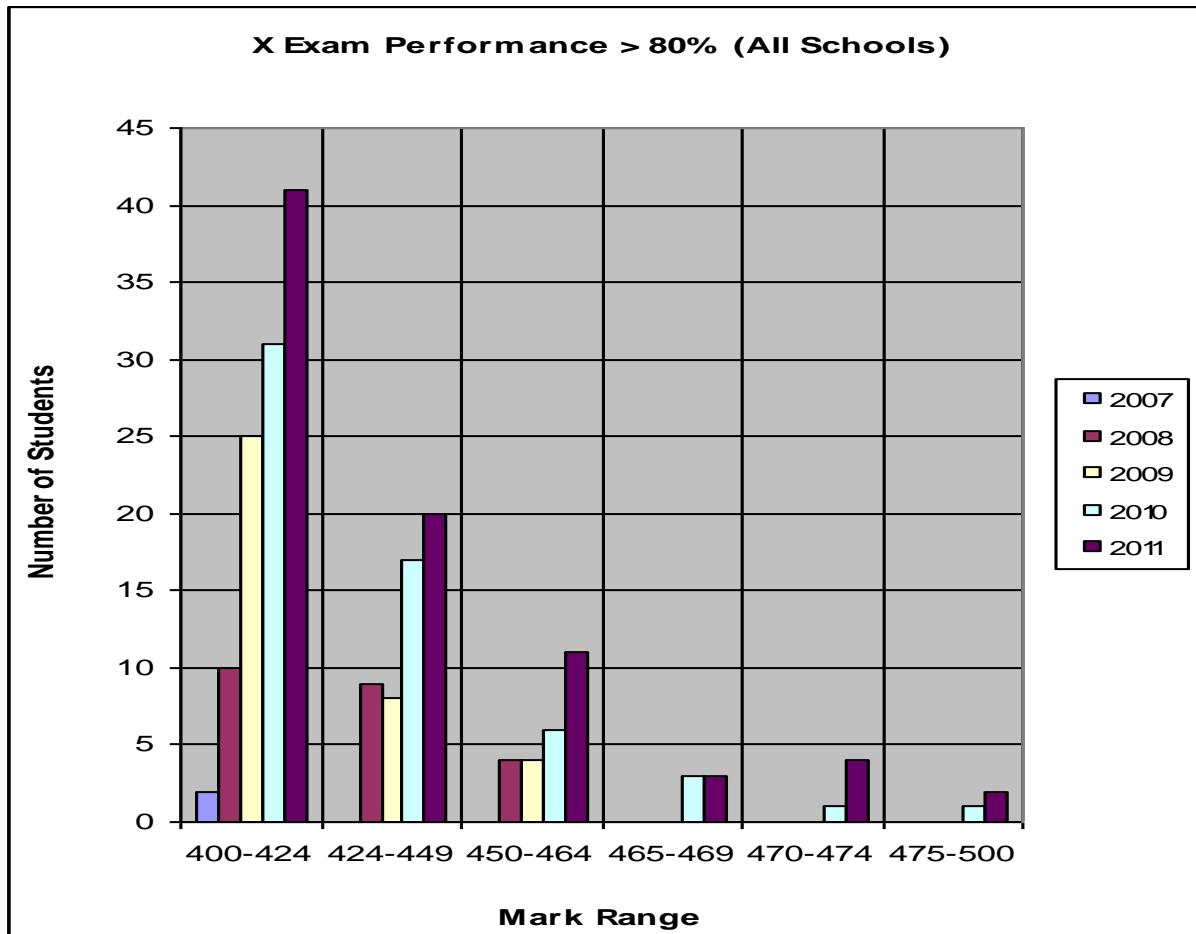
Results:

One of the greatest advantages of this project is that they have data to support the fact that their project is a success. They shared with me results in board exams by the schools that had Reward appointed teachers and in specific the performance of the students in the subjects that had Reward-appointed teachers Vs government-appointed teachers. I include a sample graph to show a sample of their success story:

X Exam Performance > 80% (All Schools)

Y-axis: **Number of Students** (0 to 45)

X-axis: **Mark Range** (400-424, 424-449, 450-464, 465-469, 470-474, 475-500)

Legend: 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011

Conclusion:

To conclude this report I would like to highlight what I think are the advantages and disadvantages of this project.

Pros:
1. The project is a wonderful demonstration of how by a well-researched and well-implemented model we can improve the quality of education provided at government schools in India. For this one reason alone I think this project can be

an interesting case study for any volunteer interested in improving the quality of education in India.

2. Dedication of the project team in India: The trustees of the project are phenomenally involved with the project and their dedication and commitment to the cause is highly commendable. Looking at the amount of effort and time that each one of the trustees puts in into this project every single week amazed me. Given that each and every trustee was doing this for a completely voluntary reason, where not paid anything from the budgets and had full-time jobs as scientists at one of the premier institutions in the country it was heartening to see that each one of them put in at least 10 hours of their time every week towards the functioning of the project.

3. It works! The detailed results that the team has provided over the past few years has shown that the project actually has a significant impact on the quality of education and they have several metrics to show the improvement including the number of students who get more than 80% in the boards exams and the number of students who graduate to enter premier professional colleges in the country.

4. Data that the project maintains: From my personal experience I have seen that a common problem with projects in maintaining information about the functioning and results of the project's implementation. I think with this project we are lucky to have highly educated individuals who are well-versed with technology and also understand the importance of maintaining records about the project and its success stories. As a result we have well-maintained accounts of the project which lends itself well for interested volunteers to analyze.

5. Influence on government teachers: The Reward-appointed teachers actually indirectly motivate the government-appointed teachers to perform better when they see the results produced by the Reward-appointed teachers.

6. The team has also been working on finding other more reliable sources of funding. They are trying to get 1000 people who promise to pitch in Rs.5000 every year thereby covering their entire budget and are in the process of gathering these people. Of last count they said they were able to fund ~150 people (well-wishers, friends etc.) who are ready to contribute to this cause but will need more time to gather 1000 people.

   CONS:
1. The budget is humongous. At the current estimate the project required close to Rs.50 lakhs per annum to support the salaries of the teachers. This is very much in line with the work they do and the salaries that they pay are actually much lesser than the salaries paid by the government for similar teachers but still the numbers are staggering for any chapter to consider funding the project on its own.

2. Scalability: Although the project is successful, if the team wanted to increase the coverage area, no of teachers, salary or the number of schools supported then there would be a corresponding linear increase in the budget.

I want to end with a disclaimer that all the information presented here is what I have gathered based on my own research and site visit and there might be a possibility of errors as most of this information was gathered hearsay during the meetings. Also the views expressed are solely mine and do not reflect stand of my chapter or Asha in general.