Payir Site Visit, July 2016, Meera Sitharam

My father provided his car for my transport to Payir with my children and Kumar from Srirangam, one of my father's employees who is well-known to Payir. As usual, we took a batch of vegetables for the Payir cook to prepare for the Payir staff, fruit and packets of biscuits for the school kids and spent the day there.

I spent the day attending one or two classes, meeting the teachers and attending a parent-teacher meeting, as well as talking to Senthil and Preeti. My kids mingled with the Payir school kids as usual, and the older one interviewed and recorded Senthil.

Classes
The classes were disrupted somewhat because they were practicing for an annual cultural variety show. They proudly showed me many photographs of last year's cultural event. They are particularly proud of the human pyramid, yoga and other such shows that they put on. Physical education appears to be one of their favorite class periods and the PE instructor who visits everyday is enthusiastic and accordingly popular.

I was still able to attend one or two classes that were in progress. One of them (a math class) was somewhat disrupted by kids from another class whose teacher had to be treated for a virulent allergic rash contacted from caterpillars. The teacher was experienced but too rigid in her lesson plan to accomodate those kids; It took my intervention before those kids quieted down and were somewhat absorbed into the lesson.

The Payir school kids are cheerful, relatively healthy looking, active and saucy, and a significant fraction of them are highly engaged during lessons and seem to genuinely enjoy the lessons.

The high school coaching as well as govt. school intervention programs appear to be still going on, the local govt. school kids seem to be doing ok in the govt public exams, but overall, I heard less about it.

In particular, I did not hear about any recent students joining the Collector's 11th/12th grade special program for high scoring kids. Perhaps the teachers have too much on their hands, especially since there are higher grade residential kids at Payir that need to be taught as well.

Progressive teaching values

The teachers, albeit rural, have absorbed the essence of progressive teaching values from their various trips to alternative schools over the years from Krishnamurthy school in Rishi Valley, Puvidham and Thulir in Dharmapuri, Marutham in Tiruvannamalai etc. They told me about another such recent trip they had taken to an alternative school (I believe it was Sholai holistic, environmental and self-sufficient school in Palani, but I could be mistaken).
The meeting with the teachers brought forth more or less the same issues as last time; many of them were echoed during the parent-teacher meeting. See below under "concerns and suggestions."

When I was asked to speak during the parent-teacher meeting, I emphasized that the goal of education is not to place the student in some stable situation in life (far from the marginal existence of the parents) where they can securely park, but to instill and develop in the student the capacity for confidence, curiosity, concentration, and motivation to make progress towards maximizing individual and community potential no matter what situation they find themselves in.

**Discussing theory of change**

While talking to Senthil and Preeti, I transmitted Charity Navigator's mandate to AfE chapters, namely to come up with a theory of change.

Senthil and Preeti sat with me for a period of time explaining where they had started, how far they had come and where they wanted to go. In addition, my older daughter recorded an entire interview with Senthil where he explained the various projects that he has undertaken there, from community health education and referral service, to progressive education, intervention in government schools, livelihood opportunities, organic farming and building initiatives. She should have the recording edited and ready at some point over the winter break.

Perhaps most striking was the realization that "participatory" was not an adjective to which Senthil had initially given any importance when he began social entrepreneurship. Neither was "cooperation with government."

Yet today his enterprise would not only have the weight of democratic authority, but also not function at all without several locally recruited staff/beneficiaries participating fully and taking ownership, and without the District government officials offering support. He is able to entirely delegate day to day running and minor decision making to his staff, trusts them to more or less uphold his values (perhaps not yet the more subtle or radical ones), and consults them on strategic and long-term decisions.

**Changes since last year**

Since last year, a building has been completed and more building is underway.

A brand new website (much needed) has also been rolled out.

The two "new" initiatives of last year have now taken root and become fixtures: (i) the preparation and distribution of a nutritious snack to girls to various government schools in
Alathur block, funded partly by the district government; and (ii) the lodging and education of several residential as well as differentially abled students, funded by Sarva Shiksha Abhyan.

The education of the older students in (ii) above is combined to some extent with the government school intervention/coaching program.

A "certificate" that they can hang on the wall has been given to the Payir school (no one seemed to be really clear whether this completes the certification process, although they suspect not). Recall that they have been waiting for certification of the Payir school for a couple of years now, while holding out from paying any bribes to accelerate the process.

**Concerns and Suggestions**

**Teachers' concerns**

Many (albeit not all) of the teachers have imbibed strong progressive values in teaching due to their exposure to various alternative schools (see above). They are torn between those values and the more rote learning demanded by the local parents.

To add insult to injury, the head teacher, who has also been in charge of the government school intervention, coaching etc. has taken his girl out of Payir school and sent her to the local government school. He is not one of the flag bearers of progressive teaching even at Payir, although all teachers seem to accept his leadership, perhaps because he is male and also dependable, humble and easygoing. He related how difficult his daughter found the atmosphere at the government school where the students are stifled and are not allowed to question the teachers' pronouncements.

Many parents feel the same dilemma about Payir's unrecognized/uncertified status as well as its ambiguous stance about rote learning or factory-like training for state public exams. The enrollment is sinking and is held up only due to the Sarva Shiksha Abhyan kids. The teachers are inadequately paid and there is a sense of instability as to the school's future.

One teacher felt that their only hope to defy these expectations is if they had a fluent english speaker and a few outside children entirely committed to the school (as in the case of alternative schools that they visited).

**Parents' concerns**

The parents who attended the gathering seemed equally divided between those who were concerned about the certification of the school, whether the kids were being rote-drilled enough, whether the kids who studied there would do well in the government public exams etc; and another much smaller group which cared about wholistic education for their kids.
These included parents with differentially abled kids, but also one very vocal parent who felt that the teachers were not progressive enough! She claimed that she had moved her kids to this school from a more rigid matriculation school and was disappointed to find that the teachers here were instilling the same rote-education values. The teachers claimed that this particular parent was given to histrionics which had to be taken with a pinch of salt. I tend to agree with them.

**Tracking kids who leave Payir school or Payir's intervention programs**

It is extremely important and long overdue that Payir keeps track of the kids who leave its care. Each year, I ask about the various kids who leave Payir school or those who leave the local high schools, perhaps after attending Payir's coaching classes. It seems that there is no effort at all made to track them. This can be done via the kids’ families. Maintaining such an alumni community network is crucial for longterm sustainability of Payir's education efforts. THIS IS A MUST DO, and Asha-Uflorida should categorically demand it.

**Cashflow issues**

Both the nutrition program (i) above and the residential/differentially abled program (ii) above apparently do not provide the funding necessary for execution without compromising quality. So they have to dip into their donations to break even.

The school too has such issues. Not including the RTE quota that Payir is obliged to admit for free, several parents seem to feel entitled to not pay tuition, thinking Payir has funding from elsewhere. The book and other instructional material, uniforms etc. are also provided by the school and parents are unwilling to bear the costs. As mentioned above, the teachers are still inadequately paid.

(This may not be relevant, but I am not sure whether Payir's livelihood programs, i.e., womens' self-help group's tailored and other goods are breaking even, or whether they still require support from Friends of Payir.)

**Planned redirection of effort:**

Senthil and Preeti say that they wish to redirect a substantial part of their energies into more activist pursuits towards socioeconomic change (gender equity and uncompromising progressive education being key activist missions which would require cultural and political policy advocacy to challenge the existing power structure).

So far, they have relied on a positivist developmentalist approach -- i.e., finding and developing resources within the current power structure. It is understandable that the two approaches are often conflicting (but can coexist, as Timbaktu's battle with unthinking energy companies illustrates). The conflict arises because a developmentalist approach invariably requires the
cooperation of those who hold the reins of power in the current power structure, whereby it becomes very difficult to challenge the current power structure without hurting the beneficiaries of the sought-for development. Nevertheless, overall, it is heartwarming to see how far Payir has come since its founding using purely positivist developmentalist approaches.

And I would certainly hold out hope that a reformist combination of activism and developmentalism, while difficult strategically, is in fact possible. However any reformist's leverage to negotiate reform comes from the counterweight demands of independent, purely activist actors (who challenge the power structure even if it hurts the beneficiaries of a developmentalist approach).