Site Visit Report

Project: Payir
Date: Jan 29, 2018
Volunteer: Ravi Venkatraman
Affiliation: Volunteer and Project Steward, Asha-U.Florida

Background

Payir was founded in 2004 January by Senthilkumar Gopalan an engineer who had worked in India and US in various industries ranging from Thermal Power Plants to Information Technology.

Vision:
Payir envisages the transformation of Indian villages into a socially stimulating, self reliant, growth oriented community rooted in the principles of Truth - a society where people practice and interact with the highest moral values. Payir focuses on holistic community development, which includes various aspects such as healthcare, nutrition, education, self-employment etc. The objectives of Payir with respect to education are outlined below:

1. Payir believes that the eventual ownership and implementation of ideas of holistic community development should come from and be owned by the community having its own set of leaders/experts. The existing learning environment does not provide scope for the development of such leaders/experts- leaders in local village governance; in areas of rural arts, crafts and culture; in local ecology; in traditional practices of farming, health and engineering; in local water bodies management and such areas of expertise which focuses on holistic rural empowerment and development. The learning center is an effort in line to nurture such leaders by working with a small set of children from their formative years.

2. The intervention program aims to introduce a number of systemic changes needed to increase the percentage of attendance at government school around Thenur:
   a. By making school more engaging and activity oriented for students
   b. Creating the right environment in terms of infrastructure, social education to parents and community at large on shift on attitude towards holistic education.

3. The project will also provide for temporary accommodation for children of migratory workers which will not hamper their education.
Site Visit Background

I have been one of the stewards for this project since 2014. However, owing to the distance from my home in Chennai and lack of time during my home visits, I was not able to visit Payir in Thenur during any of my prior trips to India. This time, I was able to visit Thenur and meet Senthilkumar and the Payir team. The visit was an informal one, for me to learn and understand more about Payir. I was flexible in the duration of my stay. I stayed at Thenur for 4 days. I arrived at Trichy from Chennai on the morning of Saturday, Jan 27, 2018. After resting and refreshing at Senthil’s home in Trichy, we left for Thenur. I spent time with the Payir team on Saturday, Jan 27 and Monday, Jan 29. During this time, I got the opportunity to interact with members of various Payir teams – education, health, nutrition and women’s self-help (bag-making) groups. This report outlines my learnings and experiences from the education team on Monday, Jan 29th and Wednesday, Jan 31st. I spent majority of my time visiting the different government schools and lesser time than I would have liked at the Payir school. Description of my interaction with other teams is outlined in a separate site visit report for Senthilkumar’s Fellowship.

Site Visit Experience

Government Schools
I visited three government schools where Payir teachers are working. Saranya, a teacher at the Payir school, obliged to take me around on her two-wheeler. She made good conversation as she drove me around, explaining about each school and Payir’s role in it. I met the Payir teachers, some of the government school teachers or the headmaster at each school but did not interact much with the children at the government schools (part of the reason being I felt uncomfortable interrupting them during their studies and did not know how to interact in the limited time. I was able to interact with kids at the Payir school later during the day.)

School visits
We went to one government school which was constructed by Payir. It looked relatively new and the walls had colorful art work appropriate for primary school children. I met the headmaster (HM) at the school. An interesting point he mentioned was that the primary challenge faced by the teachers at his school, especially the senior ones, was the amount of administrative work they had to undertake, other than regular teaching activities. He mentioned that some teachers were involved in administrative activities up to 70% of the time – performing paper work for the government, interacting with officials, visiting other schools or centers for paperwork or training etc. This leaves them with less time and motivation to engage in teaching. At another higher secondary
school, the HM spoke about the improvement of the students with the Payir teacher who was assisting with mathematics. The understanding of students improved within a span of one year, with the results showing in their performance increasing from the 40s to 80s. Teachers from multiple schools highlighted the reducing strength in the government schools due to enrollment in private schools.

Payir teachers are trained to assist in teaching in government schools with the right framework and tools. That is certainly not to say that all government school teachers lack the right resolve or training. One such government school teacher I interacted with was at an Adi Dravidar school (school for Dalit children). He seemed extremely passionate and genuine in his concern for students and the quality of education that was being imparted in schools currently. He narrated incidents on when he and his colleagues themselves took initiatives to go in search of children from the village who had skipped school and counsel them to attend.

ABL (Activity Based Learning) methods
In primary classes, children were clustered in groups studying or performing activities according to the ABL charts. This was really the first time I had a good look at the ABL charts and techniques. The basic concept made sense – incorporate more hands on/group activities to encourage learning and cluster children into smaller groups. Clustering helps interaction between students, and groups children of similar pace together as opposed to the entire class proceeding at the same pace. The teacher oversees the activities and marks the level of each child in the chart for each week. If tracked meticulously, this would provide a lot of information. However, most teachers informed me that the charts are fudged by other teachers (interestingly, in all my visits, I never encountered any of the “other” teachers. No one acknowledged fudging the records themselves). The records are altered to show suitable progress to the local authorities. The local governing bodies, and subsequently the state, is incentivized to show good progress. Besides the flawed implementation, some teachers expressed their concerns with the ABL methods itself. They preferred the conventional classroom with a chalkboard type method for all days.
Slow learners
We visited a school where the Payir teacher was dedicated to help “slow learners” from the school. Slow learners are those who are lagging a lot compared to their grade and need special attention. An example would be children going into 5th grade without knowing basic math or even to read or write. One of the reasons for slow learners is the flawed implementation of the ABL charts highlighted in the previous section.

I learnt that the previous year, the Payir teacher was facing a batch of 30 students going into 5th grade who could not read or write. Within three months, 7 of them were able to merge with the regular batch of children in their grade. By the end of the year, all of them were able to read/write. This was a laudable effort, since what this effectively does is reduce 30 dropouts before 5th grade itself. These children would at least have elementary level of education before they take on other endeavors. Payir has consistently used 3-4 teachers over the past year exclusively to assist slow learners. At the end of the day though, this is still addressing the symptom rather than the cause, which I think can be traced back to teacher effectiveness at primary levels.
A matter of concern I noticed in a couple of schools was the attitude of the government school teachers or even the HMs towards the slow learners. In early classes, (2\textsuperscript{nd} or 3\textsuperscript{rd} grade), there was an expected mix of very bright and keen learners, regular paced students and “slow learners”. These slow learners were clearly the ones who would go on to be affected later. While discussing about this, the teachers consistently pulled out some students and cited them as “dull” students. They did not seem to have the slightest inclination that just labeling the child publicly in this fashion would have a detrimental effect on his learning (I noticed this from two government school teachers). The teacher training, sensitivity, and skills at the primary levels clearly needed assistance, which was what Payir was helping with.

Summary
In line with the Payir’s vision for intervention in government schools, the teachers from Payir are assisting in creating a better environment in the schools near Thenur. A better environment is created not only for the children, but for other teachers as well. All teachers gave favorable reviews about Payir’s involvement. In fact, at the time of writing, another government school has reached out themselves to Payir to aid in teaching. The equations between teachers seem cordial, with both Payir and government teachers learning from each other.

Payir School

Status
After many years of deliberating between a non-formal center and a regular school, the Payir school is moving back towards a non-formal format now. One of the reasons for this is the delay by authorities in granting recognition because Payir refuses to pay them off.

The school itself is a compact campus right next to the Payir administrative office. It has a couple of rooms interconnected with one other, and a playground adjacent to the classrooms. The school is structured with separate grades (I, II, III etc), an overall curriculum and dedicated teachers. In the primary classes, teachers were mostly conducting lessons in small groups and the learning based on group activities and story-telling. There is a good focus on extra-curricular activities – arts, karate and outdoor activities (this can be seen from the timetables shared below).

Teachers independent
From my conversations with the teachers and attending of monthly meetings and other discussions, I noticed a few aspects – the teachers seemed genuinely interested in their role at the school and progress of the children, and they seem to be putting forth their own perspectives to improve the
There is a good structure to encourage this. One such example was a monthly meeting of all Payir teams that I attended. The education team discussed recent updates, challenges faced during the previous month.

In this meeting, the teachers discussed the training camps they attended over the past year. These have been very useful, not only for improvement in teaching skills but to boost their self-confidence overall. Many of them have not wandered outside their village by themselves before. The experience of navigating their way through different towns boosted their morale. However, one challenge discussed was the reservation of the family members, especially when they had children to take care of. There was a prolonged discussion on how to resolve this, with suggestions ranging from planning ahead to make alternative arrangements to counselling for family members etc. There was no concrete resolution to this challenge, but it was encouraging to see the education team debating ideas themselves.

2: Monthly meeting at Payir where all teams present their updates and suggestions
Children at Payir school

I was more comfortable sitting around in the Payir school than at the government schools because most of the teachers were familiar faces. I attended an English and a Math class for some time. In both the classes, I observed the girls were more attentive, while some of the boys were distracted. Math classes are taught by Pachaimuthu sir (who coordinates the overall activities of the Payir education team at the ground level). The notebooks were very neatly maintained and as I interacted with the children, it seemed like they had most of their basic geometry covered. Some trick questions that I tried were not well understood by the children, though (like drawing a 270-degree angle using a 180-degree protractor).

There is usually some play time during the day, with smaller children in the playground right outside the school building and the teenage boys playing volleyball in the court outside.
4: English class in Payir school

5: English class at Payir school
6: Math class at Payir school

7: Playground outside the Payir school
Data Collection
I had been interested in studying the progress of Payir through long term data collection. Payir has been partnering with Asha for over a decade now. Though we know Payir has made tremendous progress over the years, there is no comprehensive study to visualize this, and to portray to other volunteers or donors. While discussing this with Senthil and Preeti, they were cautious about reducing the development of a community to mere numbers. While I agreed with that, I felt it would be beneficial to track some metrics in the long term. We decided it would be a good idea to start with a basic ASER test analysis on Payir school children. The ASER test is a simple test to assess if a child can read and do basic math. The structure and frequency of this analysis is yet to be laid out.

Summary
The Payir school is functioning independently on a day to day basis, with teachers making decisions on execution matters with the guidance of Pachaimuthu sir. When related to strategical thinking, Senthil’s assistance is sought. The children are developing well at the school, especially the younger ones attending primary school. The school had to deviate from the original vision of grooming children with a holistic view to assist the growth of the rural community, but is now moving forward again with the original line of thought.

Action Items
During discussions with Senthil, the need for better documentation and communication was highlighted. The Asha-U.Florida chapter has requested more frequent communication from Payir since volunteers have not been kept updated on the progress at Payir. One of my goals was to establish a structure for communicating developments from Payir at the ground level. During the monthly meeting (held on the first Saturday of every month), I found the ideal way to do so. Each team of Payir, including the education team, presented their updates in four categories: general updates, positives, negatives and challenges. The responsibility of developing these updates alternated between members of each team and they were presented to the entire Payir team during the meeting. This documentation, if shared to Asha volunteers monthly, would be ideal. Since the documentation was already being done, the only additional effort was to translate it from Tamil to English and share it electronically.

After discussions with Senthil, it was decided that the updates from the monthly meetings would be shared with Asha-U.Florida through a Google Doc. Till a suitable translator was found in Thenur, a volunteer at Asha-U.Florida could help with translations.
Closing Remarks

Overall, my first visit to Payir after stewarding for couple of years was a great learning experience for me. Going forward, I will be able to relate to updates and discussions much more. The need for better communication between Payir and Asha-U.Florida was highlighted and a structure was established for the same.

It was a pleasant stay for few days at Thenur with Senthil and Preethi. I intended to return after a few days but was unable to due to conflicting plans. Payir has been a long-term partner with Asha for a good reason that the vision of both organizations is similar. Though faced with difficult situations, Payir has never compromised on the initial vision and has made leaps and bounds of progress on those lines. For that reason, many volunteers from Asha-U.Florida who have interacted with Payir have continued to maintain a personal relationship for years.