Site Visit Report

Project: Payir
Date: June 12th – 15th, 2019
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Site Visit Background

I am a new volunteer for this program. I learned of the existence of Payir in March 2019, from the University of Florida’s Asha for Education booth at a local cultural festival. I was immediately intrigued by the goals and principles of Payir, which focus on the holistic development of rural communities. A family trip to Tamil Nadu had already been planned for this summer, so I wanted to take the opportunity to visit Thenur and learn more about Payir in person. My mother (Revathi Rathinasabapathi) and I reached India by June 1st, and spent some time visiting with relatives. We traveled from Chidambaram to Thenur by car, and arrived at the Payir site on the morning of Wednesday, June 12th. We left on the morning of Saturday, June 15th. The visit was informal, and I took the opportunity to learn more about the initiatives of Payir and connect with everyone there. It was a really enjoyable stay, during which I visited each of the main areas of Payir – the residential learning center, Thoorigai (bag-making unit), Thinai (food production), and the clinic. I spent much of my time with the kids at Payir, doing activities and playing games with them. I made personal connections with many people at Payir, and hope to return in the future.

Education and Residential Learning Center

The students at Payir seemed very engaged and interested in learning. They were curious and inquisitive, especially when we first arrived. That Wednesday, I spent time with the kids in the evening, helping them with homework and getting to know them. They were excited to meet me, but were diligent in finishing their work. I helped them with some English spelling homework. Later on, some of them taught me; I can’t read or write Tamil, so when we were playing a drawing game, they showed me how to spell words in Tamil.

I visited a 2nd standard class the next day, during arts and crafts hour. We made different types of paper airplanes, and the kids really enjoyed it. On Friday, I observed a 3rd/4th standard class, during which the kids were practicing Tamil. They had a spelling test, and then recited songs and stories in Tamil, which seemed to hold everyone’s attention during class. The lesson was outside, in an informal setting, but all the students were listening, and were given the full attention of the teacher. I asked the teacher a bit about how the classes at Payir are structured, and she explained that an emphasis is placed on project-based learning. She also noted that, compared to government schools, Payir’s education center is less rigid in schedule, allowing for the kids to learn at their own pace in an encouraging environment. Short breaks for playing or snacks were given throughout the school day, which seemed refreshing for the kids.

Payir’s education program is very effective, as it is clear that the kids are interested in learning, even outside of class. I taught a few kids how to play a new board game (Scrabble) to practice their
English, and they all picked it up pretty quickly. It was also clear that, for the children at the residential center, subject material wasn’t the only thing being taught. Every morning, the children would practice yoga or some other physical activity, and then would carry out their duties for the morning (e.g. cleaning up the campus). Values of responsibility, diligence, and respect were instilled.

**Thoorigai – Bag-Making Unit**

This business unit was very impressive in its organization. Everyone we met with from the team was creative and resourceful. As they showed us their products and talked about their business on Thursday morning, I observed the high quality and variety of the bags they were making. They explained their business model and coordinated efforts to sell wares. At the time, they were planning a trip to Chennai to set up a booth for a few days at IIT. I was inspired by the story of how they first began Thoorigai and have carried their plans through to success. They did mention challenges about breaking even, given their current profit margin and sales. Because their bags are of very high quality, they set the prices a bit higher, but this makes their products harder to sell. Quality of products is firmly maintained at Thoorigai, so the current solution is to expand sales by establishing more stalls.

**Hospital & Health Program**

On Wednesday afternoon, my mother and I met with two members of the health committee to translate and summarize two English documents about the new proposal for the Payir nutrition project. The aim of the proposal was to get funding through Asha’s new Innovative & Scalable Project (ISP) fund. It outlined steps that would be taken to extend the AGASI study, so that at least 500 children (with BMI below the 5th percentile) could be monitored and fed nutritious snacks during the school year. This proposal expands age range and number of schools involved compared to previous years.

I asked questions about the previous years’ progress, and the committee members explained the benefits and difficulties of their work. They pointed out that one of the main benefits of the nutrition program, aside from preventing malnutrition, was encouraging kids to attend school. A marked improvement in attendance was seen through the implementation of the nutrition program.

Throughout the school year, children were educated about health and nutrition, and were convinced to eat the nutritional ladoos given. One of the difficulties mentioned by the workers was that it took longer to convince the younger kids to eat the snacks. This, they said, was a possible explanation for the lower success rates seen this past year, as the program focused on younger children. We also discussed possible improvements for data collection for the upcoming year. For example, keeping track of attendance by writing down the names of kids who don’t show up each day could help with data analysis later on.

On Friday morning, we sat in on the weekly meeting with health program representatives from surrounding areas (from 8-10 villages). Their explanations about their process of teaching and prescribing homeopathic remedies was interesting and enlightening. All the workers seemed highly trained and organized. Their main focus is prevention and awareness of diseases/illness.
Thinai – Nutrition Unit

Of the four workers at the Thinai nutrition unit, we met with two. I observed their manufacturing processes, which was very streamlined, precise, and focused on quality. Each ladoo’s mass was measured and adjusted to be uniform. We talked about how they aid in the nutrition program at government schools and at Payir. They also listed the different grains and other healthy ingredients used in Thinai products.

As a guest at Payir, I greatly enjoyed the food offered at the dining hall. It was delicious, filling, and clearly very healthy with a good mix of different grains and vegetables. I was also happy to notice that the kids were trained not to waste food, as they couldn’t leave without finishing what was on their plate.

Field Trip to Trichy

An outing was arranged for Friday evening. We rode the bus to Trichy, and went to the park. We all had a really fun time! The kids were very excited. We then went out to eat at a restaurant. There was an organized system for keeping track of the children, including pairing up older kids with younger ones. A few of the kids who were most likely to wander were given bright neon shirts to wear, so an eye could be kept on them. We returned to Thenur by bus late at night. It was a great trip, and a great chance to bond with everyone!

Concluding Remarks

The work done at Payir is truly impressive, and our visit was both enjoyable and educational. Unfortunately, Mr. Senthilkumar was ill during our visit, and thus Dr. Preethi was out of commission. We did not get to spend much time with them, but we were well-taken care of by everyone else at Payir. I felt very welcome there, and I am extremely glad that I got to meet such amazing people. I certainly look forward to visiting again in the future, and would like to do all I can as a volunteer with the University of Florida chapter of Asha for Education. I’m truly inspired by the work done at Payir, and would like to aid in the fundraising process through the university.
Pictures

Visiting the Thoorigai Team
Variety of Bags in the Making

Meeting With Members of the Health Committee
Making Paper Airplanes
Short Break On the Playground