Site Visit Report - March 1, 2020

Background

Senthil Gopalan, a mechanical engineer, who worked in corporate sector for 10 years, started Payir in the year 2005 at Thenur, Perambalur District, Tamil Nadu to work with the rural community. The educational programs at Payir is been partly funded by Asha since 2009. In 2017, Senthil was accepted as an ‘Asha Fellow’ to help in focus on the diverse projects of Payir and also take up new projects. He has received fellowship in 2 of the last 3 years, with no disbursal in 2018-19.

My meeting with Senthil was scheduled as a part of my Asha Cycling Tour across 5 different projects supported by Asha. You can read more about the cycling tour in my blog here - www.balaji.run. I did not have any specific agenda and wanted to engage in general discussion on how he sees the support from Asha, his commitment towards his fellowship, and other social issues concerning Payir. It was a freewheeling chat for over two hours during which we discussed his various projects, the challenges, support from Asha, social concerns, and his outlook for the future.

Asha Fellowship - Expectations, Projects and Timeline

The uniqueness of Asha fellowship is that it is not time-bound and does not have a rigid framework of deliverables. Fellows have the choice of projects to choose and are evaluated annually by their efforts. The goals of the project are allowed to evolve with each year’s work rather than start with a defined target. I was trying to understand about Senthil’s view on these. Firstly, the fellowship funds himself as he doesn’t have any other avenues to fund his work. He does not take any remuneration from Payir trust and prefer to keep his personal expenses outside it. Further, the funds raised for Payir are for specific projects whereas the role of Senthil extends beyond it. Second, the fellowship provides him with an opportunity to think outside the current activities of Payir. The recent outcome has been his initiatives in bringing watershed management with the help of farmers in the region. Third, the fellowship enables to him to think outside his current roles. For instance, he wishes to focus over the next few years is to bring in the next line of leadership to the various projects of Payir; and possibly, have the third line of leadership during the next 5 years for various projects.

Taking their message beyond...

I tried to understand his perspective on the role of Asha fellows beyond the projects they directly serve in. The experience that they undergo in their current projects certainly serve as a reference, at times even an inspiration, for projects and individuals in the social sector. Some ways of getting involved includes participation in conferences, workshops, and visiting other Asha projects. Senthil has given a TEDx talk at IIM, Trichy in 2013 (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Iz2clQgJ-VY). It is important that their works are showcased in various forums and it helps them to define their work better. Unfortunately, many Asha fellows prefer to keep a low profile and it deters them from speaking about their work.
Projects involving Behavioural Changes

There are projects that requires a change in the behavioural pattern of the community. Senthil has actively involved himself in bringing healthy eating habits to the community that helps in controlling levels of malnutrition, and life-style diseases. The other project he proposes is about educating the people on their civic duties. These projects don't have a definite time period or milestones for easy measurement. Asha Fellowship provides an avenue for active social workers in devoting time for such projects.

Relationship with Asha

The financial support from Asha in form of fellowship stipend is very much appreciated by Senthil as it come with no strings attached. However, the role of Asha can certainly go beyond the financial support. When asked, Senthil offered a few ideas to make the partnership more meaningful. He suggested that Asha can introduce internships for students and professionals who can spend few months in Payir and understand problems at grassroots level. Such internships should be of minimum duration of 2-3 months as it will take time for the interns to get used to rural settings. The role of steward was also discussed and an active role is envisaged.

I recommend that Senthil should be asked to address one of our all volunteers town hall meetings.

Meeting with Farmers

In the evening, Senthil had organised a meeting with the farmers in the area about the watershed management of the region. I was present in the meeting as an observer. Senthil had done extensive research on the survey maps of the region over years and had got the archives from various sources. He tried to explain the farmers how the Kalathur lake has become barren over years because the canals bringing water from the Pachamalai hills have been blocked by roads and other construction works. The lake is currently filled with Prosopis juliflora, an invasive species of plants, that uses scarce water. Payir will initiate removal of these species of plants from the lake with their funds in the first stage of the project.

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