Payir Site Visit Report (May and August 2011)

Part I

By Praveen Gopalakrishnan, Volunteer, Asha Portland
Days: May 21-23, 2011

Overall Impression
I found Payir to be a true grassroots movement, with significant involvement from the village community. I witnessed fruits of Payir work in improving education, health, agriculture, employment and general well being of the village community. The degree of friendship and respect Payir team and in particular Senthil Gopalan has with the village community is astonishing to see, with every child to elderly folk appreciating what Payir has done to transform their village.

Specific Comments
A very interesting factor I find in Payir is the use of technology in different areas such as e-learning center for education, e-health clinic, and the software services company to employ rural youth.

Mr Senthil Gopalan is a very inspirational person, the closest I have seen a ‘Gandhian’ with his work at Payir being his message.

Payir is doing great work to provide basic amenities and general well being of many village communities. I hope Asha and other NGO’s will continue to support their inspirational work.

Part II

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Getting to Thenur

The journey to Thenur, Tamilnadu, the project site for Payir, began on August 5th from Bangalore, Karnataka. Sanketh and myself booked our tickets (Sanketh paid for the tickets) from Bangalore and left the evening of August 5th to reach Srirangam, Tamilnadu (through Thiruvanaikoil) early morning of August 6th around 5:30am. The Sitharam family, which included Dr. Meera Sitharam, her parents, her lovely adorable daughters Kavina & Anusha and the folks in their extended mutual support system, was heartwarmingly welcoming and arranged for us to stay at their residence. Myself and Sanketh were picked up from Srirangam bus stop by Dr.
Sitharam. After taking a quick shower and a wonderful breakfast we headed to Thenur in Dr. Sitharam’s SUV accompanied by Senthil Kumar from Srirangam (NOT Payir Senthil). We carried along with us vegetables, biscuits and yogurt, purchased by Dr. Sitharam, for the kids and others at Payir. The journey to Thenur from Srirangam was a little more than an hour and the travel expenses (gas, etc) were borne by Dr. Sitharam’s family. As planned the 6 of us, Sanketh, Senthil Kumar, Dr. Sitharam, myself, Anusha and Kavina reached Thenur at 10am. Palani along with Dr. Shiva from IIT Madras got to Thenur from Chennai. The journey apart from accomplishing the purpose of a site visit for Payir, turned out to be the commencement of a mini reunion for a bunch of Gators and veteran Gators for Asha volunteers. The Gator Nation is truly everywhere!!

Meeting Senthil Kumar Gopalan

As first order of business, we headed to meet with Mr. Senthil Kumar Gopalan (Payir Senthil), the founder of Payir after handing over the food items to the cooks and caretakers. The excitement built up from the many conference calls and reading about Senthil in the news was just as real as Senthil himself. It was humbling, yet encouraging to see the relatively small home of the Payir founder. A well ventilated one room home had a bed, a table and a sought of an attached bathroom. The enclosure housing the one room & a bathroom also had a kitchen-cum-storage room. The aisle separating Mr. Senthil’s room from the kitchen had an open roof, which made a good path for natural light to come through. The size of the entire enclosure was comparable to many of the UF student’s apartment bedrooms. Clad in a white shirt, white dhoti and a pair of slippers, Mr. Senthil was equally excited to see and welcome the Gators. In essence, the first impression of Mr. Senthil could be described as a humble, no nonsense personality with the enthusiasm of a kid.

The Payir project site is a 6 acres piece of land, which has been donated to Mr. Senthil. The project site houses buildings for after school learning program, a residential school for a selected group of kids, e-learning center, Payir Innovations, domesticated animals and other facilities. A significant portion of the land is used for cultivation, which caters to some of the food requirements of Payir.

Introduction to the Payir team

Several members of the Payir organization, many of them who formed the original group, which helped realize the vision of Mr. Senthil, were introduced to the visiting folks. For the ease of keeping track of some of these folks a bulleted list is used for introductions:

- Preethi, a homeopath receiving fellowship from the youth collective of the community, was one of the first members who got introduced and stayed with the visiting team until late evening. The main responsibility of Ms. Preethi was to cater to the needs of the after school program. Apart from touring the visitors, Ms. Preethi showed some of the wonderful handloom work being carried out as part of Payir Innovations and convinced many of us to purchase them.
Mr. Manoharan and Ms. Thenuli, who were a part of the original team, took care of the accounts, health work (lab), dispensing medicines, purchase chores, farm activities and several coordination activities. The take away from the introductions of Mr. Manoharan and Ms. Thenuli was their ability to handle multiple responsibilities as locals. True to the belief of Mr. Sandeep Pandey that education most importantly empowers the common folks, the empowerment could be felt in these individuals and many of the organization members. While introducing these folks, Mr. Senthil pointed out that the original team consisted about 12 members.

Among the next group of folks introduced Mr. Senthil went on to point out each ones responsibility and their special talents. The farmers, Jayakundi, Santhanavandi, and Thirumati took care of cultivation the land, which contributed to some of the dietary needs of the kids.

Mr. Senthil then introduced Ms. Saroja, who he said was responsible for creating Satyamavam – a malt based powder used for making protein drink/shake. He also pointed out her excellent “rangoli” skills, which came in handy to teach it to the kids of Payir.

The Asha team got introduced to Mr. Karthik, a masters student in social work from the nearby Bishob Heber college (Trichy, Tamilnadu), who was on a 4 month internship program at Payir. It was encouraging to know that students such as Karthik were considering and making an effort to pursue social entrepreneurship as a career.

Next in line to meet with us were the highly skilled Ms. Arayi & Ms. Sarla. Mr. Senthil was quick in pointing out that Ms. Sarla carried out the responsibilities of a nurse at Payir, community health expert and quite amazingly also served as a panchayat (local governance) member. As we were getting introduced to these dedicated individuals, it was becoming evident that Mr. Senthil himself believed firmly in empowering the locals and made a conscious effort at it.

As with many of the folks at the center, another Mr. Senthil (NOT Senthil Kumar Gopalan) was introduced as an individual with multi-tasking ability, who took care of milk distribution in the village and was Payir’s point of contact with the esteemed Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) at Chennai, Tamilnadu. Payir, among other things, works with IIT, Chennai to produce organic manure for research purposes.

The team then met with Mr. Ponnudurai, a visionary and a team manager in Senthil’s own terms and Mr. Gajendran, whom he lovely called the head-man and a traditional healer. Both these individuals were also credited with the herbal garden activities at Payir.

Last but not the least, it was surprisingly heartwarming to meet the thoughtful Ms. Maithili. Although not a local, much like Ms. Preethi, Ms. Maithili could communicate in perfect English and yet was as humble at heart as one can be. Although primarily responsible as the health center coordinator/director, she was also the center physiotherapist, yoga & reiki trainer, English teacher and much more. She was trained as a senior level health worker and has been with Payir for the past 2 years. It was enlightening to learn that her mother also volunteered with Payir. Due to the language barrier and some social/cultural differences between the Asha team and Payir team, their interactions seemed to be limited in the beginning. Ms. Maithili stayed with the Asha team throughout the day and more
importantly acted as an efficient and effective connecting bridge between the Asha team and Payir members. Ms. Maithili also acted as the main tour guide and showed Asha team the many facilities at Payir.

To conclude the introductions, Mr. Senthil mentioned that there were about 10 support staff members for the learning center, which included about 7 teachers for the intervention program and 2 teachers for the gurukul (home school) program. The intervention program was being carried out in about 5 schools in and around Thenur. It was particularly interesting to learn that many of the teachers had gone from being 10th or 12th grade pass outs to acquiring bachelor degrees in education, literature (B.Ed., B.Lit.) and masters degrees in science and philosophy (M.Sc., M.Phil.)

Payir assessment session

By far, the most significant and interesting activity of the visit was the assessment session. Both, Mr. Senthil and the Asha team, were equally enthusiastic about getting to know each other’s expectations and most importantly learn from each other so a systematic, efficient & an effective approach could be adopted to oversee the operations of a non-profit organization like Payir. The session was arranged in the learning center, which in itself demonstrated the engineering ability of Payir members. The building was meticulously built making use of local resources and designed to be an efficient structure in terms of ventilation, light and temperature. Due to the limited resources available in a set up like Payir, its economically not feasible to have air conditioning or sufficient artificial lighting. To overcome this limitation, the building is constructed using special bricks, which are fabricated by the Payir team. To keep the indoors cool during summer & warm during winter, the length of the bricks forms the thickness of the walls and the meticulously designed cross ventilation makes for healthy breathing air. The features described here are just some of the many techniques adopted for efficient and sustainable operation.

The assessment session started with a keertana (hymn), which was followed by outlining some of the expectations of the visiting Asha team. The expectations were to reflect upon the need for the existence of Payir, its contribution to the local community and the justification of the role of Asha UFlorida chapter as a supporter and project partner. Due to the regular interaction of the project director (in this case Mr. Senthil) with an Asha chapter, it could be misleading in attempting to understand the contributions of a particular project through its director. In the spirit of transparency, the Asha team and Mr. Senthil encouraged the Payir members to directly communicate their thoughts in their mothertongue. Mr. Palani and Mr. Senthil translated the expectations of the Asha team to the Payir team in the form of questions Although, many of the Asha team members could communicate in the local language, Ms. Maithili was generous to translated the thoughts of Payir team for the rest. The following were the main aspects, which were discussed as part of the assessment session:

1. How does Payir contribute to holistic societal development, its focus on education and efforts for self sustainability (Sharan).
2. Payir’s involvement with Panchayat over the years, learnings from the past and how does the Payir team see itself as an extension of Panchayat (Sanketh).

3. What do kids do after primary education? Does Payir have any involvement in further their interests, either towards higher education or employment (Dr. Shiva)?

4. What is the occupational cross-section of the villages (Dr. Shiva)?

5. What kind of technological assistance does Payir seek and what are the societal needs (Dr. Shiva)?

6. How does the governance support intervention of Payir (Dr. Shiva)?

The Payir team made a conscious effort of answering all the above questions but the the Asha team concentrated on capturing the thoughts relevant to education and health care. Mr. Pachaimathu was entrusted with the responsibility of answering some of these questions in the local language. In his reply, Mr. Pachaimathu explained his thoughts on how the local folks at Thenur, just like everyone else, have the right to education, earning a livelihood for themselves and be a part of the mainstream competition for better livelihood. He explained how through the intervention program, Payir has been instrumental in affecting the pass percentage for many of the local schools. He pointed out that the schools have been able to demonstrate a 100% pass percentage for the 10th grade kids due to the intervention program, which has helped many kids realize the importance of a “life of value”. When asked about how the different elements of Payir were connected, Mr. Senthil taking the example of healthcare at Payir, explained how they focus on a holistic (curative and preventive) view of healthcare. Ms. Maithili further related to the idea of how everyone has the right to lead a healthy life and what Payir does to create situations, which help realize this awareness. She also pointed out that Payir believed in encouraging everyone to lead a healthy life so as to build a healthy community. Payir has been using government facilities and strengthening the existing facilities to do so. Dr. Shiva from IIT, Chennai, who was very much a part of the Asha UFlorida team on the day of the site visit, was curious to know if Payir was taking any measures to qualify the overall community health like child mortality rate, etc. In reply to Dr. Shiva’s question, Ms. Maithili mentioned that Payir maintained growth cards and monitored the weight of kids to gauge their health on a regular basis. Payir seeks help from government facilities like physical health center (PHC) and maintains an excellent rapport with it for maintaining some of the statistical data for the kids. In addition Payir also makes a conscious effort to work well with the village health center and the health inspector and vice versa. In certain special cases, Payir also seeks help from private hospitals through referrals. On a question about the use of technology (software) as a health monitoring system, it was pointed out that due to the time and resource constraints the use of technology was limited (monitoring child and maternal care). The overall focus on health care has resulted in an attitude change in the Anganwadi. The process of weighing was in itself a challenge at the beginning but now Payir is able to weigh about 120-180 kids and at the same time rationalize the importance of doing so to the kids and their parents.

While we were on the same discussion, the focus was now shifted to explaining the intervention program. Taking the example of one of the schools, it was pointed out that there was only one staff member for both the primary and high school when the Payir team approached it. The
school authorities, who were initially skeptical of the intervention, gradually accepted and welcomed it. As a result, presently trained teachers from Payir teach half of the classes in this school and are in charge. This has been the case for schools at Thenur/Thotiapat & Nathakadu. It was observed that the staff in these schools was irresponsible and performed their household chores during prayer time, took the class attendance, assigned homework and then went to sleep. Through intervention and help from the collector, although Payir was able to effect the staffs’ transfer, it created a negative image for the organization. But due to an observed improvement in the ability/interest of children to learn, the community realized the positives. From the incidents at Thenur/Thotiapat, the school authorities from Kalathur & Kannapadi requested teachers/staff from Payir to improve their schools. Due to the efforts of Payir (block resource teacher) all these schools have acquired a skill level of grade “A”, which positively reflects on the students and teachers. Its be noticed that the mid-day meals scheme being organized by the schools is not very attractive but due to the sensitive nature of the issue, Payir has not been able to attempt any intervention in this regard. Although, Payir has been able to provide morning food/breakfast (pongal, idli) to kids of Thenur/Thotiapat. As a consequence, a significant improvement has been noticed in the attendance and unlike in the past, kids are able to stay in school for the entire duration. On a question about whether the morning meal scheme could be realized and made sustainable through community involvement, Mr. Senthil pointed out that he is trying to introduce the concept of a grain repository called Kalanjiyam. To summarize some of the findings of the intervention program:

1. Morning meal/breakfast has been very effective in capturing students’ attention.
2. The village education committee is increasing its presence in the village.
3. Due to Payir’s persistent training efforts by organizing classes on Saturdays and Sunday (based on the activity based learning (ABL) for 1st – 5th grade & alternate schooling (ALS) for 5th – 8th grades methodology:
   a. Local school kids have been able to compete at a higher level and some of them have obtained high ranks in the region.
   b. About 40 students of 9th grade and 45 students of 10th grade have been able to acquire first class grades, unlike anything in the past.
   c. Out of a total of 500 marks more than 5 students of 10th grade have been able to score more than 400 marks and about 15 students have been able to score more than 350 marks. As a consequence many students are able to make a conscious effort at higher education unlike in the past.
   d. The student who acquired the 1st rank in the region was able to score 462 marks out of 500, which has made the community very proud.
4. As a special case Ms. Maithili and Mr. Senthil discussed their attempts to organize a meeting with Arvind eye hospital to accommodate 5 students for an ophthalmology course for 3 years, which could later provide a steady income. However, the arrangement couldn’t quite work out.

The assessment session was reconvened after a small break. During the second part of the session the focus was shifted to sustainability and process development. Both, Mr. Senthil and
the Asha team, agreed that a process was required to be in place for the long-term survival of Payir and its activities. Mr. Senthil pointed out that he could visualize the sustainability of such an organization in 3 categories. Each of these categories was discussed at length and inputs were provided by Asha team to Payir for realizing them. The discussions are recorded under the following categories identified by Mr. Senthil:

1. Process sustainability
   a. Mr. Senthil has identified 5 to 6 resources who are capable of furthering the activities of Payir.
   b. Ms. Maithili and Mr. Bala have been working towards formalizing and documenting the processes.
   c. Input from school children is being sought to develop the process of sustainability

Action Item with regards to process sustainability – Payir is looking for interns, locally and from outside. Asha UFlorida will discuss this in a meeting and possibly take it up with the central team to encourage prospective candidates.

2. Impact sustainability (Inputs provided by Asha team)
   a. The process could be explained in vernacular language but a metric was needed to quantify the outcome and compare.
   b. Interns could be used, which could be mutually beneficial, for designing and associating metric.

3. Financial sustainability
   a. Mr. Senthil pointed out that Payir Innovations has been instrumental in its efforts to sustain the non-profit activities of Payir
   b. Mr. Senthil also questioned the rationale and feasibility of self sustenance for education projects.

The assessment session was most benefitting for both teams (Payir and Asha). The session was concluded by some excellent performances from the gurukul children. The performance were to reflect upon their learning and Asha’s efforts. Among other things the children performed the following:

1. Story telling (Axe cutter & fairy) – One of the students was asked to narrate the story of the axe cutter and the fairy and reflect up on its moral.
2. Tamil poem recitation – Another kid was asked to recite a Tamil poem/song.
3. English poem recitation – As a group students recited two English poems (i) Twinkle Twinkle & (ii) Johnny Johnny yes pappa.
4. Karate demonstration – A boy and a girl demonstrated their karate skills, which were being taught as extra curricular activites. It was impressive to observe that the girl child was more skilled than the boy.
5. Riddles – The teachers also tested the students’ logical reasoning ability by asking them riddles.
6. Reading demonstration
7. Group activity – To assess their leadership and coordination skills one of the Asha volunteers directed a group activity performance.

The performance reflected confidence, a sense of belonging, enthusiasm and overall a positive attitude. It was exciting to see equal participation from both the boys and girls of Payir. The post assessment session was followed by further exploration of the many facilities of Payir. The e-learning center and the Payir Innovation center were particularly impressive considering the limited resources.

Conclusion

More than anything else, it was encouraging to experience the overwhelming positive vibe at the project site of Payir. If the goal of a site visit is to assess the functioning of a project then we could conclude that Payir is doing an extraordinary job of providing the much needed support for the education of underprivileged kids and as a consequence affect a socio-economic change in and around the village of Thenur. The support being extended by Asha UFlorida chapter is undoubtedly being used efficiently and effectively. As a visitor and Asha UFlorida volunteer I strongly recommend supporting Payir and approve of its work in accordance with the goals of Asha for Education

Part II

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August 13th, 2011

Things were a lot more peaceful on Aug 13th and I could get a good sense of the educational projects we support. I went alone - Senthil had organized an Autorickshaw from Srirangam to Thenur (I intend to pay for the autorickshaw charges). I took my lunch with me and returned by bus.

(l) Gurukul (Chutti school):

There are about 13 kids. 6-7 of them are in 3rd grade. A few, including one special needs, are new. Some kids from last year left. Sitting with several 3rd grade Gurukul kids, I looked over his/her folder of work from last year. They are doing reasonably.

The big difference from other kids of a similar socio-economic background from other places is that they are exposed to more and are not shy with outsiders like me - they are able to interact meaningfully. This is not only because they are exposed to such people, but also because they see the adults in their lives carrying themselves with a sense of self-confidence and purpose in
their daily work and with any outsiders they meet. Similarly, they seem able and willing (although I wouldn't say enthusiastic or driven) to handle intellectually stimulating and challenging situations and questions that they are unfamiliar with, and where instant success is not likely - i.e., they chip away at them using whatever they know. Many other children that are used to regular schools in India today (rural or urban) are uncomfortable and unwilling to deal with anything that requires intellectual effort, especially if it is outside their narrow boundaries of "school work."

Their teachers' relationship with them, while ensuring order and progress, is also a supportive and nurturing one. In many rural schools, the teacher is merely a somewhat frightening and unsympathetic authority figure. The teachers continue to maintain records (lesson plans, lessons completed, assessment of each child etc).

Recommendations:

Students continue to leave after 3rd grade to the regular schools (hence the name Chutti school). Parents continue to be doubtful about the Chutti school (Gurukul)'s progressive style of education. I suggest educational videos that show that this school is not a lone swan among ducks, i.e., that many other schools exist that encourage the unique features of the Chutti school's style. It would also help to give a clear idea of how higher grades would handled, including daily routine, pedagogical style and syllabus/educational goals. Since the regular schools' now follow the ABL method the differences aren't as stark as they would have been in the old days.

There was only one (steady and reliable) teacher for several months (after the other one left), until a couple of weeks ago (except for the health worker Mythili, who helped just with English). Now, thankfully, there are two teachers. It is not effective for a single teacher to handle such different ages and levels.

(IIa) Govt. Elementary school intervention:

There are about 5 Payir teachers who supplement the teaching at various local government elementary schools. About 5 of these go to elementary schools. This is a good thing, since the local schools elementary schools only have 1 principal and 1 teacher each. Although SSA (Sarva Shiksha Abhyan's) ABL (activities based learning) method is largely autodidactic, a child needs to interact with a teacher at least once a day. This is not possible for a single teacher (since the principal does not enter the classroom, apparently) to handle 40 kids of ages 5-10, at various levels. Furthermore, even the single teacher apparently takes off for various training sessions at least once a week, and has to spend a lot of time maintaining records of student progress as per the ABL requirements.
All of these Payir teachers hold education degrees obtained through correspondence courses. One of them is even an M. Phil! You may ask why these people are here. Although it is tempting to believe that they want to be part of Payir, the reality is different: Tamil Nadu is awash with education graduates seeking to snag one of the govt. school posts (well paid and secure). The phenomenon is similar to Engineering. Private colleges are factories churning out these education graduates, who pay a lot to the colleges in the hope of snagging one of these govt. posts or a well-paid private school post (rare). The govt. school posts are typically obtained through a combination of means: get a low paid "supplemental teacher" position for a few years at a govt. school or govt. aided school (in any case, one where govt. posts are (a) available (based on the student population) (b) fit the candidate's caste classification (c) the school's infrastructure permits those posts to be filled). The classic route is to work your way into the system and furthermore pay a (barely affordable, but still worthwhile) bribe to snag one of these posts. The posts are sanctioned at the district level. Teaching effectiveness is hardly a concern in choosing candidates.

Recommendation:

Whatever their ulterior motives may be, while these teachers are here, it would be good if they imbibe a progressive educational ethic, come to enjoy teaching, and become interested and enthusiastic about improving their teaching effectiveness via continual experimentation and reflection.

(IIb) Wildly successful Govt. High School intervention

Two Payir teachers (one of whom is a founding member) put a lot of effort into high school students at Thenur (during weekends, especially in science) with astounding results last year. In the state 10th grade examinations, there were several students who scored extremely high, and two around 90%. Although the examinations are really a test of rote memorizing skill, for these students, scoring high even in these exams requires an extraordinary degree of concentration, self-discipline and drive - GIVEN the relatively poor support for the students by the family, the school and the community.

A side story - preparing kids for the world outside:
A few of these successful kids (mentioned above) were sent to Madurai (for training at Aravind Eye hospital - who are well known for their innovation, namely inexpensive scaling of cataract and other eye surgery); a few others to Coimbatore for some type of technical apprenticeship and training; and another girl was sent to Srirangam (to the top performing high school in the district - which happens to be govt. aided). All (but the Coimbatore kids) returned to Thenur, essentially due to homesickness and a sense of social isolation.
Recommendation:

Some way of preparing these rural kids - who are used to a non-competitive pace and a close-knit social fabric (caring, but also nosy and interfering) - for the looser social fabric outside. Set them up with kids of roughly their own age, who are sympathetic, open and interested in the rural world of these kids.

(III) After school:  
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I wasn't able to observe after school activities - neither was I able to observe their e-learning activities. There were many miscommunications and mixed signals as to whether the govt. schools were in session that day or not.

But notwithstanding all of this confusion, it is clear that there is an attendance issue with the afterschool kids. The afterschool coordinator implied that there had been no attendance issue during the previous school year, or during the summer holidays.

She says the attendance issue currently appears to be due to the "Samacheer Kalvi limbo." A short explanation: since the start of this academic year, there has been much confusion with the TN governments (outgoing and incoming) embroiled in a court-case about a new unified syllabus (Samacheer Kalvi). As a result, neither the kids nor the teachers have any textbooks and they have been ordered to stand by. This state of limbo has affected many schools and students adversely.

I spent some time quizzing a few of the after school kids (6th grade). They are alert and cheeky. They could use some progressive mathematics education that exposes them to situations that they haven't encountered before, but which they can in fact solve and generalize to other situations using first principles, some experimentation and some logic.

Recommendation:

Figure out a way to fix the after school attendance problem.

Get a few childrens magazines that have plenty of puzzles (like Hindu's young world, but in Tamil, like Siruvar Malar etc). Make those a part of the afterschool sessions.

E-learning (for afterschool and gurukul):

Payir has live, interactive, volunteer lectures delivered via skype in two different ways:

(a) independent volunteer lecturers (I saw a conversational english class for the Chutti class).
(b) Volunteers coordinated by evidyaloka (www.evidyaloka.org) -- this outfit also supplements the lecture by power points and other free online educational material including videos etc. Everything is done in the local language and uses the govt. school textbook as the backbone.

Recommendations:

(1) Try to get a large scale innovative proposal collaboration going with others that are using e-learning methods

(2) Doing everything with volunteer lecturers is crazy. Take advantage of the local teacher base - empower them, and believe in them. There is a simple way to do this, at least for Math and science (perhaps not for English). For each lecture, the volunteer can spend 20 min reflecting on their own experience with teaching that material and how they experimented with it and modified it. They can also give the local teacher some supervision duties during the lecture. The local teacher closely listens to the 45 min lecture + the 20 min reflection. Doing this sincerely for 6 months will result in highly effective local teacher training.

(3) Collect/catalog free online INTERACTIVE material that goes with each of the lectures - so that kids can play with it on their own, outside the lecture time. This is especially good for English and math.

Thenur’s growing popularity: other educational development in the area:

At least 2 other nongovernmental organizations besides Payir are now engaged in developmental work in the area (Thenur, Kalathur, Thottiyapatti, Natthakadu, Kannapadi) etc. This is in addition to Payir’s project partners like Asha, evidyaloka, and hopefully IIT Madras (via Palani and his pal); and of course individual volunteers and interns visiting from elsewhere who work temporarily as part of Payir.

For example, Bishop Heber college (Trichy)’s social outreach program operates independently in the area and has also sent one 4-month intern to Payir; in addition there were several 1st year social-work students who visited for a few days, who brought in a visiting team of students from UK, from the University of Liverpool, with which Bishop Heber has some type of exchange program. In addition, there is a team of students from Tuft’s university, who seem to have mobilized other students from India, as well.

The development work done by both of these has an educational component as well. For
instance some Tufts students are trying to set up an e-learning component directly at the Thottiapatti school (free downloaded interactive material in Tamil that the kids can use alone, that is catalogued and organized to supplement and reinforce what is taught in school). No doubt, having many outsiders interested in the area gives the place a boost of morale and exposure. It is yet to be seen how long these programs will hold out past the initial flush of excitement; or whether the initial enthusiasts will leave without leaving behind the next generation of enthusiasts. It can also be damaging to local self-confidence and self-reliance to have many do-gooders who operate insensitively and arrogantly, without listening, without mobilizing local participation; or if they operate in name only, or succumb too soon to frustration.

A final anecdote:

During our Aug 6 visit to Payir this year, many visitors kept posing this question to the local villagers in the Payir team: "what do you see as Payir's economic and developmental goal? Towards what are we making all these educational efforts, and what is the concrete route to that goal? Where do you want to see Thenur 10 years from now?" Try as they might, the only answer they could elicit was:

"In 10 years, everyone in Thenur will be educated. Education helps you to live well, to do any job well."

It was heartwarming that they did not formulate any mundane and material goals, neither did they tie education to any specific such goals. More significantly, they do not see education as books and degrees, but as synonymous with healthy, aware and balanced progress of self, community and environment, locally and globally. I wish university students today had this progressive view of education.