Payir site visit report July 2008
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I visited Thenur village on July 28-29, 2008. A number of members of my family (mother Dr. Pankajam, brother Dr. Shreeram, his wife Arathi and 2 children, my own 2 children) and general assistant Mr. Kumar accompanied me on my visit.

Some of us (my brother, myself and my 2 kids) stayed overnight with Senthil at his uncle's old house, spent the following day there, met with the Payir teachers at their Gurukul (part of their Asha project -- see below) and computer staff at their BPO. We also met with the district collector who supports Payir's efforts in both formal and discretionary ways.

Our visit also coincided with the district education officer's visit of the 3 "model schools" in Thenur, neighboring Nathakadu and another school (name forgotten). All 4 model schools in Perambalur district are in the Alathur block, where Thenur is situated. The government school intervention program is part of Payir’s Asha project (see below).

In a few days following my visit, there was a conference call between Senthil and Asha Uflorida volunteers and the decision was made to fund Payir's proposal to Asha concerning the in-house Gurukul and the Government school intervention program.

Since my visit, there have been 2 detailed site visit reports by Mr. Ramanathan and Dr. Tom and in addition, there has been a yearly report by the Payir Trust team.

Here, I will concentrate on issues not addressed in these three reports.

Revisiting Payir's overall goals and approaches
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From my visits to Payir and conversations with Senthil, I would express Payir's goals as follows.

(a) The first basic goal is: Bringing access to livelihood choices and basic amenities (healthcare and education) for the rural community of Thenur and environs. Right now, the local sentiment is somewhat depressed and defeatist: `any one who can leave, will leave.’’ Well-intended, but misguided and capricious government intervention, associated corruption and distorted incentives and rewards have been detrimental to the health of the local economy and social structure.
(b) A loftier goal is longer term sustainability of the community: Revitalization, building enthusiasm, courage, education and exposure to a world-view that builds a sense of self-confidence in the local identity, entrepreneurship, rebuilding a sense of social and environmental sensitivity and stewardship in the population, and kindling a desire to creatively and progressively explore the unique potential of the local community, heritage and environment, developing a healthy and balanced way of life that offers choices for self-development and expansion. In the best-case scenario, the goal would be to actually reverse emigration.

The Payir organization is working towards these goals in several ways:
(i) -- Primary health care provision (their biggest expense),
(ii) -- Improving the quality of primary education by helping the local government schools,
(iii) -- Improving communication, remote economic interaction and livelihood options such as rural BPOs
(iv) -- Creative and environmentally conscious building and infrastructure development,
(v) -- Experimenting with illustrating, and encouraging the adoption sustainable agricultural practices (both individually and as a community),
(vi) -- Setting up a progressive Gurukul school (preschool to highschool and practical job training) for raising vital individuals who would help achieve Goal (b) above.
(vii) -- Last but not least, Payir is well aware that neither Goal (a) nor (b) is achievable without significant local community ownership and involvement (otherwise the most it can achieve is the status of an "ashram" populated primarily by a few die-hard idealists).

Of these, Asha-UF has now committed to support (ii) and (vi).

Progressive education of children and the community

Both for setting up the Gurukul and for intervening in the government school, 5 local people were sent to Rishi Valley for a teacher training program. I talked for quite some time to all 5 of these Rishi valley teachers. It is refreshing how open minded and modern their outlook to handling preschoolers is, and how confident and grounded they are in their identity and outlook. But I am aware that this is fragile, and the project is still very young and it will take a few years to of careful nurturing to develop weight and have a real effect on the children, parents and teachers who are undergoing this unique experience.

There is currently a somewhat hostile reception by the govt school teachers to Payir's intervention that enthusiastically supports the Sarva Shiksha Abhyan's (SSA) Activity based learning and evaluation (ABL). During my visit, the teacher's union head wanted to meet and scold Senthil for intervening.
But the attitude of Payir’s intervention team was calm and determined, but friendly, not supercilious and not confrontational. This stoicism bodes well for their eventually winning people over. One of these 5 teachers related how she had raised the hackles of some of the government school teachers by simply washing one neglected child instead of the usual attitude of holding ones nose and simply avoiding contact, or scolding and ostracizing. She reports that the education in hygiene had its effect and the child was better looked after by its folks from then on. Soon after my visit, Senthil has an appointment with the state’s SSA chief -- arranged by the collector. I would be curious to know what came of that.

The collector and his family visited Thenur during our visit. He is very supportive of Payir’s government school intervention project among other things. He is also helping via NREGA towards desilting the local reservoir, presumably keeping a lid on corruption, I do not know the details of this, but am curious to know more.

This is separate from Payir's sacred groves project funded by Feyerabend foundation. Putting all this together the ecosystem awareness education component of Payir's Gurukul effort is worth emphasizing.

Taking advantage of Visitors

The reason why such a large group of us visited (and disrupted Payir's busy daily life) as because the visitors are deeply interested in Payir's work, want to understand its goals and find effective ways to help.

I feel such visits are only good for Payir even if they do not immediately result in any tangible improvement of Payir's fortunes.

Some ways to take advantage of these visits without allowing them to become too disruptive are:
(a) openly request donations - at least to cover the food and lodging expenses of the visit
(b) request help with networking and contacts
(c) Request the visitors to participate in and contribute to various routine jobs that need to be done: a list of such jobs, openly displayed, will help provide a clear picture of daily and seasonal routine at Payir and help visitors to integrate.

Senthil does try to do these in an informal manner: I was employed to talk to the teachers, my children sorted books, Shreeram spent some time answering the BPO staff’s questions, etc.. We were itching to roll up our sleeves and get down to some real work, but did not want to be pushy or intrusive.
Some visitors are likely to be reluctant, but persuadable and have potentially valuable experience and contacts.

My parents, for example, are local well-wishers of Payir. It is worth spending a paragraph describing them, since they are illustrative examples. They are both 75, my mother is an OB-GYN practitioner in Srirangam, my father a GP in neighboring Thiruvanakoil, both of which are on the northern outskirts of provincial-urban Trichy and easily accessible to the surrounding villages by bus. Their practices spanning 45 years have been devoted to the principles of delivering:
(a) A minimum standard of quality to all patients,
(b) Maximum quality to cost ratio,
(c) Attracting well-to-do patients who seek a high level of professional experience and expertise and using those revenues to provide quality care to the needy,
(d) Developing and adhering to ethics in all dealings with patients, employees, the community, local businesses and other members of the profession.

This juggling act requires superior clinical judgment, uncompromising thoroughness in pre- and post-treatment care, keeping touch with modern developments, etc. But it also requires discrimination as well as the philosophical and socio-economic intellect to weigh and adopt only those developments that make practical sense; and invest thought and effort on health and lifestyle education and preventive methods, among other things. My mother has recently sold her practice, but still continues to work full time as a consultant at the same concern. My father still continues to practice. Neither one of them is willing to volunteer as a healthcare provider at Thenur (which is Payir’s main expense and which Senthil is struggling with); they say they are too old to make the trip to Thenur on a regular basis. However, they are both deeply respectul of the work that Senthil is doing and are willing to consider any request and offer any help that they feel comfortable with. One question they have continually had is why there is no government clinic in Thenur and if it is defunct, why Senthil does not use his access to the collector's office to ensure that it functions. I have been unable to provide an answer to this question.

In summary, if Payir's goals, routine jobs, problems and finances are made transparent to visitors and well wishers, then they are much more likely to (eventually) feel integrated and participate. This could be as simple as handing them a copy of the Payir Trust team's yearly report along with a copy of the latest few newsletters and spending an hour or so going over these with them.