

Payir Site Visit Report

Project: Payir Trust (<http://new.ashanet.org/project/?pid=956>)

Chapter: Asha-U-Florida

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Date: Dec 2014, Aug 2015 (combined report)

Both site visits about 8 months apart took the larger part of a day. My parents provided the transportation and my two girls (now 15 and 12) accompanied me both times -- we took with us the customary sacks of vegetables and biscuits to distribute to the children. There were many other visitors there in December 2014 (from Bangalore etc) with whom Senthil and Preethi were very busy for most of the day (although I had a chance to speak with them over tea just before leaving.) In 2015, I was able to speak to Preethi at length about the state of their various programs.

In 2014 I spent most of the time with the students and in 2015 most of time with teachers. This permitted my kids to play with the children. The school in Dec 2014 more or less paid for itself, although it had not yet received certification. They were hopeful that they will receive the certification soon during my 2014 visit, but the hopes were somewhat faded in August 2015, since the refusal to pay a bribe to get the school certified was causing further delays. The supportive collector seemed unable or insufficiently interested to interfere with the district education office. In 2015, having taken in some differentially abled students via Sarva Shiksha Abhyan (which is in charge of all residential schools run by the state), and having used the lower school room for food preparation for their nutritional program, they faced a severe space shortage. Moreover, by RTE, they have to take on a certain percentage of students even if they do not pay tuition, so it was not entirely clear that the school was able to make ends meet.

There is some teaching staff turnover (an enthusiastic teacher from 2014 was no longer there in 2015), although they have adequately many teachers both at the Payir school and for the government intervention at the local government schools. Ofcourse, Payir at this point cannot afford to pay the teachers even a fraction of what the government schools pay their teachers. The government school intervention, especially towards the standardized tests at the end of 10th grade is going relatively well. The collector has set up a special training school to coach the kids who perform well in 10th grade for the 12th grade standardized test and several Thenur kids have been admitted there. It is a residential program apparently modeled after the "factory" type schools in Namakkal, Samayapuram etc. Perambalur's collector has been making headlines with improved pass percentages, better performances etc. in the 12th grade exams by Govt. school students.

During my site visit in 2014, we spent the mathematics class estimating the number of tiles on the floor and walls, and, without the use of any standard measuring devices to estimate the areas of cut out windows and doors. While this was viewed with skepticism by the teachers at that time, they remembered it in 2015 and mentioned that they used such methods now. The change was wrought by a visit by all the teachers to two progressive alternative schools where no compromises are made to satisfy parents who demand success in rote standardized testing above all else. This seems to have revived fading memories of a similar such teacher training at Rishi Valley.

Maybe periodic such training visits may be necessary to bolster memories of other possibilities and keep the teachers inspired, bolstering their resolve to withstand the pressures to conform to the mindless and rote education system. Despite the more positive and determined outlook in some of the teachers, others (including some senior ones) still appeared on the fence. Even the positive ones felt that the progressive schools they had visited had been able to withstand parental pressure since they provided superior English education (they had native English speakers visit periodically). The teachers at the Payir school, however, do not have confidence that their own halting English would permit such leverage among the local parents to adopt alternative/progressive curricula.

In 2015, Payir looked very dry, with almost all the coconut trees gone. New construction was underway to accommodate the increased student population in the Payir school and increased activity -- the previous lower school building is now being used for the district level nutrition program. This is an expansion of a much smaller earlier program -- now to provide nutritious snacks to girls at various schools in the Alathur block -- who often end up anemic after puberty. It is a major undertaking and the amount of money that the district provides is insufficient. Senthil and Preethi are also forced to almost continually supervise the activity (they do not entirely trust their staff -- both in terms of hygiene and pilferage). It employs close to 20 daily-wage personnel, including procuring the items, preparing them and transporting them. To top it all, the girls aren't always enthusiastic about the snacks and sometimes waste them. Apparently some boys have asked why they don't get the snacks.

Payir has also taken on the management of a residential government school for girls (Sarva shiksha abhyan) in Perambalur district, but at least an hour's drive a way. That provides them with some additional revenue, but it is not clear whether they will be stretched too thin by all this activity.

As for their other programs: health worker outreach seems to be going well. Their BPO work is static, but their tailoring industry seems to be blossoming. One of the girls spent some time with my daughter who wants to help Payir with PR. Initially the idea was to put some of Payir's products on Etsy.com, but apparently that was a miscommunication and what they really wanted was a website. In any case, hopefully the confusions will be sorted out and a productive interaction will happen once Senthil and Preethi recover from their recent loss.

The clearly positive development is the number of people in Thenur for whom Payir now provides livelihood. It is high time to actively work towards devolving control and educate/trust some of the local folks to share in the management or else Preethi and Senthil are simply going to be stretched too thin.