

The Venkatraman Memorial Trust

newsletter

February 2008

The Venkatraman Memorial Trust, known as the Venkat Trust, was set up in 2004 in memory of Venkat, a boy whose education was sponsored by trustee Sylvia Holder, and who sadly was killed in a road accident at the age of 27. It provides and improves educational facilities for school children in the poor fishing village of Kovalam in Tamil Nadu, south India.

Every penny donated goes to the Venkat Trust. All costs are met by the trustees.

Update from Sylvia Holder, Founder Trustee

Bigger, brighter and better equipped classrooms are just part of the Venkat Trust's achievements of the past four years. Apart from these obvious physical improvements and our school fee, university scholarship and sponsorship programmes, the Trust's involvement is having another effect: Kovalam is at last beginning to feel better about itself. Seeing the improvements we've made to Panchayat School has prompted the Indian Government to release more funds for building and the village is starting to attract support from the growing private sector. *But there is still much to be done.*

Are we making a difference?

Sometimes when I'm walking around the poorest houses in Kovalam and witness for myself the dire poverty of so many families, I wonder if one little charity like ours is making any difference. And then I see all the smiling faces of our sponsored children and their families, Panchayat's pupils in their much improved school, the St Joseph's students whose fees we pay and the university scholarship winners revelling in their first undergraduate year, and I know we *are*. Scratching the surface we may be but it's a very impressive scratch, none of which would have been possible without the wonderful support we have had since the Venkat Trust was launched in 2004.



A wave and a smile from most of our 62 sponsored children

Raising the Standard

We need to further improve the *standard* of education. Already we fund extra teaching, including an IT trainer, but would like to pay for more better qualified staff. This will ensure that every pupil has the opportunity to reach his or her academic or vocational potential.



A wonderful welcome at the Panchayat School

Our UK volunteer English teaching programme continues but inevitably there are gaps and to ensure continuity, we are appointing a full time Indian English teacher with modern teaching methods.

The only way out of poverty is through education. We will strive continually to improve the quality so that all children have the opportunity for good careers and to improve their living standards and those of future generations.

Jottings of a visitor to Kovalam.

Sylvia's goddaughter, Zoe, accompanied her on her last trip to Kovalam. Here are some of the thoughts she recorded:

We arrived at the house in Kovalam at 3 am. The first impression was of the lovely noise of the sea joined, soon after, by a cacophony of cockerels, crows, and the Tannoy calling the faithful to prayers. The beach in the early morning was beautiful, if dirty: a kaleidoscope of fishermen bringing in the night's catch, cows, goats, dogs, chickens - and rubbish.

At Panchayat school we were greeted with flower garlands and marked with a bindi. A blackboard sign read "Welcome to our school Venkat Trust Founders and Friends" and a beautiful rangoli, a Hindu chalk drawing, was on the ground. I presented the book made by my daughter Lucy's school to the headmaster. We toured the school to see the children in their classrooms and the dining hall built by the Trust. To think, before the Trust the children had no shade to eat their lunch, not enough classrooms, and no chair or desk of any kind.



Zoe in front of the gate to the Venkat Tuition Centre in memory of her mother, who sadly died two years ago. She left money for the gate and the boundary wall.



Zoe's daughter's school presented this alphabet book to the school

JR and Ali took us to meet the sponsored children. Sylvia likes to visit them in their homes and meet their families. It was a humbling experience. Most live in terrible poverty. One little 6-year old, Buvaneshwari, lives with her grandparents in a tiny shack, with bits of tarpaulin and plastic literally holding it together. Sylvia was shocked and said it was the worst she had seen. Some of the children have such joy and happiness in their faces when you visit them but she looked so sad, as if the weight of the world was on her shoulders. Not surprising really but awful to see. [Editor's note: *Buvaneshwari's sponsor, family and friends have now raised enough money to build the family a small brick house*].

JR is obviously highly respected as President of Kovalam, or the King of Kovalam, as Sylvia calls him! He is an engaging character who recognises that the only way out of poverty is through education and he has obviously put an enormous amount of effort into the Venkat Trust. Sylvia's relationship with him is great. She bullies, cajoles and laughs with him and you can see what enormous respect they have for each other.

I feel that I have experienced something that most people never will. It has been a privilege to spend the time in Kovalam and amazing to see that the Venkat Trust is making a real difference to a small corner of India.



Buvaneshwari's house

The High School

Labyrinthine bureaucracy and successive planning permission rejections have meant our high school plans have stayed on the drawing board. But as it happens, this is working out for the best. The *Times of India* has agreed to build a high school on a much larger, and therefore more suitable, plot of land, giving Kovalam the school it needs and we have been able to turn our plot into a permanent sports ground. A boundary wall has been built, the ground has been flattened and it is being surfaced for sports use. Now the children will have a dedicated space for them to play cricket, volleyball, badminton and basketball and it's sure to be hugely popular with both the Panchayat and St. Joseph's pupils. Our own cricket team of older boys will now have excellent facilities for coaching the youngsters. This is all part of the Trust's aim to provide an all round education.

New Buildings for School

Thanks to an extremely generous corporate donation from CIM Investment Management in London we have been able to demolish a very down at heel classroom, prone to heavy flooding, and a splendid new two storey building is under construction. It will provide a huge downstairs area and three first floor classrooms, one of which will become the computer room, a second a music room. We are extremely grateful to CIM Investment Management for this incredible gift, which also includes the furniture for the building. Another building has been erected by the Government. Their budget did not stretch to the finishing of the building - electrical installation, painting, fans, flooring, furniture etc. so the Venkat Trust is picking up the tab for this.



The new Government building and, to the left, the rubble of the old classroom where now a splendid two storey building is going up.

Village Improvements



JR with his 18 month old daughter, Dhanuja.

JR, brother of Venkat and the Trust's Kovalam managing trustee, is now 18 months into his five year term as village President, 'village' being something of a misnomer as it now has a population of more than 6,400. Under his stewardship, there have been noticeable improvements in the village - more Tarmac roads, better street lighting, improved water supply and, best of all, more new houses.

JR's job has been helped by more funds being made available by the Indian government. At last, a little of India's new found prosperity is getting through to the poorest villages. The 75 temporary houses built for the Tsunami victims have been demolished and new, permanent structures erected. Another 66 houses are to follow. But that is just 141 houses for an ever increasing population and most villagers continue to live in abject poverty on an average daily income of less than £1.50. And even though most houses now have electricity, 90% have no running water.

The Kovalam Confusion

There's Kovalam, Tamil Nadu, and Kovalam, Kerala, and there's much confusion about it. The Kerala Kovalam (on the southern tip of India) is a well heeled tourist resort while our Kovalam in Tamil Nadu is just south of Chennai (Madras) on the east coast of the country and is anything but.

During the next six months

-four more university scholarship winners will be joining the four already enjoying their first year as undergraduates.
-we will pay the school fees at St. Joseph's High School for some 35 12-year-olds due to leave the Panchayat school at the end of the school year. This is in addition to the 160 fees already being paid.
- ... the Government building will be finished by the Trust and in use.
- ... the new two storey Trust building will be up and running – built, decorated, furnished and equipped with desks, tables, blackboards, more computers and musical instruments for the dedicated music room.
- ... a wall will be built at the Panchayat school for a basketball hoop.
- ... the sports ground will be in use for cricket, volleyball, basketball and badminton. Sports equipment will be bought and kept in a new lock up shed.
- ... a full time Indian English teacher and more qualified and experienced staff will be employed.
- ... we aim to have ten more children sponsored by individuals.

The Kovalam House

The house we rent in Kovalam has now been renovated and our supporters are welcome to stay there. It's not the Ritz but it's on the beach with a nice terrace and garden. There are two bedrooms, with air conditioning, and two shower rooms. But don't expect power showers or a Poggenpohl kitchen! JR would be delighted to show you round the village and the Trust's projects and, if you are a sponsor, you can, of course visit your child's house. He can also arrange a car and driver for visits to other areas.



Some scenes from the village

We are indebted to McPhersons Walpole Harding for preparing our annual accounts for the Charity Commission free of charge and John Sargent of sitewriters.co.uk who updates and hosts our website free. Their help is very much appreciated.

The Venkatraman Memorial Trust is a registered charity, No. 1104363
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