

The Venkatraman Memorial Trust

newsletter

September 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

I like this picture. It embodies what the Venkat Trust is all about – providing better educational facilities for the Panchayat school as well as giving individual help to the village's most needy children. This brand new and very splendid building has three classrooms, a large one on the ground floor and two on the upper floor.



We help individual children through our sponsorship scheme (most of the 87 are in this picture), by paying the fees for 192 St Joseph's pupils and awarding four university scholarships each year.



The large classroom in the new building is devoted to English lessons, which all Panchayat children are now enjoying with the new teacher provided by the Trust. Audrey Usman, an Anglo Indian, is a trained and very experienced teacher who has taught in the Gulf and Germany, as well as in India. I sat in on one of her lessons and was impressed with the progress her pupils are making. Volunteer teachers from the UK are still welcome but Audrey gives the children the continuity they need.

Undergraduates, Graduates and PhDs



As well as funding four new undergraduates each year, we are now providing help to postgraduate students from the Kovalam area to enable them to continue their studies and research.

Mercy Valarmathi already had a PhD in Biotechnology from the University of Madras but was hampered from continuing her important research by the lack of opportunities in India in her specialist field. The Venkat Trust stepped in to fund her post doctorate research at the University of Reading where she is working on Indian herbal remedies for the cure and prevention of dental cavities – so successful has her work been that she has applied for a patent and will soon be publishing a paper. She is also working on a snake venom antidote and is hopeful that her research will produce a low cost treatment for Asian and African countries.

Mercy says “It was so disappointing that there were no prospects in India for me to continue my research. I am so grateful to the Trust for coming to my rescue and enabling me to pursue my passion – research into the medicinal benefits of traditional Indian plants – at Reading. I am thoroughly enjoying my time here; it is very stimulating and the university has a wonderful faculty and excellent facilities. The knowledge I gain here, followed by some work experience with a pharmaceutical company in the UK, will enable me to return to my homeland and give the Indian people the benefit of my time in England”.

The Trust’s computer teacher at the Panchayat school, Yasmin, has been struggling to meet the cost of her further education – she has a BA and is now studying part time for an MBA. Virtually the sole earner in her family, she has to support her parents as well as looking after the education of her two younger sisters. The Venkat Trust is delighted to have alleviated her financial pressures by paying for her fees and study materials.



On the undergraduate front, our university scholarship fund is now in its second year and the Trust is paying the fees for these four school leavers from St. Joseph’s. All are taking their chosen courses at the University of Madras. The same criteria have been used in the selection process: academic ability, good character and financial need. Meanwhile, our first four scholarship winners are progressing with their studies and enjoying their second undergraduate year.

Innings



The new Venkat Trust Sports Ground is up and running and proving to be an enormous asset. After school, pupils from both the Panchayat and St Joseph's schools love to go there to play cricket, volleyball, badminton or basket ball. Volleyball is proving to be particularly popular and at weekends the children are joined by older members in the village. There are now four volleyball teams which play each other and teams from other villages. A resounding success!

.... and outings

These Standard VII pupils from the Panchayat School are having the time of their lives. They had never been to a restaurant like this one before, never eaten pizza, never experienced air conditioning, and never sat at a table to eat their meal. The outing to Chennai was organised by one of our previous volunteers, Lisa Cole, who as part of a small team from the Global Poverty Awareness Group (GPAG) in Doncaster visited Kovalam in April. While there they taught English to the pupils, gathered information for the Venkat Trust of particularly needy children for potential sponsors, and gained an understanding of the issues faced daily, particularly by the children, in a rural fishing village.



"We all thoroughly enjoyed the trip," said Lisa "It gave everyone an insight into a culture and lifestyle so very different from our own. We were so moved by the experience that we pledged to raise enough money to build a new house for a particularly poor family." And raise it they did, thanks mostly to the proceeds of an Indian banquet in Doncaster organised by Lisa and her team. The house is now built and the very happy family has moved in.

On their return to the UK, GPAG created a DVD about rural village life and an educational pack which is being used to educate local young people about global issues. If you would like a copy please contact gpag@live.co.uk.

Our thanks 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.

Venkat Trust Donations



We were successful in all but one of our “manifesto” pledges itemised in the last edition of the newsletter—4 more scholarship winners, 32 more school fees paid, 2 buildings erected and/or finished, the sports ground in use, an English teacher appointed and 25 (15 more than our prediction) more children sponsored. The final pledge—to put up a wall and basketball hoop—didn’t happen as JR had the much better idea of extending the new two storey building (seen to the right of the picture) to include this concrete platform which has proved invaluable for a variety of purposes. Here it is being used to display the books, uniforms and toys for the kindergarten which were presented to the school during the opening ceremony of the building.

Sponsorshi

One of our undoubted success stories is our sponsorship scheme, thanks to all of you who make an enormous difference to the children you have taken under your wing. Alas, however, there are hundreds more in this poverty stricken village in desperate need of financial help. Many families still live in one room leaf houses with no sanitation or running water and survive on a pittance.

Sponsors are asked to pay £10 a month, £5 of which is given to the family, the balance is kept in a savings account for the more expensive years ahead. The children write to their sponsors at least twice a year. We ask for a commitment from the sponsor throughout the child’s education.



The irrepressible and delightful Nandhini and her brother Santhosh are two of the lucky ones, having been thrown a lifeline by their Trust sponsors. Their father is dead and they live with their mother, who earns just £22 a month as a sweeper, and blind grandmother. Their sponsors’ monthly contribution has made a huge difference to their quality of life.



The busy fishing beach at Kovalam

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