

'His life was so full of promise'

A chance meeting on a beach in southern India transformed the lives of Sylvia Holder and a very special boy who died much too young. Gillian Rowe reports

By her own admission, Sylvia Holder was never what she calls "a do-gooder". She had a successful career running her own public relations company in London and enjoyed mixing the odd bit of travel with time spent among her family in her home town of Brighton. But a trip to Kovalam, in Tamil Nadu, south India, 20 years ago, was to change her life in ways she could never have imagined. It would also have a huge impact on the people of a

small fishing village blighted by poverty and lack of hope.

"In those days, there was just one posh hotel sitting next to a poverty-stricken village where the 8,000 inhabitants relied mostly on fishing for their livelihood," she explains. "The village children would walk up and down the beach trying to sell their wares. One day, a young boy came up to me and, instead of trying to sell me something, he asked if I'd like to see his village. Something about him was different from the other children. He was brighter and completely enchanting. I was delighted to have the chance to see how the local people lived."

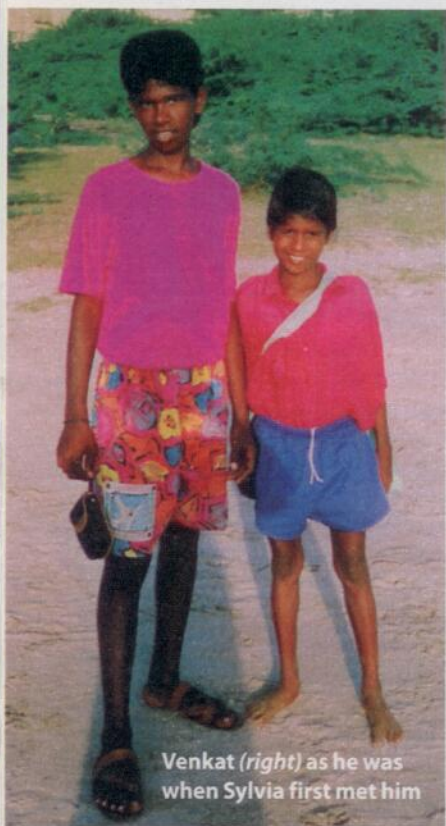
Unimaginable poverty

The boy introduced himself as Venkatraman — Venkat for short. He told Sylvia in his broken English that he was 12 years old, one of five children and that his father was a fisherman. Clutching her hand, they clambered over rocks to the village. The poverty took Sylvia's breath away. "Everyone there was eking out a living. The conditions were beyond my understanding."

At the end of her visit, Venkat asked Sylvia if she would give him £10 to pay for his school fees. "At the time I thought it a likely tale, but I was happy to give it," she recalls. "I'd had a nice time with him. Then, completely on the spur of the moment, I said, 'You can come to me for anything for your education and, if you can get through high school, I'll pay for you



Sylvia and Venkat's second meeting, when he was 18 years old she treated him to his first beer



Venkat (right) as he was when Sylvia first met him

to go to university."

She admits that she didn't expect to hear from Venkat again. "To be honest, I didn't think he'd make it through high school, let alone go on to university, but I was thrilled when his first letter arrived just a few weeks after I got home."

Keeping in touch

Over the next six years, Sylvia and Venkat exchanged letters quite regularly. "His letters were never long, but he'd tell me about his life and how he was doing in school. They were also never begging and he'd always sign off saying, 'My family send their prayers and their love.'"

Venkat was 18 when Sylvia decided to visit him again — he'd just left high school and was about to go to university. "He was very

grown-up and just as charming. I treated him to his first beer at the hotel bar — it was a big moment for both of us."

Sylvia supported Venkat financially through college in Madras and was immensely proud when he got his degree in computer science. "He did really well and graduated and for several years he worked in Qatar as a translator, sending money back to his family to buy a better house."

Venkat came home to apply for a new job in Mumbai. He was on his way to the neighbouring village to collect his e-mails when he was struck. He was riding his motorcycle with a friend on the back when they were hit by a car. His friend was injured, but Venkat was not. He was just 27 years old.