



A chance meeting on a Madras beach changed Sylvia Holder's life for ever, when she offered to pay for a poor boy's education. So began a tale of determination, bravery, tragedy and, ultimately, hope

Report **Adriaane Pielou**



About a boy

Sixteen years ago, while on holiday in India, Sylvia Holder met a bright-eyed 12-year-old boy on a beach outside Madras, who showed her around his village and then asked if she would give him £10 to cover a year's high-school fees. Beguiled by the request, Sylvia, then in her late 40s and with no children of her own, said yes. Impulsively, she added that if he stayed on she'd pay all his school fees, and, if he went to university, those fees too. She handed over the £10, wished him luck and flew home, wondering if she'd ever hear from him again.

But Venkat Raman – one of six children of a poor fisherman and his wife, who all lived in a shack near the beach – confounded her doubts. He was soon writing regularly and at the end of each term sending her his school report. Sylvia, who ran a travel PR company in London before her retirement, made a surprise visit to his village two years later, while on a

business trip, and was touched to see a photo of herself stuck on the wall above Venkat's mattress.

She happily continued paying his fees, which reached £600 a year when he managed to get himself a place at Madras University to do business studies. They stayed in contact after Venkat graduated and started working, initially as a translator for an Italian leather importer in Qatar. Three years ago, when he was 24, he returned to his home village and set up a shoe shop, funded by a £3,000 loan from Sylvia.

The shop was thriving – and providing employment for his crippled eldest brother – and repayments on the loan were faithfully being paid into the local bank account Sylvia had set up. Then, on 1 December last year, at the age of 27, Venkat was killed, hit by a car while out on his motorised bike. Deeply upset, Sylvia returned to his village last February, determined to

do something useful in his memory.

'I saw him only three times, but Venkat had come to seem like a sort of surrogate son. I just couldn't bear the thought that he'd lived and died in vain,' Sylvia says when I meet her at the house near the sea in Hove, Sussex, that she retired to three years ago. She spreads out some pictures of Venkat on her coffee table. He gazes

went to until moving on to his school in Madras – was the obvious entity to help.'

The school had 160 pupils, three teachers, and just three unfurnished, unequipped classrooms, which meant that of the children sat outside on the ground for lessons. 'But the children were bright as buttons and

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from the photos, a skinny little boy, and then a smiling, chunky young man.

'What he did was so utterly amazing for a child in his position, realising how an education could help him, and he was always so grateful for the help I was able to give him. So I looked around the village, wondering what would be the most useful thing I could do. And I decided that the local school – which Venkat

jumping to their feet when the teacher arrived, hands shot up to answer questions.'

She looks affectionately at the photos. 'They all reminded me of Venkat himself – poor, but determined – and their school would so clearly benefit from it. So I explained everything to the headmistress, who seemed a capable woman, and she v