

FROM DUST TO TRUST

THE CHANCE MEETING OF AN ENGLISH WOMAN AND AN INDIAN BOY ON A SOUTH INDIAN BEACH CHANGED BOTH LIVES AND TRANSFORMED KOVALAM VILLAGE IN TAMIL NADU. THE VENKATRAMAN TRUST CONTINUES TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

WORDS | GISELLE WHITEAKER

“A likely tale,” Sylvia Holder thought some 25 years ago when Venkatraman asked for GBP 10 for his school fees. But something about this child beguiled the British woman. Visiting India on a business trip, Sylvia wandered from the manicured beach of her hotel to the fishing village of Kovalam in Tamil Nadu where she met Venkat, just 12 years old. He showed her around the village, opening her eyes to a level of poverty she had never before encountered.

“I must have had a sixth sense about him,” says Sylvia. “I offered to put him through school and university. Without it, he would have been a fisherman like his father and eked out a living.” Venkat seized the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. He worked hard, 10 years later graduating from Madras University. His career progressed well and he built a new house for his family after theirs was destroyed in a monsoon.

Venkat’s death in a road accident hit Sylvia hard, so she returned to Kovalam to see what she could do to help the village in his memory. It wasn’t a difficult decision. The local Panchayat School for primary-age children was ill-equipped, understaffed and morale was low. Sylvia jumped into action, setting up the Venkatraman Memorial Trust (VMT) to improve education for the children of Kovalam. New buildings were erected on land bought by the Trust, qualified teachers were brought in and uniforms and equipment provided, boosting the school from its bottom of the pile rating, to a sought-after establishment with high attendance and strong academic results.

“The Trust has already made a huge difference. We witness this every day,” says Jude Sax, one of the India-based trustees.



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“Since 2003, the literacy rate among the kids in Kovalam has increased from 60 percent to 95 percent and the number of children attending school has tripled. VMT has changed the entire educational landscape of Kovalam and given a new meaning to education by making it easily accessible for everyone, irrespective of caste, socio-economic status or religion.”

Many of the village’s 7,000-strong population live below the breadline. But the Trust’s sponsorship scheme ensures that education and welfare are looked after, with nearly 200 children supported by individual sponsors. “Almost everyone had a story of how the Trust had impacted their lives. It may sound cliché, but the Venkat Trust really has changed many lives in Kovalam,” says Sarah Morgan, who volunteered in Kovalam this year.

Sylvia believes education is the only way to see an end to poverty. “I’m particularly keen that we give as many young people the opportunity of a university education as we can, which they cannot afford without our help,” explains Sylvia. “Education means good jobs, good jobs mean good money, and money means an end to the poverty trap. All future generations will benefit.”

It hasn’t been easy and there are still hurdles. “Kovalam is predominantly inhabited by fishermen and when we tried to instill the importance of education we faced a road block.

Going to school means [children] won’t be home from 9am to 5pm; kids will not be available for household chores; elders will not get a helping hand in mending their nets, sorting the catch or carrying baskets of fish,” explains Jude. “There is this ongoing battle. However, things have changed for the good. Today, people know education is something beyond money.”

VMT’s most ambitious project has been building a high school, a joint initiative with the Tamil Nadu Government, the first 250 pupils admitted this year. The school sits on a large plot on the edge of the village and will soon have a sports ground, funded through Etihad Guest, the Etihad Airways loyalty programme. Guest members donated air miles to the Trust, making this happen. Etihad Guest members have redeemed more than 1.3 million miles since July 2012.

“I’m not planning any more major projects, but rather the consolidation of everything we have achieved,” says Sylvia. “When these kids rise from the dust and become engineers, doctors, business managers, teachers and top executives, their lifestyle changes,” adds Jude. “They set new benchmarks; they raise the bar, and the future will be even better.”

For more information on the Venkatraman Memorial Trust see www.venkattrust.org.uk. ☎