The Venkatraman Memorial Trust

November 2010

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

The High School

Frustrated and anxious about the lack of progress in getting Government permission to start building the high school, I went to India determined not to leave until we had the go ahead. JR, our managing trustee in Kovalam, and I went to see the man in charge of the operation in Chennai and were enormously relieved and happy when he gave us the green light to start work "within two weeks". Alas, our euphoria was short lived. We saw him on September 1 – it is now the end of November and our high school to be is still a field.

A myriad of officials, all of whom seem to want their 15 minutes of fame, or at least power, have been involved with the project and despite permission having been given to us by the top man, one of his colleagues has managed to put yet another spanner in the works. Apparently his department didn't know that the high school land was not adjacent to the Panchayat school. This beggars belief. The land belongs to the Government, officials by the score have visited the site to check its proximity to the sea (for tsunami reasons), the soil for the foundations, the suitability of the approach road and goodness knows what else. It has pledged money for the school and appointed the headmaster more than a year ago – but still didn't know its location!

This is causing a further delay, shades of the Delhi Commonwealth Games debacle when the right hand didn't know what the left was doing. That at least came good in the end, as indeed will the high school, but I hope the men in white coats haven't dragged me off before the JCBs finally roll in.

At last – rather late in the day – I'm beginning to understand the Indian psyche a bit better – as they want you to have happy news they only tell you what they think you would like to hear, rather than how it is, although I think we have been particularly unlucky with unforeseen glitches. You must all be weary of constant promises but no delivery.

This is not the way to repay your support and generosity. I can only apologise profusely for the delay and ask you to keep faith with us – it will happen. But I will refrain from saying when that will be!

Sponsorship

There was a wonderful response to our appeal in the last newsletter for more sponsors for which many thanks. We now have another 21 children whose lives are being helped by our supporters, making a total of 138. **Please continue to spread the word**, there are still many more very poor children desperate for sponsorship help.

Sponsors often ask me for their children's surnames. Strange though it may sound, few people in South India have surnames; they just put their father's initial before their name. If they have two names, they are both their first names, as in Mary Ann. We now have several children with the same names so if you are writing to them (and they'd love to hear from you) would you please address it to them followed by your surname in brackets to avoid any confusion. The address to write to is: c/o Mr Janakiraman, Venkat Trust, Kailasa Nathar Koil Street, Kovalam 603112, Tamil Nadu.

Some of our sponsored children on the beach

Prayers are said each day at morning assembly at the Panchayat School

Bits and Bobs

- Our name, if not our fame, is spreading. Apart from the UK, we now have supporters in the USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, Japan, France, Switzerland and Belgium.

- We now have twelve undergraduates and three post graduates on Venkat Trust scholarships and the first two of our sponsored children have left school and gone to university, thanks to their sponsors.

- We have a new website which you may like to check out – www.venkattrust.org.uk. It's clearer than the first one and we now have the ability to update it as and when needed. Our thanks for this go to Wingfinger Graphics of Leeds for giving us a very special price and to John Sargent of sitewriters.co.uk. who provides our web hosting pro bono.

- Since we launched VMT we have received 309 pages of bank statements. Every single entry is a credit except for money transfers to Kovalam and support for our post doctorate research student in the UK. Not many charities can boast our record – that all donations we receive go to our work in Kovalam. Not a penny is taken for any UK expenses.

If you would prefer to receive your newsletter by e-mail, please let me know at info@venkattrust.org.uk

One of our Success Stories

This year, our first two sponsored children left school to go on to university. One of them, Sumithra, who is 18, told me her story:

"I often get up at 3am when it's a little cooler to do my university home work. *Yes, university*. I have to pinch myself to believe it's true and that I am now an undergraduate. I come from a very poor home so although I was always close to the top of my class in school, further education was beyond my reach – until the Venkat Trust was set up in my village.

"My younger brother, Kali, and I were the very first children to be sponsored by the Trust. There are now 138 of us whose lives have been transformed by our sponsors. I have mine to thank, first for helping me through high school and now my undergraduate years at Madras University. Thanks to mine I now have career prospects which will enable me and my family to escape the terrible poverty in which generations of my family have lived. I am taking a BSc in computer science and as Chennai (Madras), which is only about 20 miles from Kovalam, is an IT centre, I should have no difficulty in getting a well paid job.

"When I was a child, my parents, brother and I lived in a small, dilapidated palm leaf house with no electricity and the roof was full of holes. The rain would come in during the monsoon and so would the snakes, from the tree next to our house, which made me very scared.

"When I was 12, the tsunami struck. My father who was a fisherman was on the beach mending his nets and he was hit by a boat flying through the air. He was critically injured and he died a few days later. It was a terrible and very sad time for us.

"My father had been the only breadwinner in the family so as well as coping with our grief, we were even poorer than before. My mother was so grateful when Kali and I were sponsored and also when the Kovalam Tsunami Appeal, set up by the Venkat Trust, had a new brick house built for us. We are Hindus and part of our little house is dedicated to a shrine for the Hindu gods whom we thank for our good fortune.

"Since my father died, my mother has been working long hours as a cleaner. We have breakfast together before she leaves the house at 7.30 am – the leftovers from the night before – and I buy rice cakes for my lunch when I'm at college which cost 5 rupees (7p). My mother buys fish and vegetables for us to eat for dinner and I do the cooking for the family when I get back from college so a meal is waiting for her when she gets home at about 7pm. As my mother earns only Rs 80 a day (just over a pound) the sponsorship money makes a huge difference to us and we are happy to know that Kali and I now have the prospect of earning good money when we are qualified. We will then be able to look after our mother and afford a much better lifestyle when we marry and have our own children. I just wish my father had lived to see me go to university – he would have been so proud."

Fund Raising Activities

I've been so impressed and grateful for all the fund raising activities which have been organised by our supporters which have handsomely swelled our coffers.

The department of an international banking group nominated VMT as the beneficiary of one of their bi-monthly "dress down Friday" events and the employer matched a third of the generous proceeds, while another supporter regularly sends us the profits from the sales of her shopping catalogue. My intrepid nephew organised a sponsored Three Peaks Challenge climb – Ben Nevis, Scafell and Snowdon – which was completed in 23 hours and 20 minutes in appalling weather, and the daughter of a supporter asked her friends to give money to VMT instead of birthday presents. This is not the first time that someone has elected to give us funds in lieu of birthday, Christmas or anniversary presents but never before has a 16 year old made such a gesture which I thought was something very special and thoughtful.

Schools have played their part too – a London primary school sent us the money raised from a non-uniform day and a children's fashion show while from across the water in Canada came the proceeds of teacher-gift donations, a yard sale and a lemonade stall. Two individuals nominated the Venkat Trust to be the beneficiary of donations received in memory of deceased relatives and a church in the Midlands often sends us the proceeds from coffee mornings. Though she didn't fund raise for this donation, a Sussex supporter very kindly passed on the compensation she had received from an erring bank. To all of you who have helped us with these diverse fund raising activities, many, many thanks.

Literacy Rate Improves

Six years ago the literacy rate among Kovalam's children was just 60%. Today it is 95% and VMT can take a lot of credit for this vast improvement. Before our involvement with the Panchayat school, there were too few classrooms, too few and unqualified teachers, and the attendance record of the pupils was poor. At that time the Government took little interest in the school but when we started providing it with more classrooms, more and better teachers, computers, uniforms and books they responded by putting in more money themselves. Now, far from being the school that no one wants to go to, it has such a good reputation that children are coming in from other villages. Attendance is good and the children are keen to learn under the tutorage of qualified teachers.

Gone fishing in... a big boat, a little boat and no boat

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