

Hove resident Sylvia Holder tells Sara Whatley the inspiring story of how she set up her charity, the Venkat Trust, when she should have been kicking back in her retirement

**W**hen Sylvia Holder retired at the age of 65 after twenty years of running a PR company in London, the last thing she expected to do was start running a charity in India, but that is exactly what she did. Now, at the age of 85, Sylvia is still at the helm of the Venkat Trust, and has absolutely no plans to retire... again!

It all began on a beach in India when Sylvia was in her 50s. She was there on business and visited a fishing village called Kovalam, down the beach. Wanting an authentic experience she went to chat to a fisherman there.

Then suddenly a little voice piped up, 'What your name and where you come from?'. "He was a delightful little urchin of a boy, 12 years old," said Sylvia. Apparently that is what they all say to visitors.

This boy was Venkat. He was a disadvantaged child from a poor family; his father was a fisherman and for generations before him his family was uneducated. After showing Sylvia around his village of 8000 inhabitants, Venkat asked for £10 to pay for his year's school fees. "I had seen poverty before but was quite struck by this village," said Sylvia. "There was no free education after primary school. I thought to myself, I'll pay for your education, it won't cost me much. The likelihood is he won't go all the way through school anyway. Then he graduated from Madras University with a business degree, moved to Qatar and sent money home to his family."

Sylvia never thought it would happen, but was thrilled she had supported



# An Unlikely Retirement

this child, now young man, through his education. Then, in the middle of the night, a phone call came. "It was his brother, JR. Venkat had been killed in an accident. He was only 27." Sylvia had become close to Venkat over the years and sorely felt his

passing. "I went back to his village with the thought of buying them something in his memory – I had a television set in my mind. But his brother JR steered me firmly towards the school," explained Sylvia.



It was a dilapidated primary school full of listless, dishevelled children and unqualified teachers. They were desperate for help.

"I always fly by the seat of my pants," laughed Sylvia, "I've got an impulsive nature, so I said I'd help. I





told them we would get them a High School built." When she got home Sylvia admitted to being fed up with herself for making that commitment – she had just retired, knew nothing about India or charities, but within a few days it dawned on her that this was the most remarkable opportunity of her life.

And so, in 2004, Sylvia set up the Venkat Trust. "Given my background we did loads of publicity and got lots of interest and support. Our USP is and always has been 'All money raised goes to India and all UK costs are covered by the Trustees'." They started by revamping the existing village primary school, bringing in qualified teachers and resources. The children became motivated and it turned into one of the top schools in the area.

Then when the Boxing Day Tsunami hit in 2004 the charity's attention was diverted for a little while. "10 people died from Kovalam and many of the fishing boats were destroyed. We helped build 25 new boats with engines," said Sylvia.

The next project was the long promised High School. Sylvia explained that it was a lengthy process to get the Tamil Nadu Government backing they needed, but



eventually the budget allowed and the bureaucratic hoops were jumped through, and the High School opened!

In 2021 they were promoted to a Higher Secondary School which is the equivalent of the UK's Sixth Form, so can now offer education from kindergarten to Sixth Form, and beyond. "Four hundred children are sponsored through the Trust

and each year 75 sponsored young people have their higher education paid for by the Trust. The Higher Secondary School currently has 850 pupils with numbers rising," said Sylvia proudly.

Children from neighbouring villages are understandably attracted to Kovalam's excellent school, especially with its growing sporting prowess in cricket

and snooker, and as such further building work is underway to accommodate them all.

When Sylvia first set up the charity the reaction in the traditional village of Kovalam was resistant, she admitted, but now everyone can see how wonderful the school is and how the children are benefiting. "Yes, we have been a big influence on the village, but the village has been a big influence on itself; it is progressing," said Sylvia.

Indian income inequality is extreme, with the richest growing increasingly richer and the poor living in dire poverty, side by side with each other. It is estimated that over half of the country's wealth is in the pockets of only 1% of Indians, and very tight pockets they are too. But, as the Venkat Trust shows, education is a way out of this hole. "Education kills poverty, otherwise these children might end up



sweeping the streets,” said Sylvia. “Now, the children are striving ahead, helping their parents and by the next generation, they will be out of poverty.”

With a to-do list as long as her arm, and much to catch up on since her recent return from India, I leave Sylvia in her Hove home with a final question about how she relaxes, if she does at all. “I go to India! And I have my friends, my cat, my work. I’ve got a list a mile long; I won’t retire, no.” ● [venkatrust.org.uk](http://venkatrust.org.uk)



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