

And that's how the Venkat on my card list, 47 have sent cheques, £10 from this person, £100 from that, £500 from one. It knocked my socks off! Land is cheap in that region, and with the translating help of a former colleague and friend, an Indian tour operator in London, and his brother in India, it turned out to be easy to buy an acre next to the school.

'Venkat's middle brother, Janakiraman, who I call JR, who's 29, has been a huge help in organising it. He's taken over Venkat's shop and doesn't fully understand, the purchase of the land has obliged the local government to match the investment by building more classrooms. 'I'm staggered at how fast it's all happening,' says Sylvia. 'Has she ever worried she was being ripped off?' She grins. 'Of course. And my Indian friend here thinks everyone there is on the fiddle. But Venkat used to give me lists of what he needed and how much each item cost, and I never had the

slightest reason to doubt his honesty. I never wanted him to think he had a meal ticket for life, though, which is why I lent rather than gave him the money for the shop. I think JR is doing the most brilliant job. And the headmistress is very upfront and to the point.' She shows me the letter again. Listed alongside the cost of a licence to buy the land is the cost for 'bribe for official issuing licence'.

As a Hindu, Venkat was cremated, and has no memorial. 'Venkat wasn't married, and was still living with his family. His mother has made a little shine, with a picture of Jesus and the Hindu gods. JR is still living at home, supporting his parents. The three sisters are all married now. The crippled eldest brother committed suicide earlier this year - more tragedy for the parents.'

But for Sylvia, doing something in Venkat's memory is enormously satisfying. 'Most people want to get involved in some sort of charity when they retire, but to be able to get

involved in something as worthwhile as this is amazing. And what is so encouraging and gratifying is the huge difference we can so easily make in these children's lives. Costs are so much lower there that a little money goes a very long way.

'When Venkat died I thought what a waste it was. He'd pulled himself up by his bootstraps and done so much - and it was all for nothing. But now I can't help but feel that maybe it was all meant to be. Maybe this is what was supposed to happen. So many children will benefit because of who Venkat was and how he lived his short life. Venkat changed his life through staying at school. Now other children will be able to, too, or at least those who want to. I'd love to twin the school with a school here. It might make children in the UK realise how incredibly lucky they are.'

Send donations to PO Box 5039, Hove, BN3 5XL, making cheques payable to the Venkat Ramman Memorial Trust. Or tel: 01273 719363 for enquiries



Opposite: Sylvia in India with Venkat (left), aged 14, and his friend Seeni. This page, clockwise from far left: Sylvia with a language class at the local school; with the headmistress, Veenu Sirtyapushpam, and Venkat's brother Janakiraman; with a class of children taking their lunchtime nap, and receiving a lei and flowers for her hair from Veenu