



Left: Children in the centre with one of their volunteer English teachers. Below: The new school building named after Venkat



Sylvia was told the news in the early hours of the following morning by his brother, Janakiraman. "I was devastated, heartbroken. We'd only met three times, but we'd kept in touch for 16 years. I'm a stepmother, but I have no children of my own — Venkat had been like a son to me. It was a tragically short life that was so full of promise."

She returned to Kovalam after the accident and tells how she met his mother for the first time. "She stood there, tears rolling

down her cheeks, dabbing her eyes with her sari."

Hope out of tragedy

Back in England, Sylvia continued to mourn for Venkat, but was unprepared for the impact his death had on her life. "I began to feel that something had to come out of this terrible waste of a life."

Within months, Sylvia had set up the Venkatraman Memorial Trust to improve the education of the children in his village. Much of the money raised has been used to improve facilities at the local state-run school, which was ill-equipped, overcrowded and under-staffed. There's now a new two-storey

building with another one under way, a computer room, a sports field, sewing machines, a TV and DVDs for English lessons. There are funds to pay for books, qualified teachers and for volunteer English teachers. At the nearby fee-paying school, the Trust pays the fees for 160 children. Four Venkat Trust University Scholarship winners have had their undergraduate years funded, and there will be more scholarships in the future.

Since the creation of the trust, Sylvia has visited the village twice a year to ensure the money is being well spent. "We have a very good team headed by Janakiraman, who is brilliant and just as charming as Venkat. Because of his hard work, he's been made president of the village. I call him King of Kovalam and his parents are so proud."

The giving goes on

Sylvia's commitment to Venkat's village doesn't stop with education. Tragedy struck again, not long after the trust had been set up, when the 2004 Tsunami smashed Kovalam's fishing boats to smithereens. Sylvia set up a separate charity to fund 25 replacement boats with small engines. And, more recently, she's been trying to raise an additional £1,200 to build a proper home in the village for an orphan girl whom the trust is sponsoring. "I've seen some grim houses on my visits, but this was beyond description. Both the girl's parents are dead and she's living with her grandparents in a tiny house like an igloo covered in leaves. It leaks all the time and

there are rags stuck up everywhere to try to stop the water coming in

Sylvia is extraordinarily modest about her achievements, acknowledging only that she is a good organiser. But she's unstinting in her praise for her family and friends. "They're so supportive. They've all become sponsors of children. They pay £10 a month — half goes directly to the child and the other half into an account to help pay towards their further education." It also helps that the charity's supporters know every single penny raised goes direct to Kovalam.

Seeing others benefit has eased the grief she and Venkat's family still feel over his death. "The trust has made such a difference for other children and the generosity of people here has been so heart-warming. Venkat's accident was a terrible waste of a promising young life but, as time goes on, I'm able to feel that his death was not in vain



Sylvia on a visit to the school, before it could afford furniture

To find out more about The Venkatraman Memorial Trust, or to donate money, write to: PO Box 5039, Hove, BN3 5XL. Call 01273 719363, visit www.venkattrust.org.uk, or e-mail info@venkattrust.org.uk