

# Report: Mr. Narasingham goes North

Ghost country, here in the north. Not a person to be seen, only ruins. House walls that look like damaged skin, with pockmarks and scars left behind by exploding grenades. Blind gaps that were once windows. Tile rooves smashed by cannon-fire, the remnants swept off the charred beams by storm winds.

One and a half million landmines are buried in the ground. If a sacred cow strays over them, they won't touch her – an irony of war: the mines respond only to the weight of a human step, tearing a leg to bits. So the villages have been abandoned. Here a bicycle frame, and there a crumbled stone bench, soon to be overgrown by vines and bush. Nature spreads a green shroud over all the bombs, the dead, the displaced. Rohini Narasingham went into the ghost country while the war was still raging. He came from Berlin. For 15 years he had lived here, half his life.

His friends call him Singham. A slim fellow with a bushy beard. A guy from Sri Lanka who had made it good: German passport, German wife, life in Berlin – lively neighborhood in Kreuzberg, subway right there, whole wheat bread, fully insured. Then, in 1995, the decision to go back to his home country, to the North, the crisis area. Why take such a step into nothingness? – everyone asks him, Germans and Tamils alike.

It has something to do with an "A," and with children like little Ravindran, who is trying so hard to make that sound, "A." A as in Amma, that means "mother." It will take weeks before Ravindran can say "Amma," but each new word is a step along the path that leads him out of the world of silence with its hermetic seal. Ravindran attends a school for the deaf, whose teachers are paid by SEED, the organization founded by Singham after his return. The abbreviation stands for "Social, Economic, and Ecological Developers." In Vavuniya, a small city 250 kilometers north of the capital city Colombo, there are already 40 employees and 20 volunteers at work.

They work in the North of Sri Lanka, in the ghost country. The region was particularly hard hit by the murderous civil war that broke out in 1983. The conflict claimed about 70,000 lives, forced one and a half million people to flee, and, economically, it set the country back several decades: destroyed villages, wounded souls. Most of the 65 deaf schoolchildren are war victims. They lost their father, or mother, or both. In times of hunger and forced migration, children who cannot hear and speak are the first to be left behind. "Many of the handicapped spend their whole lives vegetating in a dark hut somewhere," Singham explains. The 14 teachers at this school are prepared to help – they have special training in sign language, and they have unflinching patience.

The aim of SEED is to improve living conditions in as many ways as possible. Alongside the school, communities have been built for several hundred war widows and their families – complete with houses, gardens and wells, shops and a community center.

The organization advises the women on how to earn money by working at home, so that they don't have to leave their children alone. It looks after street kids who no one else takes care of. And it has set up a model farm on two hectares of land to demonstrate how sustainable agriculture can be practiced. In Vavuniya, SEED has been cast onto fertile ground.

Foreign aid organizations, including the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ), acknowledge the success of Singham's concept. They offer him assistance and money to realize the program on a larger scale. But the sower of SEED is cautious: "We don't wish to expand – at least not just for the sake of expansion."

Becoming dependent might be too high a price for such new possibilities, Singham thinks: The autonomy achieved up to now deserves to be defended fiercely. His skepticism is understandable, considering his own biography – migrating from East to West and back, a refugee's life of helplessness and insecurity. At the age of 18, he fled the increasing violence against Tamils, leaving Jaffna, the capital of the north. In Berlin he applied for political asylum. For 11 years, he fought for recognition of this status, with no success. He finally received a German passport after marrying a German woman.

When the Berlin wall came down, things changed for Singham, too. In the area around the German capital, attacks on foreigners became more frequent. Arson in refugees' quarters, Africans murdered. "If I'm risking my life," he said to himself, "then not passively, just because of the color of my skin. Then I prefer to risk it actively, and to do something for my country." Not an easy decision – Sri Lanka was thousands of kilometers away and for him, at that point, an unfamiliar culture.

To find out what the people really need who had been driven off their land, he lived together with them in a camp, for several months. In a mud hut with no electricity, fetching water from a distant well like everyone else. Sri Lanka from the bottom up. He suffered from liver damage, malaria, and intestinal bleeding. Once again, he was a refugee, this time in his own country. But he found out: what kind of kitchen do people need there, what does the bedroom of an extended family look like, where and how do people eat? "Applying western ideas, we would have planned everything wrong" says Singham.

He had brought along a few alternative ideas and implanted them in SEED. In Vavuniya, in the middle of the nineties, when he started organizing the construction of houses for war widows, "I was not only concerned about results and efficiency, but also very much with the process, the path toward achieving a goal." By Sri Lankan standards, the organization cultivates a very exotic style of interaction: team spirit, open discussion, no male dominance within the group, everyone takes their turn cleaning the office – This all thanks to the influence of Berlin-Kreuzberg!

The first German donations, he figured, would be enough for 10 houses. When SEED announced their plan, 850 families wanted to participate. "We took the time to speak with every single one. Some evenings all I could do was break down and cry after all I had been told about the dead and those who disappeared, about torture and rape."

Singham wanted to help everyone, to heal everything. Very difficult to choose 10 families – and to turn 840 away. The team decided to give preference to landless families with handicapped children or very many children. Clear criteria made it easier to select without feeling guilty.

Together, the SEED team and the future community residents cleared a section of jungle. On their backs, they carried wood and stone to the construction site, installed a water pump that was contributed by a refugee aid organization. Their work was interrupted again and again by gunfire close by.

"Back then, I felt something like a fatherly instinct: I, Singham, care for the widows and orphans. Wrong, that's all wrong! We don't want to be their protectors, we want to help them manage their own lives." Shortly after the houses were up, the women began to plant vegetables and bananas on their land, and to earn money by making ropes for sale. After the first successful project, a second was begun for 65 families, now a third and fourth project will provide for 270 families each.

The need is enormous. The refugee organization of the United Nations estimates that on the entire island, there are about 700,000 displaced persons living in camps or wandering aimlessly. Almost every day, the land mines claim new victims. And the emotional damage is massive. In the region north of Vavuniya, 97 percent of the children witnesses traumatizing events – bombardment, fire, or slaughter of their relatives. About one quarter of the children suffer under the long-term effects of trauma. But in the whole north and east of the island, the areas most severely affected by the civil war, there are just three psychiatrists who can recognize and treat such emotional damage.

Nevertheless, the medical area is not the only field lacking resources. SEED tries to combat people's personal lack of resources by putting the most necessary things first: shelter, clean water, healthy food. That keeps the organization busy enough, and still, Singham is thinking ahead. Having mastered the technique of daily improvisation in the face of new obstacles, he gets enthusiastic when new ideas come up, ambitious plans or visions. "Sri Lanka" – happy Lanka – will come back into its own. The Tamils and Singhalese had lived together peacefully for hundreds of years.

"We won't allow people to manipulate us – politicians who drive people into wars," Singham

says, with emphatic gestures, "but that means we have to learn something that is almost unknown here: figuring it out yourself, asking critical questions, discussing things openly." He represents a mixture of communal experience in Kreuzberg and Sri Lankan pragmatism, a combination that gives rise to unusual approaches.

Like the ecological farm, an oasis in the middle of the ghost country. In the mild red of evening, the farm looks like a visionary sight and gives an impression of how peaceful and fertile Sri Lanka can be. Since the farm's own water supply is working, everything that is planted grows well: banana, papaya, pineapple, mango, spinach, cabbage, beans, and manioc. When it comes to the marketing, the Tamils are working together with a Sinhalese group. SEED trades fruit to the South and receives organic tea and spices in return. The official enmity of the ethnic groups is simply ignored.

Mutual advantage: The leftovers of one plant fertilize the next, earthworms are enlisted to produce fertile soil. German shepherds, Australian long-eared goats and Indian guinea-hens run about - all sorts of animals. Two peacocks strut over a roof made of palm leaves. What are they good for? "They are just plain pretty," replies Singham.

A headstrong commune has taken shape. Singham's wife and his mother-in-law are a part of it, friends, farm workers and a few "adopted" members – all under one roof, as much life as possible in the small space available.

That is what Singham has always wished for, since his days in Berlin: a land commune. No motors to be heard anywhere. A place of harmony. On the outside.

On the inside, things look different for the residents of the farm. It will take a long time, maybe generations, before the echoes of the grenades and low-flying planes are finally silent and the visions of fire have been quenched. Before it is finally peaceful again, inside.