

Sri Lanka: Singham and the Northern Reconstruction

by Michael Gleich

A bloody civil war has destroyed northern Sri Lanka, where a Tamil with German citizenship is reinventing himself for the second time. Because peace needs economic progress to survive, he is leading an exemplary reconstruction effort. With him are 14 teachers of the deaf, any number of amateur construction workers, a plantation full of bananas, and two peacocks.

The north is ghostly. For miles at a time, not a single human being is visible among the ruins. The walls look wounded, strewn with deep holes and the scars of grenades. The cavernous windows stare blindly. Shards of roof tile litter the ground. What mortar fire could not accomplish, hurricanes finished off. Herds of cattle wander untended through pastures whose dense green hides a deadly secret: mines. More than 1.5 million are buried in the ground. The sacred cows are safe. Only the pressure exerted by a human leg can trigger the explosion that will tear it to shreds. The villages have been abandoned. A skeletal bicycle frame and a crumbling stone bench have been devoured by climbing plants in record time. The bombs, the dead, the ethnic cleansing are covered by a green shroud.

Rohini Narasingham enters the ghost towns while the war is still raging. He comes from Berlin, where he lived for 15 years, half his life. His friends call him Singham. He is smaller than the average German, slim, with an immense full beard. He is known as a political activist and a brilliant persuader. He has a German passport, a German wife, a home in Kreuzberg “with a subway stop, whole-grain bread and retirement insurance,” a success story among refugees. In 1995 he made the decision to take a trip to the north of his home island – not as a visitor, but to stay. Why, his friends asked, would he say farewell to a safe and secure life? Had he gone crazy?

The answer starts with “A.” Children like Ravindran must struggle to say the “A” in “amma,” mother. Her efforts ricochet, missing the mark. She manages a squeak, then a dull gurgle. She is 14 and trying hard to reproduce the sound her teacher is making. She cannot hear it – only see and feel it. She stares at the teacher’s mouth, imitates its position, feels the vibrations of the larynx, and keeps on launching new tones into the air until the teacher pauses to praise her. It will be weeks before Ravindran succeeds in saying “amma.” But every new sound she learns helps free her from her isolation.

Ravindran attends a school for the deaf whose teachers are financed by SEED, the Organization of Social, Economic, and Environmental Developers. Singham founded SEED after he returned to Sri Lanka. In Vavuniya, a small town 140 miles north of the capital Colombo, there are already 40 employees and 20 volunteers. Their workplace is the ghost region of the north, where the civil war began in 1983. The conflict between the government and the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, known as the Tamil Tigers) went on to take 70,00 lives. It drove 1.5 million people from their homes and turned the economic clock back by decades. Villages were destroyed, spirits broken.

Most of the 65 deaf children are victims of the war, having lost father or mother or both. Children who can neither hear nor speak are at a disadvantage in times of

hunger and flight. “Many handicapped people here vegetate their entire lives in dark huts,” says Singham. The 14 teachers have training in sign language and, more important, endless patience. The children’s relatives also receive instruction, expanding the circle of people with whom the children can communicate and increasing their mobility. Ravindran is especially mobile. At a national track and field meet, she won the gold medal over 200 meters. She is the pride of the school.

SEED’s aim is to improve living conditions in an many areas as possible simultaneously. The soul and the economy should convalesce in unison. Next to the school, communities were built for several hundred war widows and their families. Each includes houses, gardens, wells, stores, and a community center. The organization assists the inhabitants in earning money through piece work at home so that they do not have to leave their children.

SEED takes in street kids no one else wants, and has built a five acre model farm to test organic methods of agriculture. Beyond its long-term projects, the organization has also proven that it can act quickly when crisis strikes. After the Christmas tsunami of 2004, it aided the relief effort through a network of supporters in Germany. Money was collected and then spent directly, without bureaucratic involvement, to ameliorate the damage done to the island’s east coast.

Foreign aid organizations, among them the GTZ (the German Society for Technical Cooperation), are carefully monitoring the success of Singham’s concept. They have offered him money and coordination to reproduce his model on a large scale. But he remains reserved: “We don’t want to grow, or at least not at any price.”

As far as Singham is concerned, dependence would be too high a price to pay for more possibilities. His skepticism can perhaps be explained by his checkered biography, the meanders of a migration from east to west and back again. Refugees know all about powerlessness and insecurity. At 18 he fled from the violence of the northern capital Jaffna. In Berlin he applied for political asylum, fighting the good fight for 11 long years. In the end his German citizenship came about because he married a German woman. With the experience of being at the mercy of a judicial process came the surprise “that people wanted to help me who didn’t even know me.” He paid them back by volunteering to provide migrants with legal advice.

The fall of the Berlin wall marked a transition in Singham’s life. In Berlin and its surroundings, violence against foreigners was on the rise. Arson in asylum-seekers’ dormitories, murders of Africans – the neo-Nazis called it “swatting Fijis.” Singham’s dark skin and his political activism made him a potential target. If I have to risk my life, he reflected, I don’t want it to be passively, just because my skin is a certain shade. I’ll risk it actively, doing something for my country.

Sri Lanka was not only thousands of miles away, but also culturally a different world. Singham had become a classic Berlin progressive, living in a commune of 16 with kitchen duty and all-night discussions. The bread was organic, the cheese from happy cows, the subway on time. Giving that up was not easy. Many of his alternative values have been transplanted to SEED. When he started organizing the construction of housing for war widows in Vavuniya in the mid 1990s, “I wasn’t worried about results and efficiency. My main concern was the process, the way we achieved our goal.” The company culture is exotic by Sri Lankan standards. Team

spirit, open discussion, no male dominance, everyone takes turns cleaning up. Greetings from Kreuzberg.

The capital to buy the land was raised by a support group in Berlin. Originally the plan was to work in partnership with a local group, the usual routine in development projects. “But the search was frustrating,” Singham remembers. “Most of the groups had an exclusively religious focus. Or their chairmen had embarrassing cults of personality.” He presented his concept to 28 organizations and was turned down 28 times. “But it’s just as well. It was clear to me that we had to found something of our own.”

He ripped up the strategy paper he had written in Berlin. Instead he tried a research method that might alienate highly-paid development experts: He lived for months in a refugee camp in a mud hut with no electricity. He fetched water from a distant well. He contracted malaria, had liver damage, and passed blood in his stool. But he found out what the future homeowners wanted in a kitchen, and what an extended family means when they say “bedroom.” What is the ideal space in which to eat? “With our western ideas, we had managed to plan everything all wrong,” says Singham. The German money would be enough for ten houses.

More than 850 families responded to SEED’s announcement. “We took the time to talk to everyone. Sometimes I spent the evenings just crying. People told me horrible stories, of death and disappearance, of torture and rape.” Their tales haunted him. Soldiers had asked a woman if she would like to fly in a helicopter. Then they tied her ankles together, hung her from the ceiling, and slammed her back and forth from wall to wall. The floor was covered with empty cartridges and broken glass. When the rope gave out, the soldiers called it a “safe landing.”

Singham felt compelled to help everyone and heal everything. It wasn’t easy to select ten families and send 840 away. “It was the first time in my life I had power over other peoples’ fates.” The team resolved to give priority to the largest families, those with no land of their own, and especially those with handicapped children. The criteria served to ease their consciences.

Together, the SEED team and the families cleared a strip of jungle. They carried stone and lumber to the site on their backs and installed a water pump donated by a refugee organization. Gunfire interrupted their work over and over. The conflict between the Tamil Tigers and the army had flared up again, and the front lines were in constant flux. Sometimes the grenades came from the right, sometimes from the left.

“I developed a paternal instinct. I, Singham, care for the widows and orphans. That’s wrong, totally wrong. We shouldn’t be their protectors. It’s better to help them get on their feet.” Not long after the houses were complete, the women began planting their lots with vegetables and bananas. They wove rope to earn a little cash. Long-term dependence was not in the cards. Singham applies the stern principles of his own life to SEED. After the first successful project came another involving 65 families. A third and a fourth, for 270 families each, are now under construction. Is SEED being permitted to expand? “At this point there are ten people on the team who are just as good as I am,” says Singham. “We can grow without sacrificing quality.”

The need is overwhelming. The U.N. high commissioner on refugees estimates that there are still 700,000 people living in camps or wandering the island. Mines claim new victims almost daily, not to mention the psychological wounds. In the region north of Vavuniya, 97% of children have witnessed bombings, arson, or the murder of relatives. A quarter of them suffer visibly from psychological trauma. In the northern and eastern regions of Sri Lanka, those most affected by the war, there are a total of three practicing psychotherapists.

The island's economic convalescence will also last for decades. A major hindrance is the island's partition. The February 2002 ceasefire, still holding if somewhat tenuously, promised the Tamil Tigers military and civilian autonomy in certain zones. The agreement created a unique bureaucratic circus whose curious excesses play out only a few miles from Singham's house. Trucks headed north are stopped by the army. With armed guards watching, the drivers must unload the entire shipment. Sand, buckets of paint, tin roofs, coconuts, it doesn't matter. An army of day laborers stands ready to help. Hours later, when the truck is empty, a soldier nods, and the sand can be shoveled back in. The truck drives through 60 miles of demilitarized zone, and then comes the same routine: Shovel sand out, Tiger nods, shovel sand back in. When the truck leaves the LTTE's zone of control, it starts again – the Sri Lankan Sisyphus. By the time the load gets to Jaffna, it has been run through a sieve four times.

The procedure reminds Singham of Checkpoint Charlie with its stone-faced policemen and their odd games of control. He would like to laugh about it, but "at this speed, our economy will never get off the ground." The government and the rebels spent two decades and billions of dollars on armaments to destroy, as if by plan, schools, streets, bridges, and wells. Any direction you look, money is lacking. For SEED, that means attention to necessities: a roof over one's head, clean water, safe food. That's enough to keep them busy.

But Singham is already thinking about the next phase. With endless daily challenges, he has honed the art of "muddling through" to perfection, but he has more ambitious visions. His plans take off, his ideas fly. "Sri Lanka, happy Lanka, we'll get there again. I mean, Sinhalese and Tamils lived for hundreds of years in peace. We shouldn't let ourselves be manipulated by politicians who like to draft everyone into their wars." His gestures are expansive. "But there's still one thing we all need to learn here, and that's how to carry on a public discussion, how to formulate an opinion."

Singham is a mixture of Berlin communalism and Sri Lankan pragmatism. Such an amalgam can be shaped into new and unusual forms. One example is the organic farm, an oasis of green in the abandoned countryside. In the soft, reddish light of evening, the farm becomes a vision of what Sri Lanka could be – fertile, friendly. With the completion of the wells came an abundance of bananas, papayas, pineapples, mangoes, spinach, cabbage, beans, and manioc. Marketing is coordinated with a Sinhalese group. SEED delivers fruit to the south, which in return sends organic tea and spices. The official enmity is ignored. Earthworms turn compost to fertile new soil. German shepherd dogs, Nubian goats from Australia, and guinea hens mix and mingle – animal cultural diversity. Two peacocks strut across a palm-frond roof. What purpose do they serve? "They're here to look good," says Singham.

Singham's own home is a populous commune. He, his wife, his mother-in-law, friends, children they have taken in, and farm workers are all together under one roof, a high concentration of humanity in a very small space. But that's what Singham always wanted, after Berlin: a big group house in the country. Not a motor is heard far and wide.

Outwardly, it's a place of harmony. Inside the inhabitants' heads, it may be generations before the grenades stop exploding, before the fires burn out and the dive bombers retreat. Only then will the outward idyll be joined by inner peace.