

Reconnecting with Laurie Baker

BY ZIYA US SALAM



Interview with Vineet Radhakrishnan on the making of a documentary on his grandfather, *Uncommon Sense: The Life and Architecture of Laurie Baker*. By ZIYA US SALAM

IT is never easy to write, paint or make a film about somebody you are emotionally attached to. It becomes even more difficult if you have blood ties with that person. Vineet Radhakrishnan, grandson of the illustrious architect Laurie Baker, decided to do the unthinkable—encapsulate the life and works of Baker in a film, *Uncommon Sense: The Life and Architecture of Laurie Baker*.

It could not have been more apt that Radhakrishnan chose New Delhi's India Habitat Centre (IHC), one of the most aesthetically pleasing buildings, to screen the film. The IHC, J.A. Stein's masterpiece, is lauded for its open space, ventilation, and its dignified appearance. And to think it all started with the prototype of a rock painting from Bhimbetka in Madhya Pradesh!

One could say the same about Baker's architecture. He was a pioneer in using local construction material, indeed, even honouring local building traditions. No raw material was too low or too high for him. Mud, clay, exposed bricks and trellis became his hallmark as Baker set about defying stereotypes. It did not come easy; Baker first had to unlearn what he had learnt in Britain, then come to terms with the fact that even a youngster in rural India knew more about the local ways of construction. How he immersed himself into the soul of India makes for a gripping story. He spent a number of years in the Himalaya, virtually lived the life of a nomad for a long time before finally making Kerala his home. It is in the State that some of his buildings have stood the test of time. Interestingly, it was the news of the imminent demolition of some of these works to build skyscrapers that inspired Radhakrishnan to leave everything aside and film *Uncommon Sense*.

The film had a special one-time pre-release screening for the Kochi-Muziris Biennale, which celebrates 100 years of Laurie Baker (1917-2017).

Excerpts from an interview with Radhakrishnan:

How personal has been the exploration of Laurie Baker and his works in your film?

To me he was always just Granddad. I hardly realised he was busy because he never took himself very seriously around the family. His self-deprecating sense of humour and unassuming laid-back attitude at home made it easy for the family to forget what he meant to the outside world. The strong and often emotional responses of the people I interviewed even after all these decades let me see him from a distance, through their eyes, and helped me understand "Laurie Baker" the public figure. Almost every building also has a story of overcoming odds—there is either a financial constraint, or insufficient land, poor terrain, lack of water, etc. So understanding each client's story was like finding a jigsaw piece to understanding Laurie Baker the architect. The four years of travelling through India was a treasure hunt of sorts since my grandfather didn't document most of his work.

For a man who lived in many parts of the country, besides China, how did Pithoragarh [Uttarakhand] and later Thiruvananthapuram [Kerala] shape his experience, his works?

In his writing he says that when he went to the Himalaya he felt completely helpless and it seemed as if everyone in the village, including the children, knew more about building than him. There was no cement and concrete and glass available in the remote mountains. All the materials were alien to him. Living in the Himalaya forced him to think beyond his English textbooks and learning and experiment and learn from local craftsmen about local materials such as slate, stone, pine, deodar and about traditional techniques. It made him realise that there was a lot which was good and worth using in traditional Indian building practices. He also started to see how many of the local materials and the techniques devised over thousands of years suited the local climate and used very little energy to manufacture compared with modern steel, cement and glass. He experimented and refined these ideas during his time in the Himalaya. When he came to Kerala, there was finally an opportunity to implement and demonstrate all that he had learnt. The materials, the climate, the customs, all of course were different, but the principles were universal.

Laurie Baker emphasised using local building material, even local tradition, in his works. How were his works then able to stand out in comparison with other local structures?

For him, it was more a question of reimagining Indian architecture than creating something brand new, in my opinion. He believed strongly in maintaining a continuity with the past—whether traditions, customs, or architectural techniques. He used to talk about buildings having “good manners”—which meant that they should merge with the natural environment, not stick out. That didn’t mean he was a regressionist. On the contrary, he combined what he found was good and worthwhile from our past with new building materials and technology. Whether it is the traditional wooden jaali that became the innovative curving floor to ceiling brick lattice jaalis in the Centre for Development Studies, or the witch-hat openings in roofs for air circulation in the Gawarikar house or reimagining the traditional “naalukettu” courtyard Kerala house in the Abu Abraham House, the goal was to merge new and old in the best way possible. It was also about using local materials in new ways—bamboo instead of steel rods for reinforcement for a concrete slab or using coconut husk or crushed Mangalore tiles as filler in filler slabs to make roofs lighter, better insulated and cheaper.

Breaking stereotypes

He was not one to go by stereotypes. Yet, he worked in a country where people find certain comfort in predictable surroundings. How difficult was it to change people’s mindsets to accept his design, his works?

One client I interviewed said she never thought she would want a Baker house since she always heard of him as someone who built for poor people. There was and still are strong social stigmas and set conventions to indicate one’s place in the social pecking order—if people don’t have money they build with mud, if they have a little more they use brick and if they have a lot of money they build concrete, steel and glass houses. In these circumstances it becomes difficult to convince people to use mud, for instance, even though the houses can be very strong, beautiful, cool during summer and environment-friendly. To combat this he deliberately used to build for only highly regarded members of society. For instance, he built affordable green houses for the Director of the Vikram Sarabhai Space Research Centre; the Centre for Development Studies; and for IAS officers. This meant everyone, from drivers and peons to senior employees, in these institutions also found it suitable to follow suit. Of course, they would never have built these types of houses if these influential people had not. So he recognised these social factors and tried to find practical ways to work around them.

It was often said that every building of Baker had a unique story, a unique design to convey.

I think the special thing with him was that every client was special—he used the same approach and principles whether it was a poor client or an affluent one. When people say he built 1,500 buildings, the important thing to remember is that not just individual houses and buildings but even the mass social housing schemes he built for fishermen and tribal people, for instance, were uniquely tailored to the needs of each family. Also, the huge constraints most clients brought with them—less money or land than needed; a rocky, sloping terrain; and peculiar needs, all these necessitated a high degree of creativity and lateral thinking to squeeze out the most utility and usable space without making the design ugly and depressing. Each building, in many ways, also reflected the personality of the client. A fun-loving client tended to have a playful design for his house, an artist had a more creative and adventurous design, and so on. Therefore, in many ways the most inconspicuous and humble buildings, rather than the more photographed and visually arresting buildings, of his hide the most radical and innovative designs and creativity.

At a personal level, there were seeming oddities in his life. British and Gandhian, he was also an activist in the fight against leprosy. Do you think posterity has been able to appreciate his worth beyond the world of architecture?

I feel Laurie Baker at his core was someone who wanted to help people. It just so happened that the skill set and natural aptitude he had was to design and build. Architectural fame, recognition and even artistic expression did not mean anything to him if it did not help someone. So within that framework, his decisions in terms of the work he accepted and, more importantly, the often lucrative and prestigious work he turned down, and his decision to “waste” a large part of his early years in the Himalaya with my grandmother to provide medical help and schools to the hill people rather than build up an architectural practice in a major city become more understandable. The life that he and my grandmother, who was one of India’s first woman doctors and a remarkable person in her own right, led was not to impress others or to be recognised, so I don’t think it would have mattered to him.

A lot of contemporary Indian architecture seem removed from the climate, indeed, even the socio-economic conditions of the country. How would Baker have designed the modern urban space in India today?

At the heart of what he believed in was the importance of humaneness when it comes to design. A house is not just a square box to contain one’s belongings. He used to say that a building has the power to elevate one’s spirit or to crush one’s soul. Unlike art, which can be shut in a museum, public buildings become a part of our collective existence. Also pride in our indigenous materials, traditions and building practices was very important to him. He also felt that urban growth needed to include marginalised populations such as slum dwellers for whom he developed numerous designs to improve their quality of life. His design ideas were holistic and extended even to waste disposal and roads. So I feel he would envisage an urban landscape that is socially inclusive, community-based and with a tangible link to our own traditional buildings and even living styles, using materials which are less energy-intensive and which disrupt nature minimally and merge with the environment around it. Even in the 1980s he was talking about walkable green cities and concepts such as “walk to work”. So he was ahead of his times and I have no doubt he would have no problems designing for today’s urban landscape.

Baker was fond of exposed bricks. And in many cases jaalis for ventilation. It was a unique mix of the modern with the medieval. Is this technique not something that has stood the test of time?

His use of exposed brick in Kerala was just the result of the place and the time when he was building. At that time Kerala had abundant paddy fields. The mud and clay to make bricks mainly comes from the paddy fields between rice crops. This mud and clay could then be fired on site to make burnt bricks. This was much better than cement, steel and glass, which consume tremendous amounts of energy and resources to make. If you live in a laterite area, then you do not import bricks. If your area is rocky, make plentiful use of random rubble walls. Where there are no rocks, but clay is available, then make and use bricks. As time passed bricks, too, became relatively environmentally unfriendly and he wanted to move to mud. However, at the time people barely accepted exposed brick. Mud, though a traditional material, was seen as something poor people used. So I don’t think he was wedded to any material. Today if he were there, I am sure he would have used mud, which has become more socially acceptable, or something else altogether. The goal was always to reduce our resource footprint and minimise damage to nature.

Jaalis make sense because they are cheaper than windows and were very suitable to the climate in places like Kerala, where the goal is to keep out the glare from the sun, yet let in the breeze. They can easily be built into corridors to provide natural lighting during the day and also are more secure than a window. They also offer unique aesthetic possibilities, both visually and in their ability to manipulate light.

Is it true that the news of imminent demolition of some houses he built prompted you to make the film?

I had wanted to make a film on my grandfather for almost a decade, but it always tended to get put on the back burner for some reason or the other. Then just after I had finished my MBA in 2012, I heard about two clients of his (also dear friends) who had recently passed away. I also got to know of a few houses that were being demolished to make way for large apartment complexes. The original owners had passed away a while back. Their children, although they had very fond memories of the houses, lived abroad and they had

no way to take care of the houses. That's when I realised that if I went back to a corporate job, I would get comfortable with a monthly pay again, and weeks and years would pass and the people and their stories about their houses and the buildings themselves would not be there when I did decide to make a film! So I gave up the well-paying "fancy" job in London I had secured and dived in.

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