

Significance of Laurie Baker

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Who was Laurie Baker? It is difficult to put him in the category of just an architect as most people do. Neither had he lived like just an architect. He was admired by people of many walks of life. But still architectural fraternity claimed him as one among them though many did not know him enough or his ideas enough. What makes Baker an important phenomenon of recent Kerala? It is not the fact that he started work as a missionary and did everything in that zeal, not even that he touched many lives and influenced the opinions of policy makers and ordinary people, nor that he could create dream houses for many who could not even dream; all that is known and written about by media. His significance is that he was an agent of change in architecture at a turning point in Kerala. But still I feel that he was most misunderstood architect.

History will remember Baker for making a generation of architects of Kerala think of their past in whatever little way and make them understand the relevance of building materials as well as appreciate the texture and aesthetics of ordinary materials. It is more significant to note that modern architecture came to Kerala too late, or may be it is true to say, it never came. All we have seen before the 60s were the insipid PWD stuff and the occasional works of Bombay or Madras architects. And Baker created some thing new in this vacuum. Though with the single minded idea of cost reduction. That was first ridiculed and then accepted and then was eulogized and even worshipped and followed. His kind of architecture was slowly kept aside today or if followed, done so only in form, like Gandhian ideas are today. Yet Baker will remain a turning point in Kerala's architectural history; the history of modern Kerala and Indian architecture.

To eulogize is to forget the real content and keep only the form. Baker's also might follow the same pattern. The ideas will get corrupted if not already by the followers who may not understand the spirit of enquiry Baker started with in architecture.

Baker's architecture is largely misunderstood. People have used his ideas to suite their ends. Some followed his brickwork and some his tracing of tile roof shapes in concrete, some his *jallis* and some his cost cutting measures and a few followed him to make ecological sense of his works, which, in my opinion, was the most sustainable of his teachings.

Baker's architecture is read erroneously and simplistically as "Kerala style". I think it was not that simple. The so called "Kerala style" is itself a questionable notion. (this is not a place to write about it). But the irony is that by labeling it that way, the critics and followers in Kerala as well as outside have belittled the importance of his work. His works, - homes or institutions or religious buildings-, had an idiosyncratic stamp typical of his and were molded by the firm belief in Gandhian frugalism and the conscious

attempt at eliminating the unnecessary, may be of cost cutting. To do so it was inevitable to build climatically suited structures and use skills locally available. When this was a philosophy, it was inevitable to result in an architecture that we now know as that of Baker's. But we took it as vernacular and labeled as an adaptation of "Kerala style". He never claimed so.

Baker did question the logic of plastered makeup as an unnecessary paste on unlike anybody before in Kerala. He bared his walls of beautiful brick works or stone masonry and made us admire the beauty of materials. None did that in Kerala before except Architect Chisholm and his ilk in the 19c or early 20c. He used plans and sequence of spaces, which were contemporary and modern (least the way Kerala planned traditionally). He used openings and windows which were simplified modern. None of these could be called Kerala Style. His *jallis* were neither an adaptation of the past. Baker rejected past's follies and adapted relevant and significant ones from anywhere

But true, he made tiled roof and sloped concrete roofs resembling the roofs of traditional Kerala as well as some wood joinery details, railings, etc. more like the "post modernist" way, yet very ingeniously and beautifully. And to that extend he was using an easily recognizable architectural vocabulary and signifying certain accepted meanings of forms. He was thus rebelling against the accepted principles of modern architecture as well. I think, that to him was just a way to get more latent ideas of architecture, - of lower cost and frugal living and ecological building - acceptable to people, more like the way Mahatma Gandhi clothed his ideas in simple mass appeal. Baker's architecture will be and is significant beyond these *scenographic* formalisms. At the *techtonic* level and in technological innovation and spatial creativity, his architecture was universal, modern and had the significant spirit of adventure and objectivity. Modern scientific spirit of enquiry was the basis of his architecture. And it happened at a significant point in Kerala's architectural and political history.

Let us remember not to reduce this significance of Baker to that of a mere technician (even if a masterly one) or just a low cost architect. Let us not disgrace his masterly adaptations with cheap imitations as seen in Kerala's recent *scenography* of questionable and insipid adaptation of sloping roofs. A serious study of Baker's architecture is required. I hope some one will do it. May be that only a European will be destined to do that!

Baker was admittedly a Gandhian in ideas and yet like Gandhi he is understood more superficially and because of his eminence, would be followed more in form than in real spirit and content of ideas.