

Builder, Thinker, Visionary:
Celebrating the Philosophy and Practice of Laurie Baker

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About *trialogue 2047*

trialogue 2047 is a series of discussions organised by Development Alternatives, to explore how India can achieve its vision of becoming a green, inclusive and resilient nation by 2047, that is, after 100 years, as an independent nation. trialogue 2047 brings together distinguished speakers to address issues like poverty alleviation, participatory policymaking, resource efficiency etc. The discussion held on December 28th 2016 addressed the theme: Celebrating the Philosophy and Practice of Laurie Baker Builder, Thinker, Visionary.

Speakers at the trialogue 2047

Mr. Gopalan Nair Shankar (Founder, Habitat Technology Group)

Dr. Pronab Sen (Country Director, India International Growth Centre)

Dr. Abhijit Sen (Retired Professor Jawaharlal Nehru University)

Brief Overview

India's population is projected to reach 1.6 billion by 2050; the growth in population would lead to increase in demand of housing. The housing sector is an important component in the framework to achieve sustainable development. It is of highest priority for India to ensure secure access to sustainable and affordable housing for of its citizens; now and in the future.

With increasing population and socio-economic developmental needs, access and availability of resources for housing sector shall be constrained.

Introduction on Laurie Baker

Laurie Baker is remembered as a true Gandhian, who inspired many thousand architects, engineers, and builders. He believed in creating dream homes for people who couldn't even afford to dream. He was a visionary whose work influenced many policy makers and professional architects in the country. His work and philosophy has been a guide for human capacity building and management of natural resources; to bring focus on sustainability in the development of infrastructure for the future generations. Introducing Laurie Baker at the **trialogue 2047**, Zeenat Niazi, Vice-President, Development Alternatives, who moderated the panel discussion, said he identified the significance of natural resources and emphasised on its value. Zeenat identified the significance of Laurie's philosophy in the current context. She emphasised on the qualities of leadership in the context of India emerging as a global leader; economic, technological and social transition, to lead India on the path of sustainable development, by becoming an inclusive economy. Zeenat also emphasised on the relevance of Laurie's work and philosophy in order to build a future for the nation and the leadership we aspire for.

Abhijit Sen, Retired Professor Jawaharlal Nehru University

Efficiency and sufficiency integral to sustainability

Abhijit said that Kerala is the only city where the Kerala State Planning Board is still thinking about the 13th five-year-plan; and it is the only city where planning has been forgotten in every form. Kerala is the city, where Laurie spent many years of his life, and he was deeply tied to the city. Laurie once said “If guys on top set an example- it flows down, if they don’t, it doesn’t “. He often advocated people to build efficient buildings, which saves money.

Abhijit said he was convinced that we have not utilised Laurie’s teaching in our lives, and in fact, have not used the word efficient appropriately. Much of the economics is about efficiency. In fact, efficiency is integral to growth. He said leading people to practice something has to be backed with reasoning, which can be either efficiency or aspiration. Among the two what drives aspiration is – what is in fashion, or what people think is original. As for efficiency, for any level of resources if we can reduce what goes into consumption and maximise on the output, it means being efficient. Therefore, it proves that efficiency as a component is integral to growth in order to move towards sustainability. Abhijit said he believes that Laurie’s good work hasn’t been spread. “There has been problems everywhere, we started in Housing Urban Development Corporation (HUDCO), but could not go far. The big question is of scale up, and how to communicate the message to scale up efficient houses to the people. So that they could decide what is sufficient for them” said Abhijit.

The bitter truth however is that somehow we aren’t being efficient, and it is a major roadblock in the sustainable development framework. Efficiency is something we all must be proud about, whether we believe in more growth than sustainability or the other way around. “In Hyderabad, the design of Indira Awaas Yojana, renamed as Pradhan Mantri Awaas Yojana- Gramin, people are building what they want and are satisfied with” said Abhijit. Indira Awaas Yojana aims at helping rural people below the poverty-line (BPL) belonging to SCs/STs, freed bonded labourers and non-SC/ST categories in construction of dwelling units and up-gradation of existing unserviceable kutcha houses by providing assistance in the form of full grant. In the aftermath of Tsunami, some places in Andaman, community provided housing designs to the architects. Communities made final decisions based on their sufficiency, it was an architecture chosen by the people.

Defining sufficiency, Abhijit raised the challenges that come forth in trying to figure out how to deliver something that is desirable & efficient, for the people. “The reason you’re doing it (making resource efficient and sufficient house). This idea was well embedded into Laurie Baker’s philosophy” said Abhijit.

If efficiency is achieved, it would reduce the cost for the client and save resources. Unfortunately, there is no market for sustainable housing. At some point in time we can put the “large public good aspect” idea in to it. To achieve this threshold, we need someone like Laurie Baker to set the model for it, and make it aspirational for people to practice and follow.

Gopalan Nair Shankar, Founder, Habitat Technology Group

Laurie reenergised the vernacular architecture

Gopalan said that he grew up with Laurie Baker buildings. He explained how Laurie Baker had the art of creating structures that would enable you to experience the space in the most natural way possible “It was a circular building of a church which captured my attention. The building design humbled me. It was the first time that a religious building was made denying the age old architectural practices” said Gopalan. He cited the example of Dr Namboodiri, a famous mathematician in Kerala, who wanted to build a 6-bedroom house, for which he approached Laurie, who advised him to build a house sufficient for his need. Dr Namboodiri did not pay heed to Laurie’s advice, and went ahead with his plan for a large house. Today, the house wears an abandoned look, as all his children went abroad to make their careers.

Gopalan confessed that initially he was opposed to Laurie Baker politically, as he believed that his architecture would be an extension of the colonial era. “The colonial architecture used cultural symbols, and these symbols were integrated into the building vocabulary. It looked subjugating population to the colonial era symbols. Rather he wanted to promote value based structures that is why he used natural construction materials. His vernacular architecture became a symbol, and he brought Indian outlook in the architecture” added Gopalan.

It has been one of the primary qualities of Laurie’s buildings since he believed in the beauty of natural colours, textures, and the use of vernacular materials. Laurie inspired Indian architects to bring out the vibrant Indian outlook in their buildings. “He learnt from the people in Himalayas (the local tribal), the kind of architecture in the area. He personally experienced the strength and versatility of the material. He chose a language to build the building. His buildings have a soul” said Gopalan.

Laurie believed buildings to have meditative quality, as he treated each of his building as a separate identity and made his eco-friendly designs keeping in mind the users and social aspects. His keen interest in understanding material vocabulary made him the first architect to practice organic architecture in India.

Usually architects tend to get driven by political and contextual influences, and it gives birth to difference between their work and their deed. Laurie’s honesty and truthfulness towards his work made him a person who practiced what he preached. Gopalan emphasised that each one must treat their work as an offering to God, thus ensuring that the workmanship in the

buildings is perfect. Laurie was a great example vernacular style and gave identity to every building. He worked as a mason himself and worked with individuals and communities to understand their needs and cater to it.

Pronab Sen, Country Director, India International Growth Centre

Laurie Baker's life defines two central values:

1. Ethics & Value in the modern system
2. Re-thinking Innovations

Ethics & Value in the modern system

Pronab said that Laurie Baker thought in rather organizing ourselves: notion of strong sense of ethics, notion of empathy and notion of innovation. And the complex framework in which these notions work together to formulate economic and political landscape. Ethics are embedded in individuals. "But when we talk about institutions, if ethics and empathy are embedded in the outcome of our interaction, should we not be thinking of the ways we organize ourselves in different dimensions of our existence" said Pronab.

In the primitive societies in India, the relationship between the producer & consumer is dynamic, because they are interdependent on each other. However, in the modern societal system, the distance between the producer and consumer is widening. The increase in distance instantly results in the declining of the empathy level but it might not result in the decline of the ethics.

"In this fast paced economy driven world, the tendency is to aspire to move towards the corporate economy, but the sad part is that, it is in this sector where the decision makers are farthest away from the people being affected" emphasized Pronab. Shareholders in the corporate economy care for a financial relationship." Where do the values represented by Laurie Baker come into the picture? How to let innovations survive" added Pronab

In the modern society context, financial stakeholder has no empathy towards the ones affected by the products of the corporate economy, and all that matters to them is their investment. In these circumstances, if we reflect on Laurie baker's values, it would be easier to understand, and see how we can better integrate it in the existing societal system.

Re-thinking Innovations

Innovations are driven by individuals despite being embedded in the larger economic system. In fact, be it ethics or innovation, it ultimately boils down to how individuals interact with each other within the economic system.

In this era, innovation needs to be rethought and restructured; in fact, it is suggested to revisit the basics, the stage from where mankind began progressing through trial and error. The aspect of aspirations and development has narrowed our thinking and overshadowed values. As a result, the innovation connected with values doesn't happen in large corporations; and the brightest of research and development institutions do not focus on the same. Value based innovations often happen more at the micro level; at start-ups at the grassroots level. Therefore, it is important to identify organisational structure that encourages value-based innovations

Audience questions and comments

A.K.Jain, former Commissioner (Planning), Delhi Development Authority, in the audience said Laurie Baker's ideologically supported mainstreaming of natural materials, locally available materials beyond cement and steel, to become the spine of construction sector. After identifying local material for construction, Laurie advocated the need to use it judiciously.

Vinod Gupta, an architect, addressing the audience said that the panel discussion was very interesting, as panellists spoke about efficiency and the need to move towards sustainability; emphasised on Laurie Baker's ideology on sufficiency over efficiency. "We should develop curriculum on masonry. Look at the political aspect, as why such sustainable practices could never be mainstreamed and adopted by the government" said Vinod.

Ramesh, a former engineer with New Delhi Municipal Corporation said "25 years ago Government of India wanted to utilize cost effective technologies and build a movement around it. HUDCO built 400 buildings. But, after initial support, the government did not support it later. Efficient and sustainable building practices could never make it to the bible of building codes".

President of Development Alternatives, George C. Varughese, described how Laurie Baker displayed the qualities of not just a great architect but an exceptional human being. "I saw Loyola School building in Kerala collapse, Laurie had built it. He reacted to the situation with modesty, humility, and integrity. It left a deep impact on me. We should concentrate on finding a formula to scale up these ethical qualities and values" said George

CONCLUSION

Sufficiency and efficiency in sustainable housing

Abhijit Sen said “We are finding ways to figure out how to scale up sustainable practices; we need to inculcate it as a passion in the society. The pressing problem is not about scaling up but understanding what we really want and need. It brings us back to sufficiency and efficiency. Therefore, as a community, decision making of what is sufficient becomes integral”. Elaborating on decision making to promote sustainability in building, Abhijit said that it is important to look at the architecture of decision making and the architecture of organisation structuring. The system should be laid out in a manner that the decision makers decide what is sufficient, and then leave it to the communities to take the final call on.

Gopalan said “Laurie left a legacy for mass housing schemes; he made hundreds of designs. The Chief Minister of Kerala had asked him to prepare a housing code bible or engineering manual, it became part of the PWD schedule. A template was created integrating soil and water management, and environmental impact. He made brick jail, no cost intervention with aesthetic expression. He even got bamboo and tried to mainstream it”. Gopalan concluded that Laurie’s life was a transcendental journey, and he opened many doors. He said that there could only be one Laurie Baker

Concluding the panel discussion, Pronab said “people’s needs and aspirations are constantly evolving. In fact, there is a need to understand the nature of discourse in public demand and aspiration. In Kerala, it was taken up because Laurie Baker was there”.
