

'We need people with a public vision'

Deborah Thiagarajan's journey of South India started in the early 1970s. She travelled through dusty villages picking up the threads of vulnerable craft and architectural traditions. When she set up the Madras Craft Foundation in 1984, this art historian from the U.S. was sure that the diverse cultural flavours of the South needed to be preserved in a way that people would experience them. Dakshina-Chitra, a cross-cultural centre of architecture, crafts, lifestyle, food and the performing arts, was opened to the public in 1996. Deborah's journey through heritage continues. Only, her vision has broadened to include conservation of ancient towns.

Deborah's partner for the *Take Two* is Benny Kuriakose. One of the few architects to explore the possibility of incorporating traditional styles into the contemporary context, Benny's work — be it at DakshinaChitra or the Institute of Palliative Care in Kozhikode — stands out in the midst of gleaming glass and shining steel modern edifices.

As Deborah and Benny traverse a gamut of topics, **T. Krithika Reddy** records their conversation at *The Patio, Taj Coromandel*.

Debbie: It was way back in 1984 (with a faraway look). I asked Laurie Baker to suggest one of his assistants to do research on the vernacular architecture of Kerala and he suggested your name. That was the beginning of our long journey. We travelled the length and breadth of Kerala.

Benny: I was fresh from college. It took almost two years to get an in-depth perspective of Kerala architecture.

Debbie: After that, you left for London on a Charles Wallace Fellowship. You've such an inquiring mind. Guess, once you work with someone like Baker, everything changes.

Benny: He works on the site and inspires the craftsmen as well. His style is distinct and he has made architecture economically viable.

Debbie: Now, you're working on housing projects for the tsunami-affected.

Benny: In between work for some affluent clients, such projects come as a refreshing change. I had worked earlier on homes for earthquake victims in Latur and Bhuj. Usually, mass housing projects are done without taking into account the end user's needs. But I'm talking to families and taking into consideration their individual needs. Tell me, what was the



UNLIKE THIS GENERATION, STUDENTS ONCE HAD SOME IDEALISM BENNY

motivation to start something as unique as DakshinaChitra?

Debbie: Those days, I worked a lot in the villages in connection with the Tamil Nadu Nutrition Project. As someone who came from outside India, I saw everything with fresh eyes. I saw the way people lived and practised crafts. Traditional craftsmen were going through uncertain times. Initially, I thought I'd do something with crafts and textiles. But as convener of INTACH for 14 years, I've seen it's not easy to get people to understand the importance of their environment. So I wanted to create something that evoked memories of history and culture. That's when DakshinaChitra became an architecture centre. It's one of the few centres where the past speaks. Our

dreams go further. Now, we are looking at how some towns and rural areas can be conserved. We are working in Tiruppur, a lovely temple town with 200-year-old structures at the end of the high-tech corridor. We did a one-year project with school kids and brought out booklets for them to understand their environment and intervene before everything disappears. We are also trying to get the highway, which is right next to the temple, around the town which means the madams will remain intact. We are trying to make the town ready for tourists.

Benny: Yes, we need to preserve the past. DakshinaChitra is a reminder of something we have lost. I've seen children recollecting their *thatha's* house there.

Debbie: It appals me. When I came to India, children used to go to the villages for vacations. So they had an idea of their roots. Today, when some of them come to DakshinaChitra they look at it as if it's a foreign place! Art and culture fills your mind with happy, positive thoughts. It makes you a holistic person. See Benny, if you didn't have such a passion for culture, you wouldn't be thinking about housing for the poor. You wouldn't go beyond that single-minded pursuit to make money. We need more people with a public vision. Isn't Chennai changing fast?

Benny: Yes, the workforce has increased exponentially and the traffic has become chaotic. As for architecture, 10 years ago, it was granite cladding, now it's glass, aluminium or steel. It might be a toilet behind, but outside it's shining glass! (*They laugh*). It's easy to do such buildings. But they simply don't reflect what's inside. We have to look at how vernacular architecture can be used in a modern context. Most of the employees in IT firms don't know if it's day

YOUNGSTERS MUST TAKE SOME TIME OFF TO WIDEN THEIR HORIZONS DEBBIE

or night, sunny or raining outside.

Debbie: Yes, if you have an office with a window and a view, you're extremely lucky.

Benny: Even those with windows use blinds and turn on the air-conditioner. People don't understand the importance of natural light. There are studies to show the impact it can have on the human mind.

Debbie: It's a symptom of a trend — that of isolation. I've been in India for 35 years. Every time I go back to the U.S., I feel a growing isolation among the people there. It all started with fast foods. The idea of a family coming together over a meal was lost when people started picking up food on the way to offices or having a bite in their cars. Computer, e-mail and cell-phone... all these are more con-

ducive to separation than bringing people together. I'm happy, in India, people still visit each other and drop over for meals at friends'/relatives' homes. We have the conveniences of a modern life, yet enjoy the traditional family set-up. There's more bonding. But, the trend is becoming apparent here too. We have to make a concerted effort. Are work, television and sleep all that make up life? So, what do you see yourself doing in the future?

Benny: As you know, I'm doing my Ph.D in IIT. I might do a few projects to sustain my office and turn to teaching and writing books. I also plan to do some work with social significance.

Debbie: And your doctor wife gives you the freedom to do what you

want. (*Laughs*)

Benny: Coming to your arts management course...

Debbie: The 11-month programme covers art history, culture studies, documentation, management, planning art-related projects, etc. It's a JRD Tata Trust fellowship programme and we admit 10 students a year. There are plans to take it further. We are looking at different possibilities — a design school and tie-ups with other organisations. It's sad, in Chennai people don't look at the arts as a career option. Chennai has all it takes to become the cultural capital of the country. There are so many talented, open-minded people doing good work. But they have to come together.

Benny: In those days, students had a bit of idealism in them, unlike the present generation. They were service-minded and wanted to do something. Now, youngsters keep comparing salaries and lifestyles.

Debbie: Absolutely. When students complete their education, at least for the first two years, they have no responsibilities. They must use this period to widen their horizons, experience and experiment.

Benny: What are your plans for DakshinaChitra in the coming years?

Debbie: For any centre to remain relevant, it has to keep evolving. We are now organising workshops on contemporary art too, so that children understand there are different ways of looking at the world. We are keen on more outreach programmes like the Tiruppur project. The newly launched national museum for women is another initiative.

Benny: What about crafts programmes?

Debbie: Working with crafts and craftsmen isn't as simple as it sounds. A true craftsman is an artist. He has an inquiring mind and is not afraid of experimenting with forms and techniques. If he doesn't, he is just carrying on a tradition, not taking it further. It's difficult to work with craft clusters and sustain them. That's why DakshinaChitra only functions as a marketing arm for crafts groups.

Benny: What about culture tourism?

Debbie: Oh, there's tremendous scope here. But it needs a master plan. In the South, hospitality comes naturally to the people. But the trick with cultural tourism is how do we reach the money to those who provide hospitality?

(*Laughter*)