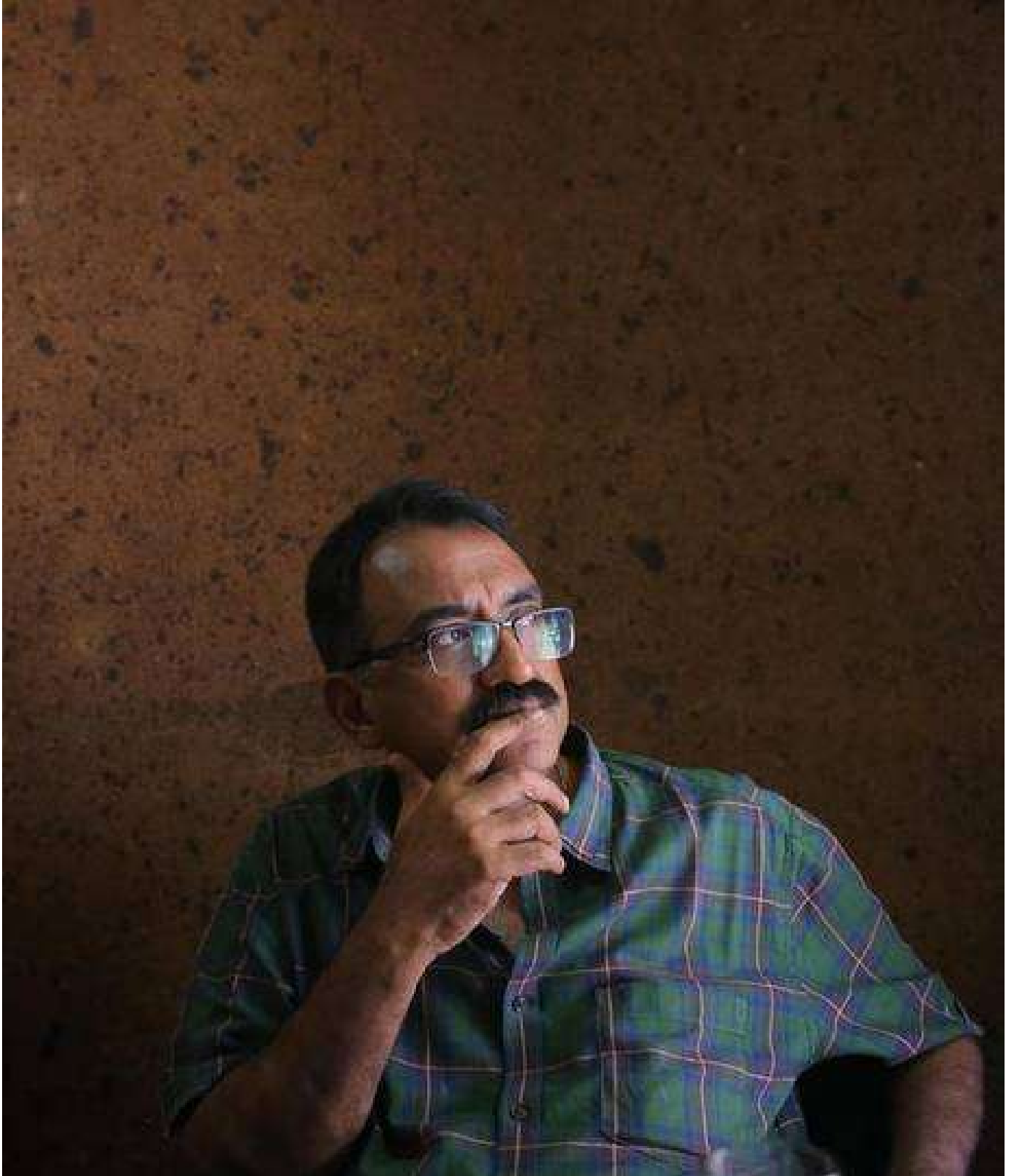


MY COLLEGE YEARS EDUCATION

Touching lives



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Master mason and people's architect G. Shankar has tried to bring about social development through architecture.

"It has been a wonderful journey and I am glad I could help many thousands of people get safe shelter," says G. Shankar, a pioneer of sustainable architecture. Having built thousands of low-cost yet eco-friendly houses in India as well as in neighbouring countries, he is also a Padma Shri awardee.

Founder and chief architect of Habitat Technology group, he built the largest NGO in the shelter sector in India, which has carried out several major disaster rehabilitation and charitable housing projects in several countries. A Laurie Baker protégé, who practises brick-and-mud architecture, Shankar says his drive to bring social development as an architect was born during his college days in Thiruvananthapuram.

Connecting

After his schooling at Government Model Boy's High School in Thiruvananthapuram, when he joined for pre-degree at Government Arts College, which was in the same compound, it merely meant a change of building. But, he noticed one big difference. The vertical social division among the students was out in the open. "Several students from financially sound families could afford facilities such as tuition and tutorials. But there were a many boys from marginalised sections who couldn't afford them. Being one of the few who was friends with many economically-disadvantaged students, I was able to understand poverty and the alienation associated with it," says Shankar.

The situation was the same at the College of Engineering Thiruvananthapuram (CET), where Shankar got admission for architecture. Engineering, he recall, was considered to be the forte of the 'elitist'. "But unlike the pre-degree days, we had a tool to fight that mentality – campus politics. I strongly believe politics was instrumental in making many meaningful interventions in professional college campuses, especially in fighting segregation," he adds.

Shankar's batch was the first to start a cultural union at CET. The late 70s was a time of political turmoil, and their first event was a reminder of that. "We hosted a poet's gathering on the campus as our first event, for which we got arrested. We were seen as some kind of extremists by many. Those were some of the most memorable days of my life," he recalls with a chuckle.

Shankar chose architecture as it was the perfect field to explore his creative avenues while doing his part in the country's social development. "We had some great teachers who imbibed all the joy and spirit of architecture in us. But the architecture I was taught at CET was not for people with a big family and a limited budget," he adds. So, after he completed

his B.Arch, he did his master's in sustainable housing at Birmingham City University(formerly University of Central England), UK.

He was keen to learn there as it was where British-born Indian architect Laurie Baker studied. "The course changed my perception about architecture. It was probably the first time I was handling construction material. Students were taught masonry, carpentry and all the other works that were part of constructing a house," says Shankar. He topped the course and soon got a call from another university in the U.K. to join as a faculty member at its newly-formed department of sustainable architecture. He admits that he was tempted to stay in the U.K. as he enjoyed life there.

Shankar adds, "I wanted to practise what I studied and help people with it. India was the perfect place to do so as our country was facing a severe housing crisis back then."

For Shankar, **education** must first aim at creating good, caring individuals. He stresses on the importance of imparting deep and precise technical knowledge on the subject. "I have always believed in Che Guevara's perception that the highest technical qualification blended with revolutionary aspirations, create the best out of individuals. India has the most number of talented people in the world. But our system is not able to shape them well. That should change," he says.

His own work, Shankar says, is based on Gandhiji's philosophy that no matter what you do, think about the poorest of the poor and ask yourself how your act is going to touch their lives.

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