

Dr. V. Kurien, the Master Builder of India's Rural Economy

Milk is now the largest component of India's agricultural economy, larger than all the grains put together. According to the Central Statistical Organization, India's farmers produced milk worth ₹6,50,000 crore in 2016-17. The value of milk produced exceeds the total value of foodgrains (cereals plus pulses), which stood at ₹4,86,846 crore, and was way above paddy at ₹2,26,481 crore or wheat at ₹1,28,998 crore during 2014-15. It wasn't like this even 15 years ago. In 1999-2000, the value of milk production was at ₹88,092 crore. It was not even two-thirds of cereals at ₹1,34,096 crore, although it was more than that of paddy at ₹70,416 crore and wheat at ₹46,224 crore. When we see the big picture of Indian dairying, this then is the greatest legacy of Dr. V. Kurien to the nation. Between the seventies and the nineties, Dr. Kurien envisioned and relentlessly pursued the mission for establishing a whole foundation and infrastructure for our dairy industry, which has given us the results we see today.

Dr. Kurien built the dairy industry of India from a scratch. The bulk of India's milk is produced by utilizing crop and other agricultural residues and optimizing on the available land, water and human resources in rural India. India is now the largest producer of milk in the world and very competitive. From dependency on large scale imports of milk powder, we are now exporting milk products. Until Dr. Kurien came on the scene at Anand, the dairy industry of India was being built on the basis of Government Milk

schemes through dairy development departments of the Central and State Governments. These dairy development schemes made the dairy sector dependent on imported milk powders to supply cheap rationed milk to the urban markets served by these milk supply schemes. Dairy development in the country, with the exception of the Amul Dairy Cooperative, was in fact in an anti-dairy development cycle that saw the best of the country's milch animals wind up in the metros.

While we as students were being taught that advanced countries kept milk production levels steady by properly timing carvings, Dr. Kurien realized that given the dominance of buffaloes in India and that most parts are rain fed, milk production in India will always be seasonal. He therefore led the first major technological intervention in India's dairy development. He set up the very first milk powder plant to make milk powder from buffalo milk at Amul. As a result, farmers got a good price for milk even during the winter months, when production was much higher than demand.

During the early years, Amul milk powder was more expensive than the milk powder dumped by the west in international market. When the Milk Commissioner of Bombay refused to buy Amul milk powder, Dr. Kurien had to question his loyalty by asking "if he was the Milk commissioner of Bombay state or the Milk Commissioner of New Zealand?" Dr. Kurien was totally against the milk bureaucracy that was dragging down the milk producers in India. He would say that wherever there were milk commissioners there was no milk and if you wanted milk you had to get rid of the milk commissioners!

Dr. Kurien was totally motivated to the cause of the poor rural milk producers. His mission to replicate the Amul pattern of farmer owned and governed cooperative dairies enabled farmers both within Gujarat and beyond to gain control on their business of milk production. By all measures, he was more than successful in establishing the value chain of production, collection, processing, product manufacture and marketing all the way to the consumers in most of the major dairying states. He would quote Nehru who had said that he was an ordinary man but the nobility of the cause (fighting



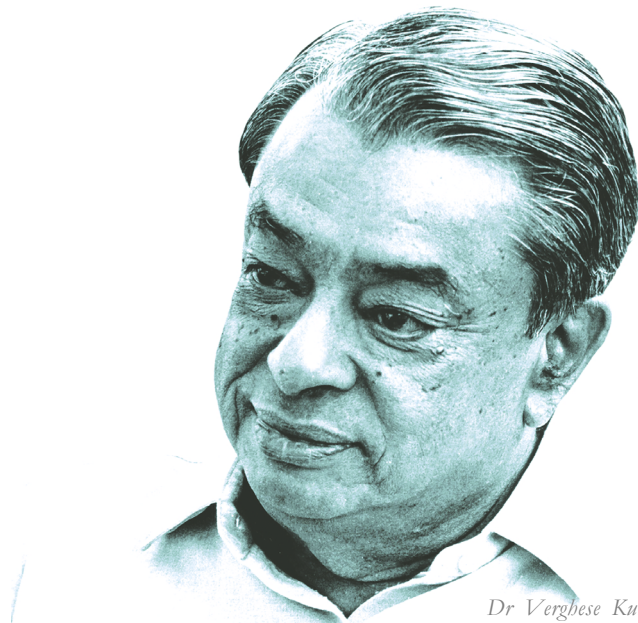
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for freedom) rubbed on him and he was seen as a great person. In the case of Dr. Kurien, the cause of alleviating rural poverty through the milk revolution was the nobility that rubbed on him.

For Dr. Kurien, replicating the Amul Pattern of Dairy Cooperatives, as desired by the then Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri, became his sole mission in NDDB. Many State Governments would want the Government departments to implement the project. He would reply that like Christian Missionaries, who believed that Christ was the only way to God, even though there were other paths, he knew of only one way (the Amul Pattern) for dairy development. Dr. Kurien used to tell governments that he was open for discussions on his belief till the cows came home but he would not deviate from the chosen path. Shri Jagjivan Ram, the then Minister of Agriculture, wanted Operation Flood funds for developing a private Dairy. Dr. Kurien refused and he earned the Minister's ire. We had the Chief Minister of Rajasthan Barkatullah Khan who questioned the wisdom of having illiterate farmers of Rajasthan run large milk businesses. Dr. Kurien shot back that that if the illiterate voters of Jodhpur Rural had the wisdom of electing him as their MP, why could not these voters be trusted with managing their own milk business.

Dr. Kurien relentlessly fought for cooperatives to be freed from the clutches of the Registrar of Cooperatives. He used to quote the analogy of the Companies Act where the Registrar carried out only regulatory functions and had no role in the day to day operations of companies. When he took his case to Mrs. Indira Gandhi, she objected. Her objections were based on the competence of the rural farmers to run their own business without the supervision of the state governments. Dr. Kurien's reply was that she was responding like the British, who had said, "We will give you freedom when you are ready". Never to let go of his conviction, Dr. Kurien told Mrs. Gandhi that our people had decided that we wanted freedom to ensure our self-respect, but in the process, if we were not able to give ourselves a good government then we should call Lord Mountbatten back!

Dr. Kurien built institutions of class and character (Amul, NDDB, GCMF, IRMA). These were professionally world class and had honesty as a core value in all that they did. Financial integrity was one of the key characteristics. A case in point is this story of a speeding challan given to one of NDDB's drivers. The driver was asked to speed up to enable the NDDB officer reach Ahmedabad airport in time. The driver got



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a speeding ticket for ₹ 50/-. The driver went to the COO with a request to get back the amount he had already paid as a fine. The COO asked the driver to get a bill from the local garage for ₹ 50/-. The driver got the bill and gave it to the Director administration who passed it on to the COO for approval. The driver was paid ₹ 50/- for the fine that he had paid for over-speeding. The Director administration, mentioned this case to Dr. Kurien. He was angry and sad. He called a meeting of all concerned with the episode. He asked a question, "If the driver were to unfortunately kill somebody on the road because of over-speeding, could NDDB take the responsibility of his negligence?" Finally, the COO was fined ₹ 40/-, the Director Administration was fined ₹ 9/- and the driver was fined ₹ 1/-. The whole episode was put on the NDDB notice Board so that it became a lesson for everybody. In another case when a senior officer of the NDDB was confronted for an alleged bribe in awarding a data entry contract, Dr. Kurien told the concerned officer that he will take him apart, limb by limb. The terrified guy resigned on the spot.

The cause of working for the poor farmers rubbed on each and every one of the professionals working for the NDDB. When the Illustrated Weekly of India published a scandalous article, the White Lie and made several false allegations against the NDDB, the issue was raised in the Parliament. The Agriculture Minister (who in any case wanted Dr. Kurien to leave) agreed to enquire into the working of the NDDB. The fact that our own minister was not defending us for the good work that we were doing in spite of all the hurdles we were facing was the last straw that broke the Camel's back. 560 professionals of NDDB sent their resignations



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to me in a matter of a few days. I sent all the resignation letters, along with mine, to Dr. Kurien, stating that this country will not get my bones and that we will stay with the NDDB only till the enquiry was over. When all this was happening, Dr. Kurien was on a tour. When he returned, he was furious. He said that the Minister will think that it was Dr. Kurien who got all the resignations done. Dr. Kurien asked me and all the other officers to immediately withdraw their resignations. I was unwilling to do so as I firmly believed the country was treating us unfairly.

A little later, Dr. Kurien had asked me to meet BG Verghese. BG Verghese was simply unable to believe that such a mass resignation of officers could have happened in NDDB. He wanted to see there signation letters. When BG Verghese saw the mass of resignations his comment was that it was the most noble event that had happened in the post Gandhi era. But BG Verghese insisted that I should not give this story to anyone else. A few days later the story broke out in four column headlines on the front pages of all the editions of the Indian Express. “600 Scientists of NDDB resign”, was the headline in the Delhi edition. Indira Gandhi was asked by the press after inaugurating an International convention related to Science as to what was happening to scientists and professionals in India. Mrs. Gandhi asked PC Alexander to look into it. The next week, in reply to a question in the Parliament, the Minister replied

that NDDB was doing a great job and the purpose of the enquiry was to strength it to undertake greater tasks. The Minister had blinked and the L K Jha Committee not only gave NDDB a clean chit but a road map for granting NDDB greater freedom and respect.

Mrs. Gandhi extended all support for Dr. Kurien. In the early eighties, she told Dr. Kurien that as a farmer she had serious issues with the pricing of vegetables. She said that when she sold cauliflowers grown at her farm she received only ₹ 2/- per cauliflower but when she went to buy the same cauliflower from the market place she had to pay ₹ 10/-? “Who takes away ₹ 8/- and what are the reasons?”, was the question Mrs. Gandhi had posed to Dr. Kurien? Dr. Kurien had replied, “Madam, you are asking me this question 37 years after we gained freedom? This is the curse of India”. After Mrs. Gandhi was assassinated, the Cabinet Secretary told Dr. Kurien that he had promised Mrs. Gandhi that he would do something about Fruits and Vegetables. Dr. Kurien replied that he had not promised anything but now it was her word. That is how NDDB really got going with the Safal fruits and vegetables project. It would be a lasting tribute to Dr. Kurien if Safal could become be as “Safal” as the White Revolution.

If Dr. Kurien were amongst us today, he would have offered a whole new paradigm for making yet another big leap in Indian Dairying. He would have put set us forth on yet another exciting journey to make India the world’s best story of “sustainable dairying” finding paths and institutional solutions where milk producers and their incomes continue to be as egalitarian as feasible, balancing producer prices for milk with the sensitivities of income elasticity of demand for milk and milk products in both rural and urban markets, delimiting urban areas for dairying or milk production and of course and resettling dairy animals housed in urban areas – given that India will soon be the world’s most populous country in the world. ■

Dr. V. Kurien photograph: Courtesy NDDB, Anand