

The Father of the White Revolution

Under Verghese Kurien's leadership, India became world's leading milk producer, surpassing the US in 1998

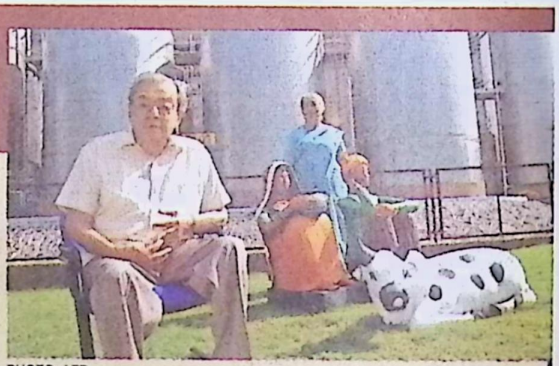


PHOTO: AFP

Verghese Kurien

His was an accidental career. After studying mechanical engineering in Michigan State University, Kurien reluctantly returned to Anand, Gujarat in the summer of 1949 as a government clerk. Circumstances soon made him the general manager of a farmers' cooperative. He insisted that they buy a pasteurizing machine for 60,000 rupees. The investment paid off; the milk could now reach Mumbai without spoiling; and the co-op idea grew apace. Farmers from other districts came to admire, and set up their own. Many of them were landless laborers and women, whose only asset was their cow or buffalo. Producers ran everything, the selling, the processing and, most of all, the marketing.

To expand the operation even further he wanted to convert buffalo milk into milk powder, which the leading dairy experts of the time said was impossible. With the help of a friend who was a chemist, he achieved the seeming miracle. Kurien implied in his memoirs that the supposed impossibility of converting buffalo milk into powder was a myth created by the Western world, which had abundant cow's milk and wanted nations like India to continue to import its milk powder. In the late 1950s, he decided to market the milk of the cooperative through a brand name, and that led to the creation of one of the most enduring Indian brands, Amul Butter.

At his humble house at Anand, Kurien received prime ministers and VVIPs. Once, a very tall governor of a state was to visit, and his security detail complained that the bed in Kurien's guest room was too short. Kurien asked his Excellency to sleep diagonally.

He was legendary for his tenacity, drive and sheer bloody-mindedness to get bureaucratic inertia to yield to his ideas. No one stood for long in his way. One minister of agriculture tried to remove him from the National Dairy Development Board, of which he was founder-chairman for 33 years; instead, the minister lost his job. At his Institute of Rural Management he forbade the students to hang out their washing or sit on the grass.

Verghese Kurien (1921-2014) chose his words with care in a nation where humility is the only permissible form of pride. He was born a Christian, ate beef, and liked a drink—but not milk.