



## Verghese Kurien

Verghese Kurien, father of India's "white revolution", died on September 9th, aged 90

MILK, and butter for that matter, are sacred substances in Hindu India. They make up daily offerings, and milk washes the feet of household gods. Newly married couples compete to fish for the ring in a bowl of milk. The god Krishna, as a child, stole butter from the household crocks. Within the primordial Ocean of Milk lay the nectar of immortality.

Verghese Kurien had no reverence for it particularly, nor for the cattle that produced it. He was born a Christian, became an atheist, ate beef, and liked a drink—but not milk. In fact, he actively disliked it. He never meant to go into dairying, either. The government pushed him into it when he went, as a gifted student, for a metallurgy scholarship, and ended up answering a trick question about pasteurisation. ("Er...something to do with milk?") To fulfil the scholarship conditions he went to work in the run-down Government Research Creamery in dust-filled Anand in Gujarat, where the machinery kept breaking down: hating the place, hating the life, hating that ever-curdling white stuff.

All the more ironic, then, that he was the man who revolutionised milk production in India, transforming the country from a milk-deficient place to the world's largest producer (with 17% of the global total), and along the way drawing millions of

rural farmers out of poverty. Ironic, yes; but not, to him, surprising. Few others had his tenacity, his drive, his sheer bloody-mindedness, to get government ministers and foot-dragging *babus* to yield to his ideas. No village *panchayat*, no landowner, no grasping corporatist, 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 own job. The saying in Delhi was, "Don't touch Kurien." Once engaged in a knuckle-banging argument, he never gave in; and he never gave in, of course, because he was right.

It had all started in Anand, where, lonely and living in an empty garage, he started to befriend local farmers. (He understood Gujarati perfectly, he said, though he, a Keralaite, chose not to speak it.) The farmers, struggling to get a fair price for their milk against the middlemen working for the Polson Dairy, had started a small co-operative. In 1949 Mr Kurien took charge of it, insisting—as only he could—that they bought a pasteurising 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 these were landless la-

bourers, whose only asset was their cow or buffalo; some were women, who thereby gained a little independence. In 2012 these tiny milk producers were getting the equivalent of 29 rupees a litre, three-quarters of the price paid for a pouch of full-cream milk by customers in Chennai or Kolkata.

### Empowering the poor

This was not all his doing. The vital discovery that buffalo milk (much more common than cows' in India) could be dried into milk powder was made by H.M. Dalaya, not by him. But it was he who seized control when, after 1970, the EEC started sending its surplus milk powder and butter oil to India. In "Operation Flood", over 26 years, he sold these donations to finance a national network of 170 milksheds and 72,500 village co-operatives—which had grown, by his death, to around 150,000, with 15m members. Dumping by foreigners, which might have killed the domestic industry, thus enabled it to thrive. As an astrologer had predicted years before, when he read the length of his shadow at noon—not that he believed in all that—his career had taken off in an unimaginable way.

"Socialism" never described what he was doing. This was democracy: producers running everything themselves, the selling, the processing and, most of all, the marketing. Empowerment of the rural poor was his real aim, and milk merely the best tool available. He avoided national politics, staying in small, dull Anand for years, even when his Amul brand of milk products had become the biggest food brand in the country, with the plump, polka-dotted Amul girl, bread and delicious butter in hand, cracking her jokes from hoardings all over India's cities. In Anand he was king, and liked it that way. At his house, he received prime ministers; at his Institute of Rural Management he forbade the students to hang out their washing or sit on the grass. His dairies, meanwhile, taught poor farmers to value cleanliness, discipline and hard work.

Liberalisation in 1991 came as an appalling shock. He had no intention of letting private companies back into the dairy business, strove to keep the co-operatives' local and regional monopolies, and dreaded competition from multinationals. India, he thought, was now defenceless. But he was old by then, and gradually lost the argument. Asked why the mood had turned against him when he was India's dairy hero, its *doodhwallah*, he would snap back, Why was Jesus Christ crucified? Why was Caesar stabbed?

His house in Anand was modest, though. The most precious thing in it appeared to be an autographed painting of Hillary and Tensing on Everest: another conquered mountain much like his, very big, very difficult, and very white. ■