

How Iron Man launched India on its milky way

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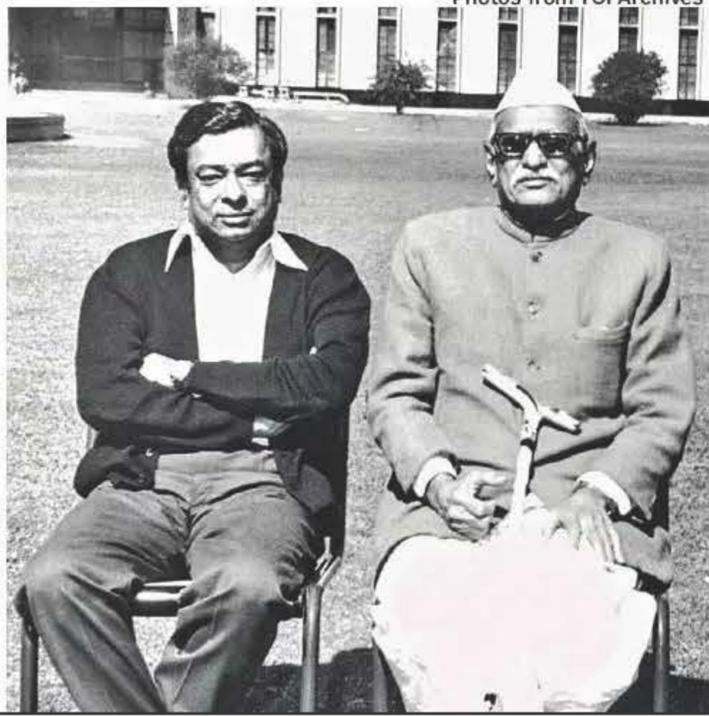
PM Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi visit a dairy facility, shortly after KDCMPUL was established in 1954

India is the biggest milk producer in the world today but 75 years ago it made a small start on the 'milky way' when Kaira District Cooperative Milk Producers' Union Limited (KDCMPUL) collected 250 litres of milk from two villages in modern-day Anand.

What KDCMPUL lacked in scale, it made up for with zeal. After all, it was not just another business but a call to end the monopoly of Polson Dairy, a private player that had flourished under the British Raj.

The 'movement' started in 1946 with a farmers' meeting in Samarkha, a village in Gujarat's Kaira district. Among the wise heads at the table were India's 'Iron Man' Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, future PM Morarji Desai, and freedom fighter Tribhuvandas Patel, now fondly remembered as Tribhuvan kaka. It was a moment for the history books.

Photos from TOI Archives



(Left) President Rajendra Prasad laying KDCMPUL's foundation stone in 1954; and Tribhuvandas Patel (right), founder of Amul, with Dr Verghese Kurien

Not cowed by the Raj

Polson Dairy had secured the rights to procure milk from the entire Kaira district. It was the first time the British had waded into India's milk sector. Farmers were angry because Polson exploited them, and they resolved to form a cooperative.

Inspired by Patel's call, KDCMPUL was registered on December 14, 1946, and found its feet under Tribhuvan kaka's leadership.

Major milk cooperatives across India

- **Verka** | Punjab
- **Vita** | Haryana
- **Saras** | Rajasthan
- **Parag** | Uttar Pradesh
- **Amul** | Gujarat
- **Mahanand & Gokul** | Maharashtra
- **Sanchi** | Madhya Pradesh
- **Nandini** | Karnataka
- **Milma** | Kerala
- **Aavin** | Tamil Nadu
- **Vijaya** | Telangana
- **Visakha** | Andhra Pradesh
- **Omfed** | Odisha
- **Benmilk** | West Bengal
- **Purabi** | Assam
- **Sudha** | Bihar

White Revolution

- India is world's largest milk producer and consumer
- Milk is the biggest agricultural produce of India
- India could produce a third of world's milk by 2033

The nascent movement got a shot in the arm when a young, Kerala-born, Michigan University alumnus landed at the government creamery in Anand to serve out his six-month bond for the government scholarship that had taken him to the US. Dr Verghese Kurien didn't know he would end up spending his entire life in the town now known as India's milk city, and become famous as the father of India's White Revolution.

"It wasn't a career that he chose," his daughter Nirmala Kurien, 63, told TOI. "He wanted a career in nuclear physics and metallurgy. But my father always said his greatest privilege was meeting Tribhuvan kaka and joining the cooperative movement which gave meaning to his life. A life that he lived on his terms, serving as an employee to farmers. At times, he even sacrificed his salary."

After Independence, the government of India cancelled its contract with Polson and entered into an agreement with KDCMPUL, which decided to establish a dairy of its own. India's first President, Dr Rajendra Prasad, laid its foundation stone on November 15, 1954, and on October 31, 1956 – Sardar Patel's birthday – PM Jawaharlal Nehru inaugurated the dairy.

Buffalo power

Just 24 hours earlier, Kurien and his team led by dairy tech wizard H M Dalaya, whose family had lost control of Karachi's largest dairy after Partition, had found a way to make milk powder from buffalo milk.

"This breakthrough proved to be a game changer for the dairy industry in India. The dairy industry of developed nations believed that milk powder could only be produced from cow milk," said RS Sodhi, managing director of the Gujarat Cooperative Milk Marketing Federation (GCMMF) that markets milk under the Amul brand. Sodhi is from the first batch of Kurien's other brainchild, Institute of Rural Management, Anand (IRMA).

"There were a lot of vested interests. Milk producing countries like New Zealand had snubbed the idea that milk powder can be manufactured from buffalo milk as well. But my father was a man with great foresight," said Nirmala.

Shastri's Jai Kisan

Having cut its milk teeth, KDCMPUL grew rapidly. It set up its first dairy plant with a milk processing capacity of 1 lakh litres per day. The brand Amul, which means priceless in Sanskrit, was launched in 1957. By the mid-1960s, the milk cooperative movement had spread to other districts of Gujarat – Surat, Vadodara, Mehsana and Sabarkantha. But a large part of India was still untouched by the revolution that had started in Anand.

That changed after PM Lal Bahadur Shastri came to inaugurate Amul's cattle feed plant in 1964. He spent a night in a village and learnt the secret of Anand's success – cooperation. It inspired him to create National Dairy Development Board (NDDB) to replicate the Anand model throughout India with Kurien as its first chairman.

In July 1970, NDDB officially launched Operation Flood – the 'billion litre' idea – that led to what's popularly known as the White Revolution. By the late-1990s, milk-deficit India had transformed into the world's largest milk producer, overtaking the US.