

EVA STALIN IAS ACADEMY

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The curious case of Sosamma Iype and the Vechur cow

This is the unusual story of a quiet, unassuming woman who won the Padma Shri in 2022 for one of the more remarkable reasons imaginable: she saved and resurrected a breed of indigenous cattle, the Vechur cow. Dr. Sosamma Iype's story is located at the heart of India's tussle to industrialise rapidly while seeking to preserve its sublime biodiversity, at a time when the former was fashionable and the latter was not.

Agrarian transformations, erasure of breeds
Steeped in abject poverty and food scarcity at the time of Independence, India had to lay the foundations of a vigorous industry, which would catapult us into the future, and simultaneously ensure that the most basic necessities of our citizens were met. Exacerbating our woes was the fact that the major bulk of our populace subsisted solely on agriculture and animal husbandry, thus making their modernisation vital. Establishing a host of agricultural universities soon after Independence, we embarked on the quest to modernise our farming and livestock rearing practices, hoping to retrieve them from the depths of antiquity. And though our agricultural output soared with the advent of the Green Revolution and dairy production spiked with the onset of the White Revolution, these miraculous transformations also came at a pernicious cost. They reduced indigenous breeds such as the Vechur cow to the brink of extinction.

Acknowledged as one of the world's smallest cattle breeds, the Vechur cow had little value in the India of the White Revolution. In its pursuit to boost milk production through the crossbreeding of indigenous cattle with high-yielding foreign breeds, the White Revolution's corollary was the erasure of smaller breeds such as the Vechur cow. Cross-breeding served to dilute the genetic purity of native breeds and diminish their population, and the Vechur cow, prized for its adaptability to local environmental conditions, found itself imperilled in the face of a sweeping shift towards larger, more commercially viable cattle. As the White Revolution gained momentum, traditional farming practices that relied on smaller-sized cattle breeds fell into disavour. The Vechur cow, with its unique characteristics, became a casualty of changing agricultural dynamics and dwindling demand. Indeed, it would have disappeared



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The professor is an authentic Indian heroine who has left an indelible impression upon India's cultural and agricultural landscape

altogether, had it not been for the selfless efforts of one unassuming Indian: Professor Sosamma Iype.

"I don't remember drinking my mother's milk," writes Prof. Iype, "but I remember clearly the taste of the Vechur milk that my mother gave us to drink." Having grown up in an idyllic era when Vechur cows abounded, with a mother and calf in the compound of her own ancestral home in rural Kerala, it must have been disheartening for Prof. Iype to realise, while teaching at a veterinary college in 1989, that the Vechur breed had all but disappeared. Neither in animal husbandry reports nor in official surveys could this cow be traced, leading many a Kerallite environmentalist, including Prof. Iype, to conclude dejectedly that it had become extinct. Conveying as much to her students, she resigned herself to the loss of an animal she deeply loved.

A student's search

But that is where the story takes a turn. Reluctant to accept the depressing reality of the Vechur's loss, Anil Zachariah – one of Prof. Iype's students who is today a renowned veterinarian – set out in search of an animal that, to him, had assumed mythical proportions. After much wandering and asking, he stumbled upon a Vechur cow in Vaikom, Kerala. Exhilarated beyond measure, and unable to keep the news from his mentor, he scaled the wall of Prof. Iype's house at midnight and leapt into her compound, thrilled to be breaking the marvellous news.

No sooner was that first Vechur cow discovered than Prof. Iype poured herself wholeheartedly into a mission to resurrect and nurture not only the Vechur but several of Kerala's other endangered indigenous breeds, such as the Kasargod, Vilwadi and Cheruvally cattle and the Attappady goat. Her Vechur Conservation Unit, founded at the Kerala Agricultural University with only eight cows, rose from strength to strength, boasting of more than 24 cows at the end of the first year itself – a tremendous testament to Prof. Iype's ardour. Yet, the road ahead was ridden with landmines. As with all idealists in India, she and her team had to contend with various obstacles, even as they blazed a trail. Simultaneously contending with government officials averse to her outlook; envious colleagues who sought to foil her efforts,

going so far as to cast bizarre aspersions on her; well-known environmentalists falsely claiming she had facilitated the "patenting" of an Indian animal abroad; and a brutish media accusing her of treachery and "gene theft," Prof. Iype negotiated a perilous terrain. But not once did she flounder or cower. She persevered, she soldiered: a gentle colossus, Kerala's "Vechur Amma".

The project that became a template

The allure of this pioneering movement was destined to transcend the bounds of Kerala; and it soon gained widespread traction, finding partners in national governmental institutions. Visiting the veterinary college and seeing the glory of the Vechur Conservation Project, R.M. Acharya, of the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR), incredulously asked Prof. Iype how she had conceived of such a project – and led it to fruition – when even the ICAR had not contemplated it. In the event, the ICAR adopted the Vechur Conservation Project, using it as a template for the whole of India.

For Prof. Iype, it has never simply been about performing a scientific miracle and making history with the astounding success of her mission. Instead, she believes firmly in giving back to society, especially to the destitute farmers and cattle rearers in whose homes the Vechur once occupied pride of place. It was in this spirit that, in 1998, she established the Vechur Conservation Trust, whose purpose was to evolve a culture of community participation and enable innumerable impoverished farmers to rear the Vechur by providing them its germ-plasm. This has empowered them and their families to attain a greater degree of self-reliance.

Prof. Iype does not project herself as a messiah. But she is one – a visionary for whom translating an ideal into reality was always more important than any exercise in self-aggrandisement. Not only has she saved the Vechur cow, but she has also left an indelible impression upon our cultural and agricultural landscape, for which we shall forever remain indebted to her. No one will make a movie about her, but she is an authentic Indian heroine.

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Ties that epitomise India's neighbourhood first policy

People have always marvelled at how little Bhutan with an area of 38,394 square kilometre and a population of 7.7 lakh as compared with its giant neighbour India with an area of 3.28 million sq.km and a population of 140 crores have been the closest of partners and the best of friends over the past 50 years and more.

The answer is quite simple. Both nations look to each other as equals, we treat each other with the utmost respect and we have long realised that size does not really make a difference in relations between two sovereign nation states. Thus, India has constantly respected Bhutanese identity, Bhutan's unique religious practices and its desire to be economically prosperous while retaining its own way of life. On its part, Bhutan has long known that there is no real threat to its sovereignty or identity from its southern flank. Hence, it has looked to India to help it grow, develop and prosper. India has lived up to this expectation. Over the decades this has developed into a unique level of trust amongst the leadership of the two countries. It has been in evidence in the recent past.

The Gelephu project

The King of Bhutan paid a visit to India in November 2023 during which he hinted at his plans for a Mindfulness City at Gelephu in southern Bhutan. It is to be like a Special Economic Zone to attract foreign investment and advance prosperity for that nation. Naturally, India, including its business entities, is expected to play a significant role in this effort. Simultaneously, the Gelephu Mindfulness City is to keep sustainability, well-being and environmental concerns at the forefront. Such a project is expected to lead the people of Bhutan to higher income levels while allaying any



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There is much evidence of the unique level of trust between the leadership of Bhutan and India that has led to a strengthening of relations

concerns about its impact on Bhutan as a carbon negative country. Gelephu city is expected to focus on human well-being too with an emphasis on yoga, rest and recreation, spa therapies and mental relaxation channels.

The visit last week by the Prime Minister of Bhutan to India was a follow-up to the king's earlier visit and there were excellent discussions with Prime Minister Narendra Modi as well as the President of India, Droupadi Murmu. This week, Mr. Modi is to pay a return visit to Bhutan. We must understand that any relationship, whether it is between two individuals or between two nations, needs constant tending, regular dialogue and a lot of care and cooperation. The back-to-back visits of the Prime Ministers of Bhutan and India to each other's nations is a manifestation of this attention placed on the relationship by both governments.

This is a good augury for the continued growth and development of India-Bhutan ties. It epitomises India's Neighbourhood First policy approach.

The anchor of hydropower cooperation

Hydropower cooperation is the bedrock of India's relations with Bhutan. Several cooperative hydroprojects have been completed and commissioned by the two governments which supply clean electricity to India and provide Thimphu with a stream of revenue due to which it has graduated out of the Least Developed Country status. The delayed Punatsangchu-II hydropower project is expected to be completed in 2024 – yet another successful example of the government-to-government model of cooperation in hydropower.

In recent years, a new joint venture model was developed for the construction of hydroprojects

between India and Bhutan, but none of the proposed five projects has really taken off. Perhaps, it is time to acknowledge that this new proposed model is flawed and there is a need to go back to the drawing board to work out a more practical and potentially successful new model for hydroprojects.

India has also been a major development assistance partner to Bhutan and contributed ₹5,000 crore to its 12th Five Year Plan which just concluded. Critical in this process of development assistance is the fact that India does not merely undertake projects which are of benefit to it but pays a lot of attention to the priorities of the Bhutanese people so that projects of direct benefit to them are constructed. Such confabulation and discussion is an integral part of the successful partnership for prosperity between New Delhi and Thimphu. It is critical that this model continues in the future too.

Measures to consider

In the years ahead, India must contribute to the success of the Gelephu Mindfulness City and can perhaps consider the following measures: commence direct flights between Mumbai/Delhi and Gelephu; provide our technology and knowledge in building hard infrastructure to Bhutan (the private sector will take the lead); encourage high-end Indian tourists and businesspersons to visit Gelephu in controlled numbers; Encourage Indian businesses to set up shop in the city.

Gelephu is next to remote parts of West Bengal and Assam and the success of the Mindfulness City will have positive socio-economic spillovers for these geographies as well. It will provide yet another example of the win-win cooperation between India and Bhutan.