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First the chicken, then the egg

Shalini S. Dagar

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For Vinod Kapur, the chicken came first, not the egg. But he never fancied the white, farmbred broilers. His passion is the Kuroiler NFG and FFG breeds, multicoloured birds like the country hen that are hardier, grow bigger, lay more eggs—and are a source of cheap protein for poor villagers. Branded eggs came later, in 2006, after he had built a name for Keggfarms Ltd. by breeding and selling Kuroiler chicks. Having given up the country manager's job at a multinational to expand his father's poultry hobby at Gurgaon in 1971, Kapur was cruising along with the usual hatch-and-sell-chicks business till India's liberalisation prompted him to hatch his first big idea, the Kuroiler.

Now, Kapur, 76, is out to capture urban India's table-egg market with his next big idea, the near-organic, almost-free-range, "Keggs". Kapur's base is his unique model of supplying Kuroiler chicks to village households across seven states. There are two kinds of Kuroiler chicken—the Kuroiler NFG is a prolific egg-layer in open conditions, while the Kuroiler FFG is good for its meat as it grows bigger than the country cousin without any special feed.

Although Keggfarms sold 1.6 crore Kuroiler chicks the year gone by and hopes to cross two crore this year, three disastrous years preceded 2009-10. The bird flu pandemic of 2007-08 almost devastated Kapur's business as states like West Bengal had to cull the entire backyard poultry stock. He realised that rearing chicks makes for very unstable income. Could eggs give a cushion and help him continue his social initiative? Not the usual poultry egg, but premium eggs? Enter the Keystone Golden, a layer developed by Keggfarms.

"The poultry business is very volatile. We needed a stable revenue channel. So, four years ago, we decided to get into high value eggs, demand for which is relatively stable," says Kapur. Keggfarms, which reported a turnover of Rs 32 crore from its eggs and chicken business in 2009-10, has become an accepted egg brand in the Delhi and NCR market and plans to enter Mumbai this year. Kapur is trying to lay claim to the polar ends of the market—on the one end, the poor who value his Kuroiler chicks for the extra rupee they yield, at the other, the urban rich who are ready to pay Rs 90 for a dozen Keggs instead of just Rs 36 for the unbranded eggs. Can he do it?

The Kuroiler Wins Rural Hearts...

At the heart of Keggfarms' rural success is its understanding of what the poor villager wanted from the poultry he or she would like to keep as an extra income source. Kapur found that poultry breeding in rural areas is usually done by landless farmers, the poorest of the poor, who are often of lower castes as well, and women. No fancy feed for these birds: they have to scavenge off the land.

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13 lakh Kuroiler chicks are sold to 1,500 mother units each month
Mother units shelter chicks for five weeks
1,500 vendors then peddle the chicks in villages
Around one million village households buy the chicks
No need for special feed, yet chickens are bigger than broiler
Kuroilers lay more eggs, 150 a year, than ordinary hens

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