

A University for Animal Sciences

A perfect golden jubilee gift for Meghalaya's farmers!

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Most countries across the globe with similar topography and climatic conditions as Meghalaya, are known for their livestock products like milk, cheese, meat, leather, and wool. The Swiss chocolate industry entirely depends on the milk produced in their own country. Though we have not fully capitalized the tremendous potential of the animal husbandry, dairy, and fishery sectors yet, a few sector-specific investments were made by the State Government, over the last one decade to bridge the production and technology gaps. The Aquaculture Mission (2012) added about 15,000 M.T. of fish to the state's production-base, the AH & Veterinary Department launched the Meghalaya Milk Mission (2018) with an investment of 215.48 crores and the Piggery Mission (2020), with an investment of 209 crores. The state government has also created two Directorates for Food Processing and Dairy Development in 2019, to create institutional infrastructure in the respective sectors. A lot is happening in the Livestock sector.

A bit of a background here: Every farming family in Meghalaya depends upon livestock rearing as an ancillary activity that provides them food, nutrition, and income. The livestock sector buffers agrarian distress by supplementing the farm incomes of small and marginal farmers, who constitute 97.5% of the total farmers of the State. So, any investment made to support 1.5 million people who either directly or indirectly depend upon agriculture and allied sectors would be worth every rupee that is spent. Unlike the Green Revolution, the Livestock Revolution will be a demand-driven one. Investment in this sector will lead to a structural shift in our state's primary economy, which is the need of the hour. However, despite the enormous potential of the sector, the attention paid to develop human resources in these domains has been minimal in our state. As it is, the livestock sector does not get the attention it deserves in the current agriculture-centric policy framework. The first exclusive university for Animal Sciences came up in 1989 in Tamil Nadu. TANUVAS (Tamil Nadu Veterinary and Animal Sciences University) revolutionised the livestock sector in Tamil Nadu, so much that in a decade's time, the state became the largest egg producer in the country. Subsequently Kerala, Rajasthan and U.P. have also established their own Veterinary, Fisheries and Animal Sciences Universities. As things shape up, it appears that the demand for professional education will increase manifold in the N.E. region, and new opportunities for absorbing trained workforce will also emerge parallelly in Fisheries, Poultry, Goatery, Sheep, Dairy and Piggery sectors. To cater to the myriad needs of the livestock tending farmers, as well as student community of the region, the State Government

has given an in-principle approval to establish a Meghalaya State Veterinary, Dairy and Fisheries Sciences University (MSVDFSU) recently. I learnt that the Department of AH & Veterinary has already finalized the draft Bill and the state Cabinet may make a decision sometime during this month itself. This is one of the most significant decisions of the present Government and of great symbolic importance to a state that completed 50 years of its formation. Investment in specialized livestock education will give manifold financial returns to the state in the form of growth in the GDP, expanded livelihoods and enhanced life quality. UK universities generate Rs. 9.78 lakh crore per year and support more than 940,000 jobs. The educational multiplier is estimated to be around 2.4 which implies that a 1% increase in educational expenditure raises incomes by 2.4%.

For want of Veterinary, Dairy, and Fisheries colleges in Meghalaya, most of our students must go out of the state with state sponsorship for their education. Usually they return with a B.V.Sc., (16 seats) or B.F.Sc. (4 seats) or B.Tech (Dairy Technology) (5 seats) degrees, and most of them get to join the government positions. Currently placement in the government sector is available for them, so they do not pursue higher education i.e., M.V.Sc., or M.F.Sc., or M.Tech (Dairy Technology) or Ph.D., programmes. This trend, however, cannot and should not continue because it will amount to an opportunity loss for bright students, and they are forced to lead a life far below their potential. In addition to these sponsored candidates, there are several candidates who go to other states to pursue professional degrees on their own and at their own cost. For example, though there is a demand for undergraduate and higher education in the Dairy Sector there is not a single Dairy Science & Technology College in the entire north-eastern region.

Likewise, in the Fisheries sector, there are only two colleges in the N.E. region (1) College of Fisheries, Lembucherra (Tripura) under the Central Agricultural University and (2) College of Fisheries, Raha (Assam) under the Assam Agricultural University. It is learnt that the number of such students who pursue fisheries education outside the north-eastern region is as high as one hundred per year. Most students go to West Bengal, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Odisha, to pursue courses in Fisheries Science. As for the Veterinary Colleges, there are only two Veterinary Colleges recognized by the Veterinary Council of India in the N.E. region viz., (1) College of Veterinary Science, Khanapara, under Assam Agriculture University, Guwahati and (2) College of Veterinary Science, Selesih, Mizoram (under the Central Agriculture University, Imphal). Together, there are 160 undergraduate seats in these two colleges. For a region like the NE with high demand for milk, fish, meat and other animal products, and extra ordinary scope for rearing livestock, the number of seats available is incredibly low. It is necessary therefore, that we encourage our educated youth to pursue higher education so they may obtain M.V.Sc., M.F.Sc., Ph.D., degrees etc. within the state, to help them find employment in the private sector as well as the academia within and outside the state. A University will provide aspiration

to the youth to evolve either as professors or entrepreneurs and creates opportunities beyond the government employment. The Cabinet has given an in-principle approval for three constituent colleges under the MSVDFSU viz., (1) The College of Veterinary and Animal Sciences (2) The College of Dairy Development & Technology and (3) The College of Fishery Sciences and Technology. The university will also focus on imparting training programmes to para-veterinarians, pharmacists, AI technicians, Laboratory technicians, and Multi-service Providers, etc. Building up a cadre for secondary level professionals is as much a priority to the sector as it is, to develop a cadre of academically qualified personnel in all the three sectors viz., Veterinary, Dairy and Fishery. So, a division for Entrepreneurship and Skill Development has also been envisaged in the proposed University. Adequate land is available at Kyrdemkulai, Ri Bhoi district for establishing the University, along with its affiliated colleges. Since the AH & Veterinary Department has about 800 acres of land at Kyrdemkulai, there will be no need to procure any land for establishing the university and the cost will therefore be minimal. Kyrdemkulai is ideal for setting up the University because of the proximity to the North-Eastern Regional Research Complex of the ICAR at Umiam, the presence of Regional Poultry and Piggery Breeding Centres, Nucleus Pig Breeding Centre, the National Research Centre for Pig at Rani, etc. The Meghalaya Milk Processing Centre at Mawiong, the Meghalaya State Fisheries Research and Training Centre Mawpun are also close by. The location is also suitable for students who come from other states and countries because, the distance from the airports at Guwahati and Umroi is small.

Also, the University could generate its own funds, as many universities have started doing of late, through fees from the students of other states and foreign countries, as well as consultancies and patenting the research innovations, etc. all of which will contribute in minimizing the operational expenses. Students from the neighbouring countries like Bhutan, Myanmar, Vietnam, Bangladesh, etc. can all benefit.

The argument to establish a specialized Animal Sciences University in our state is as much about the accumulated sentiments of five decades, as it is, about the aspirations of the intelligentsia engaged in the primary sector, the unemployed youth, the farmers, miscellaneous service providers and commercial enterprises. We must resolve to make this University come up in two years. Funds are never a constraint for a promising idea. The Chairman, NABARD has already expressed his willingness to fund the University under the Rural Infrastructure Development Fund (RIDF). A bold and befitting golden jubilee gift to the people of the state, this one is!!

(The writer is Chairman, Meghalaya Farmers' (Empowerment) Commission)