

**Inaugural Speech of Rao Birendra Singh,
Hon^{ble} Union Minister for Agriculture,
Rural Development and Civil Supplies
Delivered at the 35th Annual
Conference of I.S.A.S. at
New Delhi on
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Dr. Sukhatme and friends,

I am happy to be here on the occasion of the 35th Annual Conference of Indian Society of Agricultural Statistics. I forego the pleasure of reading my written speech and would express some random thoughts which occur to me as a farmer and as Minister incharge of Agriculture and allied subjects.

I am very happy to note that this society has been doing very useful work. It is gratifying that in India too a non-official body of scientists and experts has been so successful. It should be the policy of the Government to encourage such societies and their activities because it can't take up all the work which is needed in the field of agricultural development through its own efforts alone. In some of the countries I have seen that scientists have set up their own non-official societies and institutions practically in every field. In our country, however, there is a tendency to depend completely on Government. Your Society has also the unique distinction of having Dr. Rajendra Prasad, the first President of India as your first President and even today you have one of our most eminent and world renowned agricultural scientist, Dr. Swaminathan, as your President.

I have heard about the work of Dr. Sukhatme, the President of this meeting. I am glad to meet him and to hear his thought-provoking theory of nutrition. This in fact is one of the fields where we should have some very reliable data. I hope you will look into the question of the food, its minimum quantity and its variety, needed by a farmer, who does manual work. We should also find out as to how much money is needed per capita to ensure good health.

The two subjects 'Alternative Sources of Energy' and 'Effect of Floods and Drought' that you have selected for the symposium are really very important. We have been suffering from floods and drought for ages and even in this scientific age it is really surprising that we have not been able to quantify properly the extent to which people suffer from these recurrent disasters. Nobody seems to have gone into the question of farmers suffering from calamities like drought, flood, hailstorm, and cyclones from year to year. The risk involved in agriculture in the developing countries is very high. I know that it is not possible to do away completely with distress on account of natural causes. People in advanced countries have been able to minimise the adverse effects of natural calamities but in India even what could be done, has so far not been done.

We have not as yet been able to provide irrigation facilities to all of our arid areas. But as you all know since India took to planning under the leadership of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, we have been making steady progress in all these fields. Our Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi, since she came to power again last year has been laying great emphasis on development of agriculture and of course agriculture depends upon irrigation more than anything else. Out of our Sixth Plan Outlay of Rs. 97,400 crores, more than 25 per cent has been allocated for agriculture and irrigation. Irrigation has expanding at a very fast rate during the last few years, and for the current Plan we have set a very high target of providing irrigation to 2.8 million hectares of land every year. India perhaps is at the top in the world in providing irrigation to new areas. We have yet large potential of irrigation. By the end of the century, we hope to be able to double the present potential and that will not be a small achievement, jumping from about 56 million hectares of land at present to about 113 million hectares.

Fertilizer consumption also has been steadily increasing. High yielding varieties of seed have done wonders and that has enabled us to provide food to the increasing number of people being added every year. Our population has grown very fast. At present our foodgrain production is about 130 million tonnes. It is estimated that by the year 2000 A.D. we shall need about 225 million tonnes, almost double of our present production. We hope it will be possible. That is what the agricultural scientists say. However, we cannot be complacent. All the land, the cultivable area, has already been brought under the plough. Irrigation does make a difference. Fertiliser also helps in increasing production. But there is a saturation point and also a point of no return. The fact that

India is a land of very small farm—more than 72 per cent of our land owners have holdings of less than two hectares—poses problems. That is why, what Dr. Sukhatme says that we have to plan for the small farmers, marginal farmers and landless labourer, becomes very relevant. We have to find out as to how to make this small and marginal farmer stay on his land if he is to earn a living. His income has to be augmented. With further fragmentation of land holdings taking place day after day with the increase of the family members, agriculture may not be an economical proposition. Even now I don't think agriculture alone provides the sustenance for a family in a village. There is talk of farmers becoming rich in India. You have to prove it by statistics how far this notion is correct. To my mind this impression is being created by the lobby of industrialists and businessmen. They want more funds to be diverted to development of industries. This might prove detrimental to development of agriculture in India.

Through planning you can develop agriculture, but for planning and development you have to have reliable data. Without reliable statistics, we won't be able to know where we go wrong in planning. It is like diagnosing the disease. Unless you diagnose the maladies, you can't find a cure. Just as a chart is necessary for the doctor to prescribe medicines for his patient; similiary statisticians are most essential to remove the sickness in Indian agriculture.

I would like to mention several thing where statisticians can play important roles. We don't even know whether it is economical really for a farmer to maintain milch cattle. At present we do not know the price of milk that he gets in the market and how much of it he spends on fodder grown on his own land. He continues to produce milk. We have no idea what should be the milk yield of a cow or a buffalo to make it a viable proposition for a farmer to keep one. Though these are very small matters yet more attention need to be paid to them to find out the exact position. We have started our agricultural census operations but most of the information perhaps would not be collected through them. Statisticians shall have to find their own way. A methodology has to be evolved. Unless there is a fool-proof uniform methodology applied all over the country keeping, of course, the climatic conditions and other factors prevailing in different parts of the country in view, we may not be able to know exactly what needs to be done.

There has been a controversy about the remunerative prices that should be paid to the farmer for his crop. I myself feel that

while from year to year we have been fixing prices for farmer's produce, some of the factors that go into cost of production have not been taken into account. For instance, the risk factor that I have mentioned. It has been estimated that of the four crops that a farmer grows only one crop, on an average, is good. The three crops are either marginal, which hardly make up the investment or one or two are complete loss to him. He does not recover even what he has spent. While computing the cost of production the time that the farmer spends on management is not taken into consideration, whereas in any other business or industry most part of the cost goes towards management, expenditure on executives, on their tours, their guest houses, their entertainment etc. A farmer has to run many a time to get a bag of cement from the Block Office. To find if he can get a good variety of seed from the store in the town he has to depute somebody else in his place or to waste his own time but this is not accounted for. There are several other similar things. His cost of transportation to the market, how he carries his produce to the market, what is the means of communication, what is the condition of rural roads, how many taxes he has to pay all these things also should go into the cost of production and should be considered by the Agricultural Prices Commission. The Commission has on it a person who is one of you, a statistical expert. Therefore, I am talking about it before you. These are the difficulties and these are some of the grievances of the farmer.

As regards the use of computer, I know computer perhaps can be more reliable but sometime you hear computers going wrong. This may be because of human error, because computers are worked by humans. They are fed with information collected by humans. They only tabulate. They themselves can not know the conditions in the fields and judge whether the information supplied to them is correct.

Another important feature about agricultural statistics that I would like to mention is the urgent need to streamline the crop estimates reporting system. There are wide fluctuations in the figures of production estimated and reported by the States. Sometimes it becomes very difficult for our statistical department in the Ministry of Agriculture to reconcile these figures. I know there are certain losses in agriculture but we should be able to know whether our crops have been affected by disease. We should be able to know in advance so that plant protection measures are adopted. We must find some methods of knowing what the correct figures are. The present system of subjective sampling is very old. One agricultural

inspector goes to a very good field and collects samples from there. Generally, the information compiled on the basis of such sampling can be exaggerated. Some experts later say, they cannot explain why this estimate was given in the beginning. The country will benefit a lot if your Society can help the Government in trying to solve this problem for us. If you could supply some reliable data for each crop it will help a lot.

We don't even know the burden of indebtedness on the farmer. They get credit supplied by the government, short-term and long-term credit at a very high rate of interest. One of the grievances of farmers is that the rate of interest charged from them for agricultural loans is very much higher than what is charged in industry. Again this short-term loan is to be recovered within six months. It is crop loan. In the matter of loans for industry, the recovery starts after production has started. But for a farmer it starts the moment he sinks his tubewell. Unless we remove the hardships a farmer suffers from in agriculture and the discrimination he feels, we shall not be able to develop our agriculture to the extent we want it to develop. India being an agricultural country, it is absolutely essential, and we should be conscious of it, that our emancipation lies in the development of agriculture. Agriculture can give us the quickest returns. There is no other activity in the field of development which can give maximum returns and that too at a very small investment.

I don't want to say that our statistical experts have failed. Perhaps you are trying to give us a true picture, may be the fault lies more on the people who provide the information to you at the field level.

With these words I wish you success in your deliberations and I formally inaugurate your Conference.

Thank you.