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INAUGURAL ADDRESS

by

HON'BLE SRI P. S. KUMARASWAMY RAJA

Premier of Madras

Revered President, Learned Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I do not conceal a mild sense of elation and even a pardonable sense of distinction that I experience in having been called upon to inaugurate this tenth session of the All India Agricultural Economic Conference. I must frankly confess that I deem it a unique pleasure and a privilege. Firstly because, this Conference is held under the distinguished Presidentship of Dr. Rajen Babu, than whom perhaps there are few leaders beloved of the peasants all over the land. Secondly because, the subject of agriculture in general, and the problems relating to the economic uplift of the agriculturists in particular have always been so dear to my heart, and are today having such vital bearing on the national life that they claim an unprecedentedly large share of our attention in the daily life and thought. When in 1920, our beloved leader of revered memory, the Father of the Nation, Mahatma Gandhi started the Champaran Agrarian Struggle, Dr. Rajendra Prasad, then a brilliant luminary of the bar, enjoying the sweets of a lucrative practice, gave up his all and followed the Master. Throwing himself heart and soul into the peasants' cause, he emerged as their stoutest champion for all time, and the greatest "Peasant-President" of the Indian National Congress during several successive terms. His interest in their cause never waned; nor have the peasants ceased to idolise him. To have been called upon to inaugurate a Conference which is being held under his loving guidance is, therefore, no small distinction for me; and I must here, in all fairness to myself, admit to an abundant sense of relief at seeing him take the Chair today; for, when at the last session of the Conference at Hyderabad, Dr. Rajen Babu's name was proposed for this year's Presidentship, although it met with unanimous acceptance, it was tinged with vague doubts and anxieties as to whether in his then state of health he would be in a position to undertake the strenuous duties of a three-day session here at all. No

one is happier than I, therefore, to see that Dr. Rajen Babu has been able to be bodily present here today and guide the deliberations of the Conference.

Years ago a famous statesman of England said. "We are all socialists today". Whatever be the truth of that remark, I may say, with even greater validity, that so far as this country is concerned, "We are all peasants today". All of us at one time or other in our lives have been taking or have been forced to take, by dint of circumstances, some interest or other in the welfare of our peasantry,—even if we were not actively connected with their day to day avocations. For my part, born of a peasant family, who exchanged their sword for the ploughshare centuries ago, I have been taking a keen interest in agricultural problems ever since I entered public life at the behest of Mahatma Gandhi. This interest quickened in me with years. As a member of the Indian Society of Agricultural Economics I had taken part in more than one of their annual deliberations; and when as a Minister of a former Madras Cabinet I was entrusted with the portfolio of Agriculture, I had valuable opportunities of studying and understanding the intricate problems of our peasantry; and in my present office, these problems have become almost all-absorbing. I venture to strike this personal note, contrary to my usual practice, only to tell you how very glad and how very hopeful I am to find that the All India Agricultural Economic Conference is meeting here today, and that in the course of its deliberations, it would show us some solutions to the thousand and one ills with which our peasantry in this country is afflicted, so sorely and for so long.

I said, "We are all peasants in India today". This is largely true in more than one sense. Apart from the fact that agriculture is a fundamental industry, and that all other avocations directly or indirectly flow from it, I refer to the number engaged in it also. This number is very considerable, absorbing roughly 75 per cent of the population. Is this something which we should be proud of? There is a school which wants even a more wide-spread agrarian distributism, so that the section of the population dependent on land might even be larger. They hold that in a society where every one has his "patch of green and cow", there would be peace and stability. On the other hand, Western thought, particularly American, asks the question, "why so many farmers?" Americans consider, fewer the farmers greater the prosperity. In the early days of the United States, 75 per cent of American population was agriculturist. Then came trade and industry, and as they grew, the farming section began to decline until today it is less than 25 per cent of the population. Even out of this 25 per cent. a bare 15 per cent produce all the food and raw materials the States want for their internal consumption, and the

rest 10 per cent produces all the exportable surplus that American agriculture has to give the world.

Whatever may be the merits of either school of thought from the ultimate point of human peace and social stability, it would be readily admitted on all hands that for a people to have to be incessantly obsessed with the bread problem is something not very complimentary to their powers to create or ability to achieve things; and that is the state in which we are today. In the past, such obsession with the bread question arose only at intervals, when famine and drought struck terror in the land. Normally man produced what he wanted; but now, during the last 7 years, we have reached a plane of thinking wholly dominated by bread. I ask, is this a sign of progress? The Grow More Food Campaign has been there for nearly seven years now, and there has been great argument about it; but we seem to come from the same door as we entered. Unless we find a speedy solution to this, we shall soon degenerate into a nation who cannot think or achieve anything else. Perhaps a planned peaceful revolution in the sphere of agriculture based on the consent of the people is needed. Perhaps a fundamental change in the pattern of agrarian economy based on larger farms and increased mechanisation may be the solution; but all that is closely related to the even bigger problem of increased industrialisation to draw off the surplus population that would be thrown off land; and that, in turn, with world shortage of capital, equipment and technical know-how. A bold decision is needed and sooner it is taken the better for India and the world.

I am aware this is easier said than done. I am aware of the colossal nature of the repercussions—however transitional—such a bold decision involves; and I am also aware of the conscious co-operation it implies at home and abroad; but it has to be faced sooner or later, as the alternative would be a rapid decline on the slippery slope of precarious existence. All else that we do by way of ameliorating the peasantry, better credit facilities, better wage and housing conditions for agricultural workers, better tenant and lease terms, better prices for agricultural produce, etc. etc., are no doubt good in so far as they go; but the fundamental problem is still there,—inadequate production, insufficient earnings from land and inefficient methods of cultivation; and these, in my humble opinion, can be successfully solved only by a fundamental change in the agrarian pattern. This may take some time, and a great deal may have to be done by way of psychological preparation of the people for the change; but until that change arrives, we cannot take our rightful place among progressive economies and be rid of the haunting bread question.

These are but my personal reactions to this most vexed of all subjects today. I am but thinking aloud; but for governments to take decision in this matter, the considered views and combined experience of all concerned, agricultural experts, economists, administrators and practical farmers are required. At no time in history perhaps, is Governmental decision in this country so much dependent on the guidance that a so few experts can give; and it was with this view that the Government of Madras, invited this Conference to be held here. You are discussing here a number of vital problems relating to agriculture, such as the problem of the low-income or submarginal farmer, high prices and rural prosperity, taxation of agricultural income; and you have already had a symposium on the Grow More Food Campaign. These, to my mind, are not mere academic matters, although I am anxious that nothing should be done to disturb the serenity of the academic atmosphere or to detract from the tone and level of the discussions; but the subjects, as any one can see, have such a vital bearing on the problems with which government in India are faced, that it requires no extenuating arguments for governmental association with a body, largely academic like the Indian Society of Agricultural Economics. It has been said by a great writer that if we can develop a class of educated men with nothing else to do but to better government, we ought to use them. We therefore look up to you with great expectations, and I dare say with Dr. Rajen Babu guiding your deliberations, we shall not be disappointed. May your deliberations be fruit-bearing, as well as light-bearing. I now with great pleasure declare the Conference open and wish the session every success.