

28 June 1943

Dear Egerton,

Many thanks for your letter on Mahalanobis's paper.

When I took the step of communicating this paper as possibly suitable for Transactions, which I did after consultation with Sir John Russell to whom the author had sent it, I thought that, although publication in the Transactions would have been eminently suitable for a paper of this kind say twenty-five years ago, yet that with the growth of Imperial Bureaux some procedure such as joint publication of the Society and of the appropriate Bureau would be more suitable.

For any large body of work, especially if its findings have a bearing upon the development of proper means of official enquiry, it is of course impossible to reconcile the first desideratum, that it should be a well-rounded exposition of an extensive topic, with the second one, that it should all be brand-new. It appeared to me that a great part of the value of what Professor Mahalanobis had to say lay in the fact that he had for illustration and reconsideration the results of a series of increasingly extensive experiences with sample-survey projects. Although there are other workers in the United States, and Yates here at Rothamsted, with first-class ideas about the conduct of sample-surveys, I do not think anyone else has

yet placed on record a body of experience comparable with that which Mahalanobis now offers. That he has analysed the experience with a view to gaining further guidance from it seems to me just what was wanted, even though, as one might indeed hope, later workers may be able to analyse it yet more effectively.

The view that it is too technical and specialised a subject is, I feel confident, a superficial one. It seems to rest on the fact that it is a subject on which at present rather few people are experts, but this does not mean that the principles and methods, and value of experience gained step by step so far, are not of value in a very wide range of fields of enquiry. Sampling surveys in this country started in the economic or demographic field; a more precisely planned method was developed chiefly to study experimental plots in agriculture, and the method, or some thing like it, is now perhaps best known as a means of gauging public opinion. Mahalanobis is applying it principally to show that in a region where the normal basis of complete survey and registration offers almost insuperable difficulties, namely in Bengal, a properly conducted sample-survey technique can give the administration direct factual guidance on the points on which they would otherwise be ignorant, and at a cost much below that of full detailed surveys.

In the circumstances I suggest that the Council might properly take the initiative in suggesting joint publication with the Imperial Bureaux, since both the general theory and the detailed experience should be of value to future work, agricultural or ecological, in all extensive countries.

Yours sincerely,