

The Vice-Chancellor's Convocation Speech

Professor Amartya Sen, ladies and gentlemen,

This special convocation comes at a time when the world faces an economic downturn graver than any since the Great Depression. The settled economic wisdom of half a century has been challenged by the near-collapse of the market economies and financial systems of the West. These, not so long ago, were billed as the great engines that would integrate the economies of the world into one global system.

We meet at a time when the choices that countries and, within countries, universities, face, are made starker by this sense of crisis. These aren't abstract, academic choices: they are debated in our newspapers and our broadcast media every day.

Do we want India to be an integral part of a global economy or do we want to insulate ourselves (always presuming we can) from the volatility of the world's markets?

If this seems like a question remote from the concerns of the university, let me stress its immediate relevance. As we prepare to train young Indians to make their way in a grim global economy, should we prioritize professional disciplines like engineering and the hard sciences or continue to support liberal arts subjects which don't always excite corporate campus recruiters?

Can the Indian university afford to invest in knowledge for its own sake? Or to put it another way, can it afford not to without negating the very principle of intellectual inquiry?

Old arguments take on a new edge in times of trouble. Should poor countries like India concentrate on creating efficient, meritocratic institutions or on redressing historical inequality through affirmative action? Should the principle

of reservation in universities, for example, be extended to cover more deprived communities or gradually phased out in the name of merit?

At the national level we are confronted by the same binary choices: should we, for example, prioritize economic growth over distributive justice?

In the matter of politics and culture should we seek an authentic Indian-ness or embrace a secular cosmopolitanism?

Is there an Asian route to modernity that China has pioneered and which India should emulate or is social democracy combined with a market economy still the best way forward?

Many of us have felt oppressed by the bullying, black-and-white rhetoric of these choices which simplify the complex reality of the world into ideological sloganeering.

The rhetoric that has given us the metaphorical opposition between Left and Right, Indigenous and Cosmopolitan, Traditional and Modern, the West and the Rest, is plainly inadequate as a way of dealing with a world that no longer fits the categories of the Cold War.

The challenge is to find new ways of thinking about this world that can replace the ideological reflexes of another time.

And this is why we are so privileged to have with us someone who is not just one of the great minds of modern times, but who, in his life and his work, embodies the rejection of the black-and-white choice, the tyranny of the Either/Or, Professor Amartya Kumar Sen.

Professor Sen is a man of such impossible distinction that I shan't waste your time in trying to precise his achievements in a short speech. Suffice it to say that had he not won the Nobel Prize for economics or the Bharat Ratna, he would still have been one of the most honoured men on this planet. What I do

want to emphasize is the importance of being Amartya Sen in these polarised times.

In his life and his work, Professor Sen has defied categorization.

For example, in an age when economists seem to write a prose based more on numbers than letters, Professor Sen is one of the great essayists of our times.

In a period of ever greater specialisation, he holds a double chair at Harvard, he is the Lamont Professor of both Economics and Philosophy.

At a time when economists write historical theorems about trade and institutions, Professor Sen's work, on famine to take only one example, is densely historical.

What's more, he has been perfectly happy to make forays out of the so-called mainstream of the dismal science, into the unfashionable terrain, for example, of development economics.

He is that rare public intellectual who publishes both in the Wall Street Journal and the Economic and Political Weekly.

The lesson of his remarkable life for all of us in the university is fourfold:

1. That subject categories are meant to be enabling, not stifling. They are disciplinary platforms for an exploration of the whole world.
2. That the life of the mind is most meaningful when it harnesses curiosity to the cause of humanity. The UNDP Human Development Index which Dr Sen was crucially involved in formulating has given the policy maker and the intelligent lay person, a way of measuring and understanding social progress.

3. That good policy has to be derived from clear first principles: the intellectual life isn't peripheral to governance, it is central to it.

4. That there is no contradiction between being a grounded Indian and a citizen of the world. Professor Sen has been Master of Trinity College, Cambridge, President of the American Economic Association, Professor at Harvard without once ceasing to be an engaged Indian. This has to do with more than the colour of his passport. It is connected to his attachment to Bengal, his socialization is Santiniketan, his immersion in the history of the sub-continent, and above all, his conviction that cosmopolitanism and Indianness are functions of one's values, not one's location.

While Prof Sen would be an inspiration to any academic audience, I like to think that his presence in Jamia Millia Islamia is particularly appropriate. From the time of its formation in the crucible of the Non-Cooperation Movement, Jamia has been committed to the idea of the engaged academic life. Dr Zakir Hussain, Vice-Chancellor of Jamia well before he became the President of our republic, would have recognized in Prof. Sen a kindred spirit who saw the university not as an ivory tower, but as an agent of change.

Ladies and gentlemen, please join me in welcoming the master of much more than an old Cambridge college, Professor Amartya Kumar Sen.