

Conferment of the Degree of Doctor of Social Science, *honoris causa* A Citation



Amartya Kumar Sen, PhD, D Litt, DSc, LL.D., Nobel Laureate in Economics

Professor Amartya Sen is a man who has taken the pulse of modern economic life and understands many of the implications of its alarmingly irregular beat. So profound and persuasive are his diagnoses of the economics of inequality, poverty and deprivation among the peoples of the world, that last year he was awarded an overdue, according to some, Nobel Prize in Economics.

Amartya Sen was born in November 1933 into an academic family in Santiniketan, India. His father was Professor of Chemistry and his grandfather Professor of Sanskrit. Professor Sen's writings demonstrate the combination of literary humanism and scientific method, with its patient classification, mathematical formulae, and rigorous technical analyses. His work is informed by compassion for the victims of economic forces that ensure the sufferings of the world's poor but escape their understanding.

Let us recall G. B. Shaw's words from his play *Major Barbara*: 'The greatest of evils and the worst of crimes is poverty.' We can then understand some of Professor Sen's motivation for trying to reveal the causes and mechanisms of poverty and for making its study a great part of his life's work.

Professor Sen gained his Bachelor of Arts degree in 1953 at Presidency College in Calcutta, took a second Bachelor of Arts degree at Trinity College, Cambridge two years later, having won the Adam Smith Prize and a Wrenbury Scholarship. Armed with the Stevenson Prize of 1956, he went on to get his Cambridge PhD in 1959. His brilliance was of course rewarded by his own college's prizes, including a Prize Fellowship in 1957, and, most recently, Trinity's welcoming him back as Master. Yet he has not confined himself to Cambridge: he has been Professor of Economics at Jadavpur University in Calcutta (1956-58), and at the University of Delhi's Delhi School of Economics (1963-71); he has been Professor of Economics at the London School of Economics (1971-77); he has had visiting professorships at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (1960-61), Stanford (1961), Berkeley (1964-65), Harvard (1968-69), and was Andrew D White Professor-at-Large in Cornell (1978-84). Again extending his reach across the Atlantic to the American Cambridge, he became Lamont University Professor and Professor of Economics and Philosophy at Harvard University (1987-98), and a Senior Fellow of the Harvard Society of Fellows (1989-98). His work still takes him far away from one Cambridge to another, for the Master of Trinity is also now at the Center for Population and Development Study at Harvard. Yet some might say that he strayed furthest from Cambridge when becoming Professor of Economics at Oxford and a Fellow of Nuffield College (1977-80). As if this were not enough, he spent the next eight years as



Drummond Professor of Political Economy at Oxford and a Fellow of All Souls (1980-88). He is now back on track in the two Cambridges; yet two Cambridges do not cancel out an Oxford. In fact, some Oxonians might even imagine that one Oxford equals two Cambridges.

Happily, such petty rivalries are left far behind by Professor Sen's impressive list of accolades from so many major scholarly institutions. His honorary degrees are too numerous to list here but they come from leading universities in India, Europe, and North America. A Fellow of the British Academy, Fellow (and President in 1984) of the Econometric Society, and Foreign Honorary Member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, he is a Member of the Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei and of the American Philosophical Association. He has also served as President of the Indian (1989), the International (1986-89), and the American Economic Associations (1994).

Such awards signal the respect accorded to his thought and publications by his colleagues throughout that global society of intellectuals and researchers known as academia; this recognition eloquently attests to the very significant contribution he has made to the more general understanding of Economics as an intellectual discipline with far-reaching human and societal consequences that should not be ignored. His work in fact has implications for philosophy, sociology, and the history of ideas.

Following the pioneering work of Kenneth Arrow in particular, Professor Sen has developed social choice theory, providing a general approach to evaluating and choosing between different social possibilities. This involves arriving at fuller understanding than was previously available of inequality, poverty, and welfare issues. As Professor Sen points out in his enthralling Nobel lecture of last December (1998), 'The reach and relevance of social choice theory can be very extensive indeed.' Enthralling may be a term used primarily of fiction rather than lectures in economics, the so-called dismal science. His technique, however, is to lead us to a series of questions, each one being a moment of suspense, such as 'When would *majority rule* yield unambiguous and consistent decisions?...How can we accommodate *rights and liberties* of persons while giving adequate recognition to their preferences?...How do we appraise social valuations of public goods such as the *natural environment*, or *epidemiological security*?' We want to know the answers to his questions, in much the same way that we want to know what happens next in a plot. He does not ignore the questions that might destroy his own theories. He asks himself and us '...whether the pessimism associated with Arrovian structures in social choice theory must be seen to be devastating for welfare economics as a discipline.' He faces such questions and gives his answers. In short, Professor Sen is a *writer* as well as an economist.

Through his 'capability approach' his analyses take into account not only income or gross domestic product but also quality of life and the capacity for a society to offer people what they need, such as education and health care. His influence can be seen in a range of



things from social choice theory, the more informed measurement of poverty and inequality, to the Human Development Report. His work complements that of other economists with ethical as well as purely technical interests.

His work has helped us at The Chinese University of Hong Kong by providing colleagues and students with insights for considering the welfare of our own society.

The reasons for this respect and recognition may be found in his many publications, such as *On Economic Inequality* (1997; 1973) and *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation* (1982;1981). The first book, based on the Radcliffe Lectures he gave at Warwick almost thirty years ago, combined analytical and mathematical thinking with intuitive interpretation, in the basic belief that the significance of the research and its results consist in what Professor Sen points out with incisive clarity: their 'relevance to normal communication and to things that people argue about and fight for.' In the Preface to the second book I mentioned, he invokes Shakespeare's dramatization of 'poor naked wretches' in *King Lear*, and faces the fact that some might be 'impatient' with the academic anatomy of poverty. Poverty is horrifying but it is complex and its causes little understood. The questions raised by enquiries into poverty in developing countries are extremely difficult to answer. Professor Sen's focus is on causes of starvation and famine. He is thus involved in the analysis of complex 'entitlement systems' in economies. The questions on poverty indexes and the causes of specific famines that he raises and the answers he gives go to the heart - in every sense of the word - of economies and societies, combining methodology from economics with philosophical rigour and considered ethical concerns. His work is distinguished, then, by key contributions to social choice theory and welfare economics.

According to other leading economists, Professor Sen's work has opened up new fields and perfected the earlier results of others, besides inspiring new endeavours by his colleagues. Theories of social choice, individual preference, and welfare, together with measurements of poverty and real income, constitute the wide range of issues his work has tackled so impressively.

Here is a third generation academic who has lived his life in universities, yet has never been trapped in an ivory tower; one who amid all the thinking, writing, abstractions and distractions of academic life, has never lost touch with the realities of deprivation. The urgent need to understand the economic factors behind the misery that still abounds in the world is his fundamental motivation.

Mr. Vice-Chancellor, Amartya Sen, Master of Trinity College, Cambridge, is the first Asian to be named Nobel Laureate in Economics. He has shown us how to understand more clearly the complexities of poverty and given us a better chance of helping the poorest of the poor at a time when common perception has it that the rich are getting richer, while the poor



are getting poorer. His work is as compelling academically as it is urgent in its need for practical application. I thus present Professor Amartya Kumar Sen, Nobel Laureate, for the award of the degree of Doctor of Social Science, *honoris causa*.