

Amartya Sen's speech at the Nobel Banquet, December 10, 1998

Your Majesties, Your Royal Highness, Ladies and Gentlemen,

More than two millennia ago, the poet Horace said, "It is lovely to be silly at the right moment." Well, I plead silliness in taking this to be the right moment.

Here is my first silly thought. Disciplinary boundaries can generate giddy suspicions. Physicists can receive post-modern criticism. Biologists took a long time to shake off the creationists. Economists and social scientists are, of course, especially suspect. W.H. Auden gave eloquent expression to this scepticism:

Thou shall not sit
With statisticians nor *commit*
A social science.

Well, we are reconciled to going on "committing" social science, sitting in our lonely corner, but it is nice to be able to see what the others are up to, on an occasion like this remarkable celebration of science and culture.

In fact, I am privileged to have known, as a child, the great Bengali poet, [Rabindranath Tagore](#), who received the Nobel Prize in literature in 1913, and whose achievements include, among many other things, the authorship of the national anthems of two different countries - India and Bangladesh. Tagore had set up an unusual school in Santiniketan, where my grandfather was teaching; I was born on the school grounds. The school aimed at offering education that was at once local and global. As Tagore put it: "Whatever we understand and enjoy in human products instantly becomes ours, wherever they might have their origin." His universalist, tolerant and rationalist ideals were a strong influence on my thinking, and I often recollect them in these divisive times.

I believe that [Chandrashekhar](#), the astrophysicist, who also originated in India, when he received his Nobel Prize in Physics, quoted a poem of Tagore, in praise of freedom of the mind: "where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into the dreary desert sand of dead habit." Let me praise Chandrashekhar's praising of Tagore's praising the freedom of the mind.

Now a seriously silly thought. From this focus on open-minded reasoning, there is much that economists too can learn. The subject stands to lose a lot from dogmatic beliefs of one kind or another (for example, we are constantly asked: "Are you *against* or *in favour* of the market? *Against* or *in favour* of state action? Just answer the question - no qualifications, no 'ifs' and 'buts,' please!"). This is an invitation to replace analysis by slogans - to be guided by grand dogma, either of one kind, or of another. We do need "the clear stream of reason." What Tagore, the poet, and Chandrashekhar, the physicist, demanded, we need in economics too - for much the same reason. That is the last silly thought I inflict on you tonight.

From *Les Prix Nobel. The Nobel Prizes 1998*, Editor Tore Frängsmyr, [Nobel Foundation], Stockholm, 1999.