WHEN RUDYARD KIPLING WROTE THESE LINES IN ‘THE BALLAD OF EAST AND WEST’, they were applauded and became a raging success because they expressed precisely how the world was viewed in the heyday of Empire. Unfortunately, mental structures long outlast the work of human hands. Ideas conquer more territory and maintain more authority than all the armies of the Queen Empress eulogized by Kipling, who was deeply ambivalent about his own origins in the East as an Anglo-Indian. Despite the evidence of history, politics, economy and culture, Kipling’s simplistic dictum still remains the preferred approach to understanding the world.

What is just so about Kipling’s lines is not its beginning. East and West are different, and the differences are substantive and of enduringly import. Civilization, culture and the experience of history distinguish discrete diversity that makes the East eastern and the West western. The wrongheadedness comes in the conclusion ‘and never the twain shall meet’, at least not till Judgment Day! It is in the conclusion that the power and authority, the potency of simple binary opposition resides. It is not because the East and the West are genuinely different that there is a problem. The problem arises because difference is taken to be an unbridgeable gap: ‘never
the twain shall meet'. Difference has the force of a negative value. What is encoded by this negative value is the basis for fear, doubt of the other, perpetual insecurity and prejudice. In operation, the negative value becomes an active value judgment, a ranking principle. In such simple oppositions the other pole must be inferior, inimical to ‘our’ wellbeing, otherwise differences would be surmountable, and there would be no threat. Thus unbridgeable difference becomes the doctrine of maintaining distance, keeping oneself pure, and ensuring that two sides never actually meet. The formula fulfills its own prediction and sustains the manipulation of power and authority on both sides to maintain an implacable eternal opposition. The truth of the premise, East is East and West is West, taken uncritically at face value, substantiating the implications and construction of meaning placed on evident differences.

Even though Kipling was mistaken at the outset, partial in his premise, and wholly wrong in his conclusion, his reward has been the staying power of his simplistic dictum. The dissipation of the simple binary opposition of superpower rivalry, the end of ‘the evil empire’ of Communism, provided the occasion for Kipling’s much older, more instinctive opposition to return with a vengeance to rescue business, politics, history and everything from the horrendous prospect of thinking through a new perspective. We have had the ‘end of history’, where Western liberalism was declared undisputed victor and ‘clash of civilizations’, where the West was up against all the other civilizations of the world. The speed with which Communism died and the Samuel Huntington’s thesis of ‘clash of civilizations’ emerged and became the centrepoint that constructed how we debate the future is truly astonishing. An impeccable proponent of the Cold War ethos of relentless opposition, Huntington analyzed the post-Communist future within exactly the same framework. The fault lines of future opposition, which was inevitable, essential and not be questioned, would be seven ‘civilizations’ he identified as opponents of the West: Confucian, Japanese, Islamic, Hindu, Slavic-Orthodox, Latin American and ‘possibly’ African. The essential point is that what stimulate these fault lines is exactly Kipling’s dictum and its old familiar oppositions. ‘Civilizations’ is an evocative archaic sounding expression for the operative reality: inimical, unbridgeable difference. Not all the panoply of nation states, development, globalisation and ingested modernity can disguise the ultimate reality, and only meaningful point, that the rest of the world is different and will therefore
act and contend with the West in the old familiar way. Whatever we think of the clash of civilizations thesis it become pervasive because it represents so accurately how the past, present and future are conceived. The sentiments its substitutes for reason were at work before Huntington propounded them as a theory of international relations. The East, in all its complexity, continues to seen as the provider of a basic service to the West: the provision of ‘bogey men’ and villains. Barbarian hordes, marching towards our borders as ‘immigrants’ and ‘illegals’; Muslims out to terrorize us; old and new villains that match the villains of Communism, from Putin’s Russia to a threatening China. So it was, and it remains just so.

But time has now come for us to transcend this pernicious binary logic. To talk about a neat division between East and West in a globalized, diverse, interdependent world of common problems and shared human destiny is dangerous and absurd. The boundaries and dividing lines of East and West have not only changed but have become blurred and indistinguishable. There is as much East in the West as there is West in the East. The West cannot continue to perceive the East as inalienably different; the classic tirade against the West that promotes the innocence and vaunts the superiority of the East is meaningless. The potency of the ideas that impelled western imperialism is alive and well and operated by the East within itself, by itself.

Searching out the original miscreant and apportioning blame is a way of continuing the game of implacable opposition, and, thereby, keeping all its necessities – suspicion, military preparedness, manipulation of public opinion, double standards and neglect of pressing human needs - in place. The East has been complicit in the perpetuation of the ethos of binary oppositions. The more the East has unquestioningly sought to appropriate the means of the West, to become modern in an uncritical, slavish manner, the more it demands to be seen as different, the more it has romanticized the superior perfections of its own traditions and values. But no matter how bad things get the East has an immediate escape clause, thanks to the prevailing Kiplingesque understanding of the world. Condemnation of the West for its acts of commission (colonialism, neo-imperialism, political and economic dominance) and omission (failure to understand or appreciate and implacable opposition to the worth of Eastern values and ideas) suffices. It covers all contingencies with complacency and avoids the East’s need to examine its own internal shortcomings. East is East and West is West serves everyone.
In as much as East and West are human products – human societies, human cultures, human civilizations, human categories of thought – they are both endowed with goodness and evil. No society is purely evil – that would make it an impossible proposition. But neither is any society totally good – that would make it angelic, not human. Any attempt to move from binary oppositions must take into account the goodness in East and West as well as the evils within both. Only by acknowledging there is no-one with clean hands can we accept that we all have to find new ways of washing away the grime of our own imperfections, both East and West. To make sense of what is wrong in our world we must make visible what is identical and unacceptable in both the West and the East, what is good and wholesome wherever it is found on the planet.

A globalised world is a world in which everyone has problems, and no society has all the answers. We have to learn from each other – whoever ‘we’ are. The differences between East and West are not unbridgeable; they have been made so by the perversity of human understanding. We have to create a mutually comprehensible language in which to explore how analogous principles and shared values inform the diversity of our systems of thought and social organization. This is difficult territory. Nevertheless there are values, principles, imperatives, reflexes for justice, equity, tolerance, the right to individual liberty and responsibility to community and much else in each and every evidently different society, people and civilization. We need a language that focuses on these similarities and brings them to the fore. We have to be able to think our way forward to the realization that East is East and West is West and that is the last best hope for everyone East and West. Unless we can embrace the possibilities of truly plural futures we have to resign ourselves to the despairing conclusion that contemporary problems have no solution, East or West, but are just so.

The need to bring East and West together becomes even more urgent when we consider the truly global nature of many problems that beset us – from climate change, threat of pandemics, increasing competition for energy to growing political and financial instability and increasing inequality. None of these problems can be ‘fixed’ by individual states; and they affect every person on the planet. And they are not simple: there is nothing simple about fixing the economy, or securing our energy supplies, or fighting pandemics or ensuring our security or even doing something positive about climate
change that in 2012 alone brought floods to Manila and drought to several states in the US. These are complex problems; indeed, almost everything we have to deal with nowadays is complex. Complexity is enhanced by the fact that all our problems are interconnected, occur simultaneously, are global in nature and subject to rapid pace of change.

There is another added dimension. Complex, interconnected problems often lead to chaos. Chaotic behaviour is evident not just in the markets and our financial institutions but also in our social, individual and institutional activities. Thanks to mobile phones, blogs, e-mails, and 24-hour news media, we are constantly in the know. We are thus primed to react instantly, equipped with the means to set off new patterns of chain reactions. Things multiply quickly and change occurs in geometric proportion. Thus small perturbations rapidly acquire global proportions. The behaviour of a handful of unscrupulous bankers can lead to financial collapse. A vegetable vendor can start a freedom and democracy movement, what came to be known as the ‘Arab Spring’.

When complexity and chaos combine with accelerating change the only definite outcome is uncertainty. The first decades of the twenty-first century have made it abundantly clear that we are living in a period of uncertainty, rapid change, ambiguity, upheaval and realignment of power. It is a time when old orthodoxies are dying, new ones have yet to be born, very few things seem to make sense, and there is little out there that can be trusted or gives us confidence. Elsewhere, I have characterised this period as ‘postnormal times’, an in-between era where nothing which we conventionally took as normal makes sense.

What is so different about post-normal times?

In normal times, a generalised acceptance of the existing distribution of power and the hierarchy of interests is maintains. Normal times are not without dissent or dissatisfaction but change is overwhelmingly accepted as working through and with the way things are. The social compact that holds society together is the acceptance that the vested interests and power holders care for the common good. Therefore, the powers that be and the hierarchical order of things are the basis from which a better future is envisioned and the premise on which we direct our efforts to realise the future. In normal times, a rich mythology underpins popular understanding
and support for society, science and economy. There are caveats, escape clauses which allow for imperfections in the systems that govern our lives. But the caveats do not undermine collective belief in and acceptance of our institutions: intellectual, academic, political, social and cultural. Heroic science, the will of the people heroically translated into laws and good governance, prudence and probity as the routine principles governing economy and government, instil confidence in the present and hope for the future. If things are not right or even far from perfect we remain convinced we have the means, capability and collective intent to make them not merely work but work better. The mythological underpinnings also create the most sought after luxury of normal times: time. Things may be interconnected but there is confidence that problems are not immediate, there is always time to solve them. Problems could be dealt with in an ordered episodic progression where knock on and even unforeseen consequences would be managed sensibly. In normal times we believe or at least accept the ability of the institutions of society – politics and governance, science and economy, financial organisations and social relations, health and welfare - to generate solutions. This is what institutions are for: solving problems to sustain the society they represent. The system may be imperfect, but it has the ability to rectify problems and contain its abnormalities within its competence.

In postnormal times it is the institutions, the system itself which constitute the problem. Moreover, there is no luxury of time: problems need immediate and urgent attention, and even as we attempt to solve them they entangle themselves into a complex web, and multiply rapidly, concurrently and dangerously. All that we took for granted seems to evaporate and cannot be trusted to deliver what it supposed to deliver. The emperors in whom we placed confidence – scientists, economists, accountants, bankers, politicians; governments, markets, financial institutions, drug companies, technology giants – are seen to have no clothes. It is not that we ever saw the foundations of our societies as perfect. Rather, it is the realisation that these foundations are perilously shaky, unable to resolve the enduring imperfections of our world order, and can infect lead society towards a potential collapse. The entire system is geared to disproportionately rewarding the few at the expense of the majority. The selfish self-interests of power and the powerful are revealed as the only mechanism that works and the reality on which everyone is dependent. Control and management become the grand illusions. All overarching explanations, the mythology
that bound and made society viable, become toxic, the bearers of pathogens that infect society with distrust and lack of confidence. In postnormal times we know we have abilities but not the systemic, ethical and organisational capacity to translate our abilities into providing sustainable solutions to our endemic, interrelated and proliferating problems. In normal times, uncertainties are small and manageable. But in postnormal times, uncertainty takes centre stage. Since everything is interconnected, complex and chaotic, and changing rapidly, nothing can actually be described with any certainty. Moreover, given the complexity of the increasing web of problems and the rate of change, we are unable to relate our present predicament to any past. We are thus unable to learn from anything from the past, even when we know there have been comparable systemic failures in history.

It is clear that the predicaments of postnormal times cannot be resolved with existing tools. They require new modes of thinking and new way of doing things, East and West. There are, however, lessons to be learned from the dominant characteristics of postnormal times itself. Complexity tells us that the notions of control and certainty are becoming obsolete. There is no single model of behaviour, mode of thought, or method that can provide an answer to all our interconnected, complex ills. The ‘free market’ is as much a mirage as the suggestion that science and technology, or liberal secularism, or religious fundamentalism, will rescue us from the current impasse. It is thus foolish to place our faith in a single ideology or a monolithic notion of truth. Diversity and plurality are essential both to understand and deal with complexity. Chaos teaches us that individual and social responsibility and accountability are all paramount for our collective survival. The actions of any individual or group, from unscrupulous bankers to a neglectful social worker, can cause serious instability and upheaval. On the other hand, individualism, the notion that an individual can fulfil himself and do anything he or she wishes, is a recipe for catastrophe. In post-normal times, the world can really be laid to waste by the actions of a few individuals.

When chaos and complexity come together, often the end product is contradictions. One year London is ablaze with riots and multiculturalism is declared to be an unmitigated disaster; the next year multiculturalism is hailed as a great success as the city celebrates its diversity and Olympic triumphs. India is supposedly an economic superpower, yet vast majority of its population lives in abject poverty. As societies become more diverse
and plural, large segments of national populations become more and more nationalistic, fundamentalist and narrow minded. While certain segments of the globe are experiencing unprecedented change - information technology doubles its power every year, our capacity to sequence genetic data doubles every year - large segments of the planet and swathes of our social life are quasi-static. While technology forces us to work faster and quicker, the speed of air travel, since the demise of Concorde, has actually slowed. While billionaires and millionaires have increased throughout the world, grinding poverty in Africa is as bad as in colonial times – if not worse for many. In a world of superabundance food, around 850 million still go to bed hungry every night. While our knowledge increases by leaps and bounds in almost all spheres, our ignorance of other cultures is pitiful.

Not all the obvious contradictions around us are a product of postnormal times. But postnormal times have brought specific types of contradictions to the fore. Take ignorance. Many contemporary problems, such as tackling global epidemics, effect of GM foods and nano materials, have an in-built uncertainty that can only be resolved sometime in the future. We therefore remain ignorant of their consequences in the present and the near future. Rapid change in an uncertain environment also means we remain ignorant of alternatives and the chance of gaining new knowledge is lost. Ignorance is not soluble by means of ordinary research; we therefore have no notion of its existence. We are thus hit by a triple whammy of ignorance. We need to negotiate the future in a state of constant uncertainty, and if not in total ignorance, then at least with only partial or inadequate knowledge. Consider innovation. We imagine that new and innovative products are being constantly produced as technology moves forward with leaps and bounds. In fact, innovations have radically slowed since 1970, as Tyler Cowen points out in The Great Stagnation. Most ‘new and improved’ products, from consumer electronics to supermarket goods, are not real innovations but minor tweaks. Some 85-90 per cent of new drugs are anything but new: they are minor alterations to existing drugs with virtually no clinical advantage. Innovations have now been replaced with rent-seeking as Joseph Stigletz shows so brilliantly in The Price of Inequality. In fact, rent-seeking has now become the norm as it delivers far greater profits for big business and benefits for executives than socially beneficial innovations.
Contradictions too have lessons for us. They focus our gaze towards what Amin Maalouf calls the threshold of ‘moral incompetence’. The stark contradictions of our economic and financial system, the modus operandi of drug industry and corporations, the behaviour of politicians, and so on are essentially issues of ethics and morality that we have long ignored. In postmodern times, old fashioned ethics move from the periphery to the centre. Contradictions also teach us to accept and appreciate different perspectives. There is no right or wrong answer to any given problem. Even a very basic understanding of a problem requires a dialogue on its various dimensions, involving a whole range of perspectives and interests including those of experts, citizens, adults as well as children, people of different social and cultural backgrounds, different ethical notions, and even consideration of the needs of non-human species. Contradictions cannot be resolved, they have to be transcended. That means we need to put our differences aside, East and West, and manage contradictions and complexity through negotiated consensual dialogue, where all participants are given equal voice. There are no violent means to resolve contradictions or dealing with complexity. Violence only adds further complexity – and takes us even closer to the edge of chaos, as demonstrated so well by Afghanistan and Pakistan. Military action to remove a perceived threat only generates more chaos, leading to further new and unseen threats.

Humility, modesty, accountability, responsibility, diversity, and dialogue are not added extras but an essential requirement for surviving postnormal times of uncertainty, chaos, complexity and contradictions. There is no place in postmodern times for Kipling’s simplistic dictum of East and West as two fuming bulls in a boxing ring. Rather, East and West have to come together and employ the best that their tradition, history and societies have to offer to negotiate our turbulent times with our sanity and humanity intact.

Both East and West, there are more ways of thinking, principles for defining inquiry, shaping theory and informing understanding, than we have ever imagined. To get beyond the impasse of the just so predicament of our times we need new questions and new insights before we can hope to have new, better answers.

This is the explorative journey that East West Affairs intends to undertake.
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