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Is there a postnormal time? From the illusion of normality to the design for a new normality

Rakesh Kapoor*

Alternative Futures, B-177, East of Kailash, New Delhi 110065, India

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ABSTRACT

Ziauddin Sardar's characterization of 'postnormal times' elegantly captures the mood of despair, uncertainty and insecurity in the West due to the multiple shocks of terrorism, economic recession and climate change. However, the prevailing mood in India, most of Asia and developing countries in general is confidence and optimism for the future. The label 'postnormal times' is inappropriate for resurgent Asia and other 'emerging markets'. Similarly, these countries – as illustrated by examples from India – need more modernization and efficiency to save and improve the lives of their citizens. This paper argues that the seeming normality of twentieth century in the West was an illusion arising out of the ignorance and neglect of environmental and health consequences of unbridled industrial growth. The distorted assumptions of neoclassical economics are largely to blame for this. It is now time to pay back for those excesses. A new normality will emerge only by addressing these distortions and by creating democratic global institutions that can reflect the changed global balance of power of the 21st century. The intellectuals, opinion-makers and leaders of the world have to exercise their ethical responsibility and creative imagination to enable this new normality to emerge.

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1. The illusion of normality

Zia Sardar's characterization of the present as transient, post-normal times is appealing and insightful. It captures the unexpected things that keep happening in our world today in the elegant phrase, "post-normal times." The post-normal events of this age, Sardar argues, are driven by the forces of complexity, chaos and contradiction [14].

Sardar offers an interesting over-arching characterization and a valid critique of current times, especially so in the light of Western circumstances. Yet, looked at from an Indian or Asian or less-developed-country perspective, although I agree that we are in times of significant change, it is difficult to agree with the label 'post-normal'. The world appears very different from the vantage point of a person sitting in New Delhi/India/South Asia or in some other part of Asia, such as China or Vietnam. The same is true, although perhaps to a lesser degree, for a person sitting in Africa or in another developing country – or 'emerging market', in the lexicon of the market economy.

'Post-normality' is premised on the passing of 'normality'. In the period of the last five to six decades, roughly during the period 1945–2001, the West enjoyed a period of stability and affluence that created an illusion of 'normality'. In the last decade, the combined shocks of terrorism, economic recession and climate change have broken this illusion and have forced the West to come face to face with the stark reality of the 21st century. The combination of these events has shaken the

* Tel.: +91 11 26847668.

E-mail address: mailboxrk@gmail.com.

confidence of the West. From the smug comfort of affluence, stability, security and the feeling of ideological superiority,¹ the West has suddenly been forced to acknowledge that ‘things are not normal’ anymore. And the future that stares the West in the face is not very bright. Climate change and the environmental backlash on the one hand, economic recession on the other, seem to foreclose the possibilities of return to a golden period of unfettered growth and consumption. Terrorist violence creates insecurity and the fear of more conflict and violence in the future. A feeling of despair and meaninglessness is quite natural in these circumstances.

But the mood in Asia is distinctly different. From the perspective of New Delhi, Beijing and Brasilia – and of those from other ‘emerging markets’ – recent times have been wonderful and the future looks bright – despite the nuisance of terror, the compulsions of climate change or irritants like the Swine flu epidemic. Within half a century of Independence, China and India have done remarkably well in the economic realm, are the acknowledged economic powerhouses (along with Russia and Brazil and a few other countries) to drive the global economy in the next few decades and are staking their claim to a much greater global role. The mood of the public (the better-off, educated classes, whose numbers are swelling consistently, if gradually) in these countries – as evident from investor behaviour, consumer and youth surveys, television advertisements and newspaper articles – is highly optimistic. The feeling is almost that after decades of being the underdogs, they are now reclaiming their rightful position in the global scheme of things. These countries lived through decades of squalor and scarcity in what could well be described as ‘pre-normal’ times. Not to mention the impact on their psyches of the two centuries of colonial domination.² With their efforts of the last few decades, however, they are now moving to a more ‘normal’ phase in which the global balance of power is more equitable, they are moving to consolidate their gains and their strengths and talents are being recognized.

Kishore Mahbubani, the Singaporean diplomat and writer, articulates the change in the global balance of power eloquently in his book *The New Asian Hemisphere: The Irresistible Shift of Global power to the East* [9, p. 9]:

“Few in the West have grasped the full implications of the two most salient features of our historical epoch. First, we have reached the end of the era of Western domination of world history (but not the end of the West, which will remain the single strongest civilization for decades more). Second, we will see an enormous renaissance of Asian societies. The strategic discourse in the West should focus on how the West should adapt, but this has not happened. To make matters worse, the West has gone from being competent to becoming incompetent in its handling of many key global challenges, from the threat of terrorism to climate change to keeping the nuclear non-proliferation regime alive. This incompetence, with naturally disastrous consequences, aggravates the Western sense of insecurity.”

2. ‘Payback time’

The single most important factor that allowed the illusion of normality to emerge in the West was the fact that for many decades of development in the 20th century while the West pursued advanced industrial growth, it abused and exploited the natural environment with little realization of the consequences. The environment as well as the pollution and depletion of resources, soil and biodiversity loss were simply considered as given or ignored as ‘externalities’ and were not given a sufficient monetary value. There was – and is – simply no (or insignificant) place for natural resources or environmental pollution in the scheme of neo-classical economics. Neoclassical economics “assumes the natural environment is static and infinitely available. Resources are thus not a crucial factor of production, because growth is seen to occur primarily as a result of inputs of capital and labour. . . This view of the natural environment in neoclassical economics is not surprising, given that the field emerged in the nineteenth century, a time of frontier economics, where natural resources and sinks for pollution seemed limitless” [1].

This was aided by the Western Judaeo-Christian philosophical framework in which nature was only a resource to be dominated and milked for all its benefits [10]. It is only in the last decade of the twentieth century that the reality of climate change hit home. Only then did the realization dawn that the industrial path and the massive consumption of resources has created long-term impacts on the climate that will not go away easily.

The excesses of advanced industrialism have had other consequences that have a parallel with climate change, in that these are medium to long-term consequences of practices of the last century, whose folly could not have been recognized until the fallout was evident. Two examples of such impacts are the fall in the age of onset of puberty and drastic loss of sperm counts in men (and feminizing of the male population) in western industrial societies.

According to management thinker and physician Patrick Dixon, one of the two reasons for lowering of the age of puberty is the larger bulk of children’s bodies, the second likely factor is environmental. “There are a vast number of pollutants in the urban environment with oestrogen-like properties. An example is the string of chemicals which leach out of plastic containers into bottled water or foodstuffs. One of the biggest sources of environment oestrogen is food. Soya flour is a well-

¹ With its acme being Fukuyama’s proclamation of the “end of history.”

² This is an area that has not yet received adequate attention by the intelligentsia in these countries, although there are a number of fragmented efforts. The Indian diplomat and writer Pawan Varma’s recent book, *Becoming Indian: The Unfinished Revolution of Culture and Identity* [16] deals at some length with this question. I suspect – as I have argued elsewhere [5] that once success and confidence are achieved in the economic realm, the cultural rediscovery will follow more vigorously.

known source, so much so that a loaf of bread is being marketed which is claimed to reduce or eliminate hot flushes in women around the menopause. But what happens to male consumers or to unborn boys?" [2]

Similarly, writes Dixon, "environmental oestrogens in an increasingly urbanized society may also be the explanation for a catastrophic loss of sperm in men in industrialised nations, where counts have fallen by half in 50 years. We have also seen a significant fall in the healthiness of sperm. On current trends, millions of men will be unable to father children because of this effect by the year 2050. If this decline continues at the same rate, healthy sperm counts will be seriously low in most men within the next 80 years. At the same time as sperm counts fall, testicular cancer and prostate cancer are rising. This feminizing of the male population is subtle but progressive. Unfortunately, the causes are so diffuse, so complex, that it could take several decades to be certain what they are. There are 100,000 widely used industrial chemicals in the environment and 1000 are added every year" [2].

As with climate change, remedial action, if at-all possible on these issues, will take many years or decades to mitigate the impacts. In a sense, then, it is payback time for the excesses of advanced industrialism during half a century, or more, that was wrongly considered to be a period of 'normality'.

3. India: in search of elusive 'normality' and efficiency

The label 'post-normal times' is inappropriate for India and many other Asian and developing countries for a number of reasons. Much of what the West has achieved and takes for granted, with respect to economic growth, infrastructure, education or health, for instance, India has yet to achieve. In fact, the situation could be better described as 'pre-normal' rather than post-normal. The policy implications of Sardar's arguments, too, can be very problematic for developing societies such as India. Sardar suggests that post-normal times demand that we abandon the ideas of 'control and management', and rethink the cherished notions of progress, modernization and efficiency. These suggestions make sense in the Western context of advanced development with a remote, heartless and intractable bureaucracy that ends up benefiting only the rich. To some extent, this critique of bureaucracy is valid even for India. But can we afford to give up progress, modernization and efficiency?

What could this mean for India? Let us look at three different examples: the condition of farmers, literacy and vocational skills for employment and road safety. In each of these areas, India's indicators of development and welfare are abysmal. It is a strong comment on the state of social security in India that nearly 20,000 farmers – largely from poor, non-irrigated areas – commit suicide every year due to distress and helplessness after crop failures [13]. The figure for the period 1997–2008 is over two hundred thousand farmer suicides. The government has done little to address this huge human tragedy, although the problem is not very complex or insurmountable.

Regarding literacy and vocational skills, India has one of the largest labour forces in the world but the least number of skilled workers. Among persons aged 15–29 years, only 2 per cent have received formal vocational training – one of the lowest in the world. The corresponding figure is 96 per cent in Korea, 75 per cent in Germany and 80 per cent in Japan, for instance. The training capacity in the country is only 3.1 million per annum against 12.8 million new entrants to the workforce per annum. In addition, 39 per cent of the Indian labour force is illiterate, 25 per cent has had schooling up to the primary level while 37 per cent has had schooling up to the middle or higher level. Consequently, although India has the youngest population in the world (median age in 2000 – 24, as compared to 30 for China, 38 for Europe and 41 for Japan), at least 70 per cent of the workforce in both rural and urban areas does not possess any identifiable marketable skills [11].

In the area of road safety, India's record is sad and shocking. According to a recent government report, there were 485,000 road accidents in 2008, in which 120,000 individuals lost their lives. This implies a death every 4.5 minutes in road accidents [7].

A lack of progress, modernization and efficiency in each of these areas has severely negative consequences for the victims, mostly the poor and the underprivileged. The point is, by no stretch of imagination can Indian living conditions in the last few decades be called 'normal'. The need for more modernization and efficiency in each of these areas – as in a host of other areas – is stark. We definitely need more efficiency and innovation, although we could do with less bureaucracy.³

Sardar points out that the constantly connected and networked world is much more prone to the unexpected and spontaneous consequences of chaotic behaviour. In India, however, a remarkable story in the last decade has been the immense social and economic benefit that the mobile telephone connections have brought to the poor. At one go the telecom revolution has brought in over 500 million people (that is larger than the total population of the European Union) into the 'modern' sectors of the economy and have given connectivity, power, advantage and a sense of confidence to the poor, including in rural areas. From farmers checking prices in urban markets to telemedicine to migrant workers keeping in touch with their far-away families, the telecom revolution has benefited the poor in remarkable ways. From merely 45 million phones in 2002 (a tele-density of 4.29 per cent) to 207 million in 2007 and 600 million telephones today, well over half the number of Indians now have access to a telephone (the large majority of these are mobile phones) [12]. This has been a growth of 13 times in 8 years! According to a 2005 study by Leonard Waverman of the London Business School, an extra ten mobile phones per hundred people in a typical developing country leads to an additional 0.59 percentage point of growth in GDP per person (quoted in Mahbubani [9]).

³ A recent publication of the Indian government's Administrative Reforms department describes some of the successful government innovations in public administration [4].

4. Negotiating our way to a new normality – a new global balance of power

Sardar's critique of progress, modernization and efficiency seems to be part rhetoric – an overstatement, to make a point. If not, his critique of these cherished notions of the West is ambivalent, for he agrees that we need logic and reason, too. On the one hand, he says that progress, modernization and efficiency “have now become redundant if not dangerously obsolete terms.” On the other, he states, “logic and rationality, the virtues of modernity, alone will not secure the changes we need to make in our lifestyle to meet the challenges of post-normal times. Ethical accountability that emphasises both values and virtues must come to the aid of logic and reason. Without an overriding sense of ethical responsibility it is hard to imagine convincing the rich and powerful to become more modest in their demands and lifestyle, more humble, indeed ready to temper the profligacy of their lifestyles and the disproportionate use of limited global resources this requires.”

So, I take it that Sardar's position is that we need logic and reason, but that this instrumental rationality that is at the heart of progress and modernization has to be tempered by ethical responsibility, by imagination and creativity, besides humility, modesty and accountability.

There can be little disagreement with this formulation and with the virtues that Sardar suggests we need to cope with the crises of our times.

What would these values and virtues mean in practical and policy terms? What implication do they have for global and social institutions – especially from a Western perspective – as well as for individual action?

One of the ironies of our times is that, inundated with information, overloaded with perspectives and bombarded by the babble of voices from the numerous media channels and networks that we are constantly tuned into, there is little time we have to stop and stare, to carefully weigh options, consider the big picture and make wise choices. And then to spend time and effort to pursue them meaningfully. We may hear the words that Sardar spells out, but we may not grasp what the principles imply in terms of policy and practical action.

The values and virtues that Sardar lists translate into two kinds of action – at the global/institutional level and at the level of individual action. These may, for want of better terms, be called the political and the personal spheres of action. It is important to understand that these are two sides of the same coin, the twin poles of social transformation. Change could be top-down, initiated by leaders, policy-makers and opinion-makers, or it could be bottom-up, initiated by ethically minded individuals, small communities and civil society groups.

The institutional-political change will require the leaders of the Western civilization to open their minds to the changing global realities of the new millennium and to exercise their ethical responsibility to enable global institutions to change in accordance with accepted principles.⁴ The current institutions of global governance were created at the end of the Second World War. They cannot serve us in the 21st century just as the neoclassical economics rooted in the 19th century cannot offer us the right path in the 21st century. We now need to create a new global architecture of governance, but many Western leaders and intellectuals are not prepared for these changes. “Asia and the West have yet to reach a common understanding about the nature of this new world,” Mahubani says. He puts forward three scenarios of how the world will develop over the next fifty years. These are ‘the march to modernity’, ‘the retreat into fortresses’ and ‘the triumph of the West’. “Hitherto, both the United States and the European Union have been good custodians of the open global multilateral systems. But will they remain good custodians when their populations no longer believe that they will benefit from open globalization? Hence, Asians too need to engage in new thinking to prepare for a different world.” [9, p. XII]

The challenge of bottom-up action by individuals and communities is altogether different. The number of individuals who can today be agents of change is larger than at any other time in history. Individuals can make choices only within the framework of given institutions and policies. Yet – thanks partly to the power of telecommunications, networks and the media – a critical mass of individuals today can be powerful agents of change.⁵

The area of energy use and climate change illustrates well the interplay of these two modes of action. The energy policies of governments and corporations largely determine and constrain the energy choices of consumers. The German politician and environmentalist Hermann Scheer's book, *Energy Autonomy: the economic, social and technological case for renewable energy* [15], documents how governments along with the global oil industry and nuclear lobby prevented institutional and paradigmatic changes by constraining the growth of the renewable energy movement. Scheer sees energy autonomy both as an outcome of the shift to renewable energy and as the hard core of a practical strategy vide which autonomous initiatives by individuals, organizations, businesses, cities and states are required to get things moving. Similarly, on climate change the governments and the industrial lobbies of the West are not permitting adequate action on climate change. Chris Goodall argues in his book, *How to live a low carbon life* [3] that since neither the state nor the market in the United Kingdom and in the West, in general, are coming to grips with the problem of climate change, it is individual consumers who will have to take the lead. Goodall puts forth, in well-researched detail, what individuals can do to live a low carbon life and tackle climate

⁴ Indeed, there are some signs that this may be happening. Ian Lowe argues, in a recent paper to appear in this special issue of Futures on Global Mindset Change, that the Washington consensus of the 20th century has now given way, for the first time after the global economic crisis of 2008–2009, to the Zurich consensus, with adherents such as the World Economic Forum and the International Energy Agency. “A new consensus is emerging that recognises biophysical limits and the interlocking social, economic and environmental challenges we face. This provides grounds for cautious optimism that we may be entering a period of social learning which will allow human civilisation to survive” [8].

⁵ The question of the personal and the political as the twin poles of social transformation, and the role of millions of conscious and visionary individuals acting as agents of change is discussed at some length in my introduction to a special issue of Futures on Transformative Initiatives [6].

change. While the Bush administration in the US was dragging its feet on the question of climate change, 131 US cities took their own decisions to take action to limit carbon emissions in line with the Kyoto protocol – which the US government had rejected! [17]

5. Conclusion

The crux of the transition to a new normality is that the West has to learn to live in a world in which it is no longer exceptionally privileged or dominant. The West has to shed its double standards and to co-exist with the rest on terms that are equal. This normality will be premised – in all likelihood – on a new ecological economics, on sustainable energy supplies and patterns of living with nature. The basis of this normality will also be a new, much more democratic global architecture of governance. It will represent the age of sustainability rather than the age of profligate, mindless consumption, that has been called the “age of stupid,” in the recent movie of the same name intended as a wake up call on the perils of climate change. The task of knowledgeable intellectuals and scientists, visionary leaders and activists and concerned citizens is to help us evolve to this new stage of ‘normality.’ Both through their personal choices and through their pooled efforts to create new, democratic global institutions that can address the global problems of humanity while giving the freedom to diverse human civilizations, communities and cultures to bloom. Without this collective application of ethics and creative imagination, the future could be bleak. Do we have any other option but to apply ourselves to the co-creation of this new normality?

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