

# Growing Up With Rabindra Sangeet

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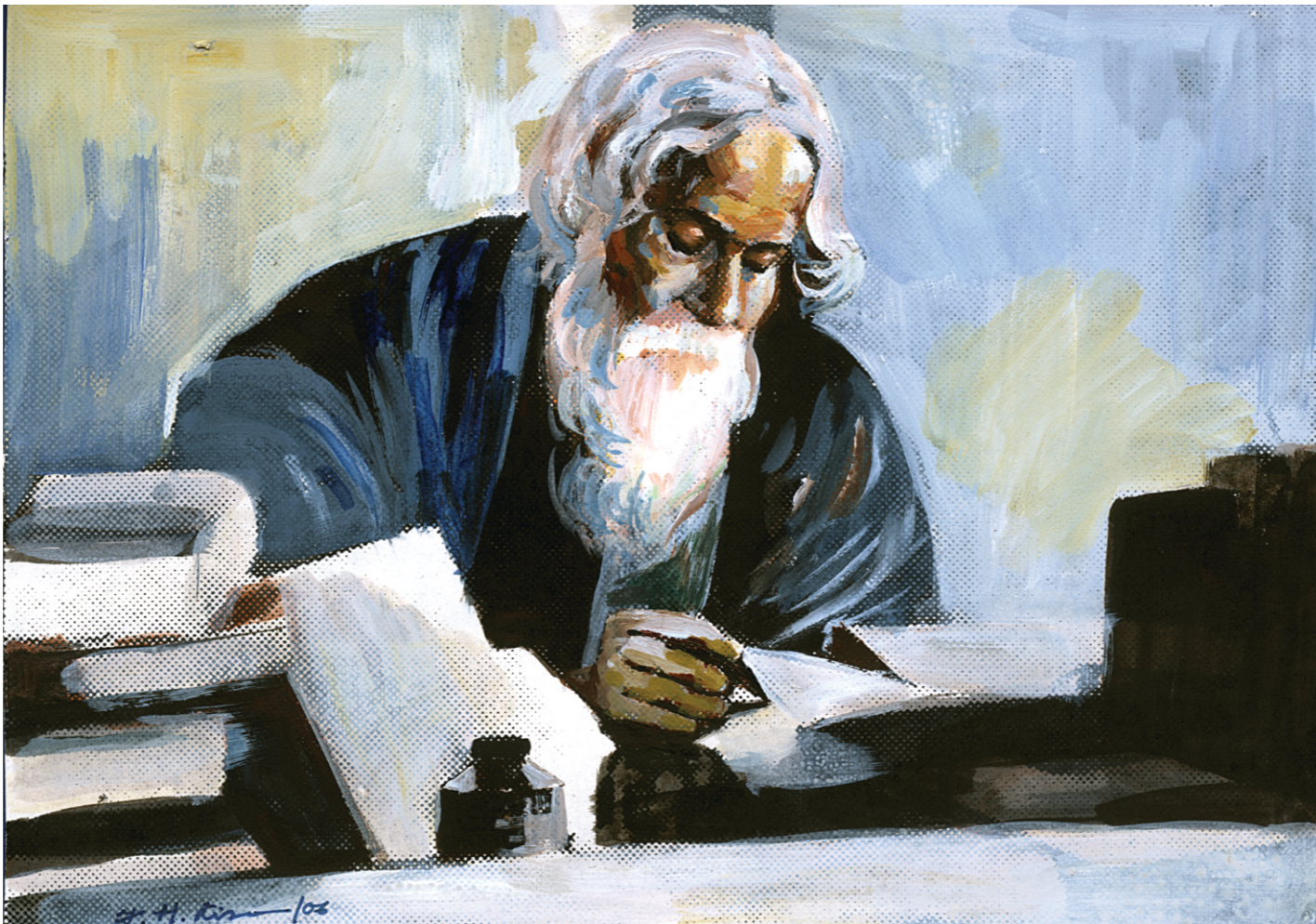
One of the earliest memories I have of my father is of him coming out of his bedroom, transistor radio in hand, eager to share his delight about a Tagore song being broadcast in Dhaka or Calcutta radio with someone else in our family. "Aha" he would say, shaking his head to the beat, or clapping as if to accentuate it, or humming the tune out loud. The youngsters in the house, of course, didn't very much care about these songs and, in fact, weren't thrilled at all about his craze for these tunes. Indeed, if we could, we would have much rather listened to the modern Bengali songs being played in some other station at that time. Failing to inspire us, therefore, my father would retreat to his room. But for us there was no escaping the Tagore tunes as long as he was in the house; he would simply increase the volume a bit till it seemed to us the whole house was filled with those awfully serious, somewhat sedate, occasionally tedious songs.

Whether we liked it or not, then, we grew up with Rabindra Sangeet. Little by little, we even learned to live with it--after all, it was just about a part of the air we were breathing in our house. From my present perspective, it appears now that in being exposed to Rabindra Sangeet thus my soul had a "fair seed-time", although at that time no doubt I felt more like someone "flying from something that he dreads than one/Who sought the thing he loved".

Gradually, I began to like at least a few of the songs composed by Tagore. The ones that appealed to the growing boy in me, not surprisingly, were the ones with the quickest, most throbbing beat. It was nice to see dances based on these pulsating songs staged for Tagore birth anniversaries or for some neighborhood cultural function. Who cared if the dancing was amateurish, the singing out of tune, the lighting lacking synchronization? Who cared indeed, if it was Tagore's birth anniversary? What attracted us neighborhood boys was the spectacle of the girls we were getting increasingly excited about dancing to fluttering lyrics such as this one: "My heart dances like a peacock, / Passionately, and spreads, refulgent, like a peacock's tail."

Not surprisingly, then, certain Rabindra Sangeet tunes attracted me even more in my teens because of the aura of romance associated with them. Sung by a singer like Chinmoy, you were transported to a world of intense emotional longing or made to empathize with the lover's anguished question: "If loving brings no bliss, why, oh why, love at all?" You almost could hear the helpless lover in the doleful voice, and you were always getting some amount of perverse thrill at the vulnerability of the lover. No doubt, a teenager's taste for mushy music or the maudlin made me overvalue certain sentimental Tagore songs or misinterpret them. However, there were also songs which uplifted your spirits when you felt the stirring of desire in you or when you fancied yourself in love, or were fascinated by the prospect of loving someone, even if this meant committing yourself to unrequited love. Certainly, Tagore had the words and the tunes for grand gestures and exotic attachments: "In my soul there is nectar, do you want it/Alack, you don't know about it" or "I know you, know you well, oh wondrous one from a far-off land!"

In the sixties, still in our teens, my generation was feeling not only the stirring of desire but was also waking up to the fact that we had become second-class citizens in a country supposed to be our own. The time had come for East Pakistanis, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was telling us, to shake off the shackles imposed on us and to rise and shine. As we sensitized ourselves to our culture we found an obvious source of pride and inspiration in Rabindra Sangeet. The fact that the Pakistani government had tried to prevent Tagore's songs from being broadcast on public radio in the early sixties only increased their popularity amongst us. It was at the end of the decade that we began to be regulars in such events as Chayanaut's Poila Boishak function, where the main items in the program were inevitably songs by Rabindranath, tunes such as "Arise this day in happiness fresh and new, soak in the light of the newly arisen sun." This was the time when we were delighting too in a young and exciting group of singers, fresh as the dew or the leaves in the Balda Garden setting (the venue would shift to Ramna Park later) of Chayanaut's celebration of the coming of the Bengali year: Milia Ghani, Iffat Ara Dewan, Flora Ahmed, and others, votaries of the beautiful, vestals, it seemed to us, who were reviving traditions long suppressed by a regime bent on driving a wedge between us and our



artwork by t h lisa

Bangla heritage. But the more that regime tried to disparage whatever constituted our culture, the more they tried to discredit Rabindranath's songs, for example, the more they attracted our attention to it, and his music became an unfailing source of pride and joy.

Looking back from my present perspective at the burgeoning popularity of Rabindra Sangeet in the late sixties and 1970 and 1971, it is obvious that our taste for the songs of Tagore had to do with the national longing for form. The Bangladeshi moment had come, and Tagore's song appeared especially appropriate for all of us budding nationalists. Everyone everywhere was humming tunes such as "My Golden Bangla, I love thee!" At rallies and demonstrations, the idea of Bangladesh seemed to have been vividly encapsulated in Tagore's lyrics: "From the heart of Bangladesh suddenly today, and all on your own/ You have emerged in beauty that is beyond compare, mother!" Bengal's other great lyricist, Kazi Nazrul Islam, did sound more revolutionary, but Tagore too gave us pulsating tunes. Indeed, who can doubt that his songs were a source of inspiration throughout 1971 and that lines such as "The more they try to shackle us in, the more our bonds will loosen" stimulated our freedom fighters throughout that year?

In fact, it was in 1971, that I first began to come close to appreciating the spirit of Rabindra Sangeet. Confined to our homes most of the day and all night long, and forced to listen to Calcutta radio or Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendro or our tape recorders, we were exposed to the riches of Rabindra Sangeet as never before. Certainly, from that year I began to see how Rabindranath's songs were woven out of our seasons, were sweet songs which told of our happiest as well as our saddest thoughts, were gems cut from veins that ran deep into our subconscious.

As I came close to grasping the essence of Rabindra Sangeet, I could see that no matter what the time of the year or the frame of mind I was in, Rabindranath had the words and the tunes for the occasion. Where else but in his songs, for example, could you find

such a consummate treatment of our rainy season and the mood it could induce in us? If the drifting rain-bearing clouds made you restless, hadn't Rabindranath found the perfect song for the moment: "what is that wind that drives my thoughts/ my mind swings, swings suddenly at its onset." In looking at the clouds thickening before the rains, you felt impelled to hum "After innumerable years and from another shore, *ashar* comes to my mind/ who is that poet whose rhymes sound in such incessant showers?" If you were inclined to be metaphysical, where could you come across a better conceit than in Raindranath's song as sung in Debobroto Biswas's incomparable style and voice where God is a *baul*, a mystic and crazed singer who plays on his *ektara* till that instrument produces thunder, lightning, and rain? In the years that bring something of a philosophic mind, this, then, is the ultimate lesson one learns from Rabindra Sangeet: because of it you get to at least think of the possibility that everything in this world is tinged with the infinite, and can conceive of yourself as a traveler destined perhaps for some final revelation.

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My father's death on February 21, 1992 was quite sudden, at least for me. A few days before he died, he complained of discomfort and confined himself to his bed. I could see that he was unwell but had no idea that he was dying. When I went to see him the day before he went into a coma, I asked him if he would listen to the radio or hear some of his favorite Tagore songs on the tape recorder that was his constant companion. When he shook his head to say no, I should have known that his time had come, but I failed to read this sign, bent on believing that he was suffering from some passing illness. Then, when he died, I was, for a while, inconsolable. It was as if there is grief so intensely painful that even Rabindranath's delicate songs cannot assuage them. But later, I would remember that Rabindranath had the words and music for the utter bleakness induced by the death of a loved one, as in the song so hauntingly rendered by Kanika Banerji: "Everything has ended, almost all dreams/Where has

he hid himself, where is he alas!" And much later, I would remember Rabindranath's insight into the human condition as the supreme consolation for those in mourning: "There is life, and there is death, and the anguish of separation/Still, there is peace, happiness, arising everlastingly." And somehow, it seemed appropriate that I would ultimately come to accept my father's death at least partly because he had at one time introduced me to the endless source of wisdom and delight that is Rabindra Sangeet!

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**Power to soothe the wounded heart:** Fakrul Alam's article ("Rabindranath had the words and music for the utter bleakness induced by the death of a loved one") reminded me of Shireen Huq's words after the burial of her younger sister Nasreen Huq, who, as has been widely reported in the media, died recently in an accident in the carport of her home. After the body was laid to rest at Gazipur, after the traditional rites and *munajat*, Shireen gathered family and friends in a circle and sang Rabindranath's "*Jokhon porbay na more payer chhino ai batay/Aami baibo na more kheyta tori ai ghatay/Chukiyay debo becha kena, mitiyay debo jena dena/Bondho hobay ana gona ai hatay...*" the red earth of the freshly dug grave littered with wreaths investing the old words with renewed meaning. As their voices, in necessarily frail, fractured harmony given the circumstances, drifted upwards from hot, dappled earth towards a green-leaved *shal bon* roof and Boishakh's *roktajoba* and *krishnachura* shading the grave, it felt the most poignant and spontaneous part of the burial ceremony. Echoing Fakrul's sentiments, Shireen, inconsolable till then, said that it was only after singing the song that her heart "at last found a measure of peace."

...Tokhon amai naiba monay rakhlay...

---Literary Editor

## Banshi (Flute Music)

(translated by Krishna Dutt and Andrew Robinson)

Kinugola Lane  
A two-storey house

Ground-floor room, bars for windows  
Next to the road.  
On the rotting walls patches of peeling plaster,  
The stains of damp and salt.  
A picture label from a bale of cloth  
Stuck on the door shows  
Elephant-headed Ganesh, Bringer of Success.  
Apart from me the room has another denizen,  
Living rent-free:  
A lizard.  
The difference between it and me is simple -  
It never lacks food.

I earn twenty-five rupees a month,  
As a junior clerk in a trading office,  
Eat at the Duttas' house,  
Tutor their boy in exchange.  
Then it's off to Shealdah Station  
To spend the evening.  
Saves the expense of lighting.  
Engines chuffing,  
Whistles screeching,  
Passengers rushing,  
Coolies yelling,  
It's half-past ten  
When I head for my lonely, silent, gloomy room.

My aunt's village on the Dhaleshwari River.  
Her brother-in-law's daughter  
Was all set for marriage to my unfortunate self.  
Surely the signs were auspicious, I have proof  
For when the moment came, I ran away.  
The girl was saved from me  
And I from her.  
She never came to this room, but she's never away from my mind,  
Wearing a Dacca sari, vermilion in her parting.

Monsoon lours,  
Tram fares go up,  
Often my wages get cut.  
In nooks and corners of the lane  
There pile up and rot  
Mango skins and stones, jackfruit peelings,  
Fish-gills,  
Corpses of kittens,  
And who knows what other trash!  
The state of my umbrella is like  
The state of my wage packet,  
Full of holes.  
My office clothes resemble  
The thoughts of a pious Vaishnava,  
Oozing and lachrymose.  
The dark presence of the rains  
Hangs in my moist room  
Like a trapped beast  
Stunned and still.  
Day and night I feel that the world  
Is half-dead, and I am strapped to its back.

At a bend in the lane lives Kanta Babu,  
Long hair nattily groomed,  
Wide-eyed,  
Refined of manner.  
He loves to play the cornet.  
Frequently the notes come floating  
Through the lane's stinking air.  
Sometimes at dead of night  
Or in the half-light before dawn,  
Sometimes in the afternoons  
When light and shadow coruscate.

Suddenly one evening  
He begins to play in *Shindhu Baroa* raga,  
And the whole sky rings  
With the yearning of the ages.  
Then in a flash I grasp  
That the entire lane is a dreadful lie,  
Insufferable, like the ravings of a drunk.  
Suddenly my mind sees  
That Akbar the emperor  
And Haripada the clerk are not different.  
Tom umbrella and royal parasol fuse  
In the paths of the fluting melody  
Pointing towards one heaven.

The music is true, the key  
To that endless twilit witching  
Where flows the River Dhaleshwari  
Its banks fringed with dark *tamal* trees,  
Where  
In a courtyard  
She is waiting  
Wearing a Dacca sari, vermilion in her parting.

From Rabindranath Tagore *The Myriad-minded Man*, Bloomsbury: London, 1995.

artwork by apurba

# A Poet at Large: Rabindranath Tagore's Travel Writings

KAISER HAQ

*Travel can be one of the most rewarding forms of introspection.*—Lawrence Durrell

Tagore published two early accounts of visits to Britain, one from his mature years of a trip to Japan, and four from his maturer years of visits to the Soviet Union, Argentina, Java and Persia. Though generally ignored by critics they will gain in significance if examined from our postmodern, postcolonial perspective. Formally they are distinct in being either epistolary or diaristic, and hence are immediate responses to the passing moment; even introspection in diaries and letters is marked by a spontaneity that is absent from the well-considered thought. One could say of such introspection in Tagore, as Cioran has said about Nietzsche's philosophy, that it is "a meditation on his whims". A corollary of this is the likelihood of a disjunction between such writing and a subsequent treatment of the subject. Tagore's very first travel book is a case in point. In 1878, a seventeen-year-old Tagore set sail for Britain. It was hoped that he would eventually study for the Bar. In the event he stayed for a while with an elder brother and his family in Brighton, put in brief stints in a public school and, in London, with a couple of private tutors with whom he lodged, and spent about three months as a student at University College, London. Almost as soon as he embarked on the voyage to England he began sending letters to a magazine describing his experiences. These were collected in 1881 in *Europe Prabashir Patra* ("Letters of a European Sojourn"). It attracted considerable attention, partly because it satisfied the Bengali readers' curiosity about the imperial "mother country" and partly because it was the first book to use the colloquial "chalti" form of Bengali. The ten letters have an explicit intertextual connection with Thackeray's "Travels and Sketches in London", which Tagore quotes and paraphrases. The first letter vividly describes the voyage to England--the torment of mal de mer, the idiosyncrasies of fellow passengers--and caricatures a jingoistic Englishman whom Tagore aptly nicknames John Bull. The second describes the healthy shock of discovering that the real

England is very different from the imaginary England of the bookish colonial Indian: "Before coming to England I had foolishly harbored the hope that this tiny island would resound throughout with Gladstone's rhetoric, Max Mueller's commentary on the Vedas, Tyndall's scientific theories, Carlyle's profound ideas [...] Fortunately, I have been disillusioned. The ladies here are busy at their toilette, the men at work; family life goes on as it's supposed to; and only politics occasionally raises a furore." (My translation.) Tagore casts an amused eye over the English social scene--masked balls, picnics, flirtations -- but is acerbic in portraying Anglicized Bengalis. These are the true colonial subjects, Naipaul's "mimic men", who have condemned themselves to go about with fractured personalities. To understand this, Tagore advises his readers to observe them in three situations, vis-à-vis English people (they cringe), vis-à-vis ordinary Bengalis (they are rude and contemptuous) and vis-à-vis fellow Anglicized Bengalis (they practice one-upmanship). The last letter breaks off in the middle of Tagore's stay with the family of an English doctor whom he calls Mr. K but whose real name was Dr Scott. He was then studying at University College, London, where he relished the lectures on English literature. Tagore's days with the Scotts were the happiest he spent in England. But the expression of this happiness in his letters home, ironically enough, brought about its termination. Tagore's biographer Krishna Kripalani thus describes what transpired: "His earlier observations on English society and in particular the role and ways of its women, which had been mixed with not a little irony and caustic comment, now underwent a change and he began genuinely to admire the charm and strength of character of women brought up in a free society. This admiration was freely expressed in his letters home and published in *Bharati* where he compared the position of women in the two societies, western and his own, and sought to show how the same sex was a source of strength to one society and a source of weakness in the other. These outbursts of admiration for the fair sex in England caused a flutter among the elders at home who

began to wonder if it was wise to let this impetuous boy loose in England after his elder brother returns home [...]. So a peremptory order went from India that Rabindra was to cut short his studies and return home with his elder brother." A poem Tagore wrote at this time throws light on what happened: "Du-Din" ("Two Days") is a lament for the end of a brief romance: And O the regret and shame of it! I came for two days to this land--only to break A gentle heart! (Translated by Krishna Kripalani.) The gentle heart belonged to one of the three Scott girls. Nirad Chaudhuri suggests that Tagore experienced the awakening of the passionate aspect of youth in a manner comparable to that described by Chateaubriand. Be that as it may, the role of Tagore's English sojourn in shaping his mind is indicated in the concluding words of *My Boyhood Days*: "I went to England but I did not become a barrister. I received no shock calculated to shatter the original framework of my life--rather East and West met in friendship in my own person." Tagore's autobiography, *My Reminiscences*, also gives an account of his first English visit, but significantly it begins with an apology for the epistolary travel book: "They [those letters] were nothing but the outcome of youthful bravado [...] These attempts of mine to establish my superiority by revilement might have amused me today, had not their want of straightforwardness and common courtesy been too painful?" It is primarily the send-up of the Anglicized Bengalis that Tagore so deeply regrets. One can only praise the delicacy of feeling Tagore expresses here, but not at the cost of wishing that the letters had not been written. The first impression has a value all its own even if one is ashamed of it afterwards. In *Europe Yattri Diary* ("Diary of a Voyage to Europe"), the record of a round trip made in the latter half of 1890, Tagore's praise of the beauty of English women is reminiscent of earlier Indian travel-writers like Mirza I'tesamuddin and Mirza Abu Taleb: "It is a pleasure to walk along the street here. One is sure to see a pretty face. Patriots at home will, I hope, forgive my admiration of these fair faces, their red lips and shapely noses and eyes that

reflect the blue of the sky. English girls are, indeed, attractive. This statement may cause jitters among my well-wishers at home and amused smiles among my friends. Nevertheless, I must confess that a lovely face is lovely to me. Good looks and a charming smile--what a wonderful human asset they are!" (Translated by Kripalani.) But there is also a diatribe against colonialism, probably symptomatic of a change in India's political climate; the Indian National Congress was set up in 1885, and so by 1890 a robust and well-defined critical stance towards the colonial power must have become common among the intelligentsia. In 1916 Tagore traveled to Japan, and three years later published *Japan Yatri* ("Traveler to Japan"). This was a crucial time in Tagore's intellectual development, for he now went beyond his quasi-mystical romanticism to become a controversial political critic. In Japan and the USA, which he next visited, he delivered the series of lectures later published as *Nationalism* (1917). At a time when nationalism had mobilized millions for the abattoir of the Great War, and when Indians, in reaction to the iniquities of the Raj, turned to nationalism for ideological support, Tagore stringently criticized its built-in narrowness, its blinkered view of human reality, its irrational worship of state power. This makes Tagore highly relevant to our age, as E. P. Thompson pointed out: "So far from being outmoded, Tagore's commitment to anti-politics and his concern with civil society make him appear at times to be a markedly modern--or perhaps post-modern--thinker". The broad libertarianism that underlies Tagore's stance would later manifest in the sympathetic view of the Soviet Union in *Russiar Chitthi* ("Letters from Russia", 1931). The "post-modern" ideas expounded in *Nationalism* found their way into the travel book on Japan. But the latter is also postmodern in its aesthetics, as the following excerpt on the phenomenological dimension of literature should illustrate: "This morning nature presents herself draped in the green-bordered brown sari of the river, and I am looking at her. Here I am purely an observer. If this observing "I" expressed himself in language, or in

line, the result would have been literature, or art. Someone may become annoyed and say, "What is it to me that you are looking at things? It won't fill my belly, or cure my malaria, or raise the yield of my fields". This is quite true; you have nothing to gain from it. But if you are really indifferent to the fact of my being an observer, then the creation of art and literature has no meaning in this world. You may ask, "What will you call these scribbles of yours, literature or theory?" Let's not call it theory; there, what is important is the theory, not the theorist. In literature that person is more important, and the theory more pretext. Consider this blue sky dotted with fleecy clouds; beneath it the earth's glorious green courtyard; and flowing past it the insouciant current of the mendicant river. Amidst all this what is chiefly finding expression is the observing "I"..... ..in the inner world too it is the same observing "I" that drifts along. There, too, he who speaks is paramount, what he says mere pretext. As I go along, in the same way that I am looking at the beauty of the world out there, I am also looking at the stream of thoughts and feelings within through the vision of my consciousness." (My translation.) Tagore's phenomenological sensitivity endows his travel writings, right down to the posthumously published account of Persia, with aesthetic and spiritual value even as they present challenging socio-political ideas. They teach us what Buddhists call mindfulness--the detached alertness to what is going on--and show us how this mindfulness can be transformed into literature.

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