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Macaulay's Ghost: The Unimportance and Importance of English

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What stand should one take between the campaign for decolonisation of the Indian mind and that giving pre-eminence to English? We ought to develop a universalism that is attentive to local cultures but still speaks to a common humanity: a 'reconciled universalism'.

If you are so obsessed with decolonising the mind, I say to myself, why do you begin this essay with a quote from William Shakespeare? Is it the result of a knowledge deficit, an inability to find suitable illustrations for the point one wishes to make from sources outside the West?

Or is it another example of the overwhelming power of the knowledge hegemon, the Northern episteme, that even when one seeks to make a case against it one feels the need to draw on its resources because one wants to be appreciated? Is there something interesting going on here?

Since I first read Thomas Babington Macaulay's *Minute on English Education*, written on 2 February 1835, some decades ago, I have railed against it, enraged by his arrogance and his superciliousness. I swore I would mock Macaulay every day, in every way. I looked for allies. I soon found one in England: Lytton Strachey of the highbrow Bloomsbury group.

Reading Strachey's essay on Macaulay helped me vent some of my anger. I must therefore begin this essay with Strachey so that I can end it by saying to the ghost that has haunted me, "Thy bones are marrowless; thy blood is cold."

The first paragraph of Strachey's pen portrait of Macaulay begins thus:

> In Apollo's house there are many mansions; there is even one (unexpectedly enough) for the Philistine. So complex and various are the elements of literature that no writer can be damned on a mere enumeration of faults […] Macaulay - whatever the refined and the sublime may say to the contrary - is an example of this. A coarse texture of mind-a metallic style-an itch for the obvious and the emphatic-a middle-class, Victorian complacency-it is all too true; Philistine is, in fact, the only word to fit the case; and yet by dint of sheer power of writing, the Philistine has reached Parnassus (Starchey 1960: 195).

The *Minute*, however, is not philistine.

Single shelf of a European library

The *Minute* has some interesting ideas on the potential of English education in India, on what India needed to access the superior knowledge of the world which Britain offered, in contrast to what was available in Sanskrit and Arabic.

In arguments before Viceroy William Bentinck in Council, in response to the Orientalist group, which had advocated education through Sanskrit and Arabic, Macaulay stated:

> The whole question seems to me to be - which language is the best worth knowing? I have no knowledge of either Sanscrit or Arabic. But I have done what I could to form a correct estimate of their value. I have read translations of the most celebrated Arabic and Sanscrit works. I have conversed, both here and at home, with men distinguished by their proficiency in the Eastern tongues. I am quite ready to take the oriental learning at the valuation of the orientalists themselves. I have never found one among them who could deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia. The intrinsic superiority of the Western literature is indeed fully admitted by those members of the committee who support the oriental plan of education (Macaulay 1835: Paras 9, 10).

This is the statement that has incensed me over the years. Here is a man who is deciding on what policy of higher education to recommend for India- yet he does not know either Sanskrit or Arabic, has read some of their great works only in translation, asked a few European orientalists about their value, and then formed a "correct estimate of their value." He has come to the conclusion that the whole native literature of India and Arabia is not equal in worth to what can be found on a "single shelf of a good European library."

> Maybe Macaulay had not heard of the grammarian Bhartrhari, whose paradoxes still engage linguistic philosophers today, some of whom have extended his work to the current thinking on the philosophy of mind.

This statement was deeply offensive in addition to being stupid and shallow. Obviously he had not pondered over the sophistication of Jaina epistemology, reflected in concepts such as anekantavada or logical protocols such as saptabhangivada, which make the work of today's European deconstructionists and post-structuralists look simple. Maybe he had not heard of the grammarian Bhartrhari, whose paradoxes still engage linguistic philosophers today, some of whom have extended his work to the current thinking on the philosophy of mind.

The commentaries of the aesthetician Abhinavagupta, whose reflections on Bharata Muni's *Natyashastra* serve as the bedrock for classical Indian dance and theatre, also passed him by. Or perhaps his orientalists did not tell him of the contributions of Indian mathematicians such as Aryabhata, Brahmagupta, Mahavira, Bhaskara II, Madhava of Sangamagrama, Nilakantha Somayaji, and others who gave us the zero - without which the digital revolution would not have occurred. The science of yoga, which is based on elaborate treatises that date back thousands of years and is today recommended by Western practitioners of wellness remedies, also seems to have been ignored.

In reality, the list is endless. If we were to take only commentaries on the seminal works of Indian thought, they would themselves fill all the shelves of a good European library. And more. Perhaps the 50 volumes of books and anthologies planned by the Project of History of Indian Science, Philosophy and Culture, which began in 1995, can be seen as an attempt to occupy those empty shelves in Macaulay's library!

In the statement, Macaulay makes three claims. The first is that India's contribution to the world of knowledge is, at best, very modest. This claim was superficial and based on colossal ignorance. I agree with Strachey who sees it as an expression of "middle-class Victorian complacency."

My anti-colonial outrage, when I first read the passage, however, stopped me from engaging with the other two claims - both of which are more interesting and raise questions that cannot be glossed over. First, can Sanskrit and Arabic give a seeker access to modern knowledge? And, second, can such modern knowledge only be imparted in English?

Education in that foreign language

Education in English in post-colonial India has been a policy problem that many education commissions such as Radhakrishnan, Kothari, Pitroda, and Kasturirangan (named after their respective chairmen) seem to have either openly accepted or given their passive endorsement to.

For starters, let us look at the observation of the first Higher Education Commission of 1949, set up soon after independence under the chairmanship of S. Radhakrishnan, who knew everything about Indian philosophy and culture and who was, in addition, at the forefront of building the post-colonial Indian nation. He did not need a lecture on decolonising his mind. In chapter IX, 'Medium of Instruction', after exploring the alternatives of Sanskrit, Urdu, and Hindi, the commission concluded that :

English, however, must continue to be studied. It is a language which is rich in literature - humanistic, scientific, and technical. If under sentimental urges we should give up English we would cut ourselves off from the living stream of ever growing knowledge. Unable to have access to this knowledge, our standards of scholarship would fast deteriorate and our participation in the world movements of thought would become negligible. Its effects would be disastrous for our practical life, for living nations must move with the times and must respond quickly to the challenge of their surroundings. English is the only means of preventing our isolation from the world, and we will act unwisely if we, allow ourselves to be enveloped in the folds of a dark curtain of ignorance. (Report 1949: 283)

We need English. It is the "only means of preventing our isolation from the world", giving us access to the living stream of "ever growing knowledge" that is humanistic, scientific and technical. In the report, Radhakrishnan recognised that as a nation of many competing languages, investment in one would be politically hazardous. He also recognised that "world movements of thought" were only available to those trained in English. Those who did not have such training would be isolated and remain "enveloped in the dark curtain of ignorance." There are echoes of Macaulay here, who says:

> We have to educate a people who cannot at present be educated by means of their mother-tongue. We must teach them some foreign language. The claims of our own language it is hardly necessary to recapitulate. It stands pre-eminent even among the languages of the West. It abounds with works of imagination not inferior to the noblest which Greece has bequeathed to us, -with models of every species of eloquence, -with historical composition, which, considered merely as narratives, have seldom been surpassed, and which, considered as vehicles of ethical and political instruction, have never been equalled- with just and lively representations of human life and human nature, -with the most profound speculations on metaphysics, morals, government, jurisprudence, trade, -with full and correct information respecting every experimental science which tends to preserve the health, to increase the comfort, or to expand the intellect of man. (Macaulay 1835: Para 12)

The argument is clear and it is powerful. Education in English, and through English, would fire the imagination, and give the student the capability and confidence to sit comfortably at the high table of the knowledge feast. England is the new Greece, and English the new Greek. In paragraph 15, Macaulay writes, "What the Greek and Latin were to the contemporaries of More and Ascham, our tongue is to the people of India."

This claim about the pre-eminence of English as not just a language of colonisation or of the "enslavement of the mind" (forcefully stated by K.C. Bhattacharya in his lecture *Svaraj in Ideas*) but as a language of access to the larger and richer world of knowledge has not been sufficiently debated by post-colonial scholars who were more intent on exposing the conceptual exclusions caused by English education (Tagore 1927), or in examining the psychology of inferiority that it produces (Fanon 1977), or in analysing the amnesia about their cultural world that such an education creates amongst the natives (Ngugi wa Thiong'o 1986), or in tracking the resulting disconnect with local cultural practices and meanings (Cunha 1944).

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Abu-ur-Rashid, alerted by these anxieties, campaigned for a new university in Punjab because he saw the English education of Calcutta University producing an "anglicising tendency" amongst the youth, which he considered harmful since it led to their "denationalisation" (1888). It could only be resisted, Abu-ur-Rashid believed, if the literatures and sciences would be taught in the "vernaculars and classical languages". This did not happen in Punjab under British rule. It could not happen. English as the medium of higher education requires one to also, therefore, look at the other half of Macaulay's claim, not just enslavement of the mind but its liberation.

Tucked away in the statement just quoted is Macaulay's observation that English education trains the student in the "lively representations of human life and human nature", introducing them to the "most profound speculations on metaphysics, morals, government, jurisprudence, trade" and exposes them to the "correct information respecting every experimental science which tends to preserve the health, to increase the comfort, or to expand the intellect of man."

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This is as full a description of the educated person as one is likely to get, one who is not just equipped with the skills required by the world, the sciences both applied and basic required for comfortable living but also one trained in metaphysics and ethics, in law and government. Training in each of these knowledge areas is necessary for leadership. An English education will give one this training and capability. While it may appear like a huge boast, which must be examined both historically and in practice, Macaulay offers us a real world example: Russia.

> There is reason to hope that this vast empire which, in the time of our grandfathers, was probably behind the Punjab, may in the time of our grandchildren, be pressing close on France and Britain in the career of improvement. And how was this change effected? Not by flattering national prejudices; not by feeding the mind of the young Muscovite with the old women's stories which his rude fathers had believed; not by filling his head with lying legends about St. Nicholas; not by encouraging him to study the great question, whether the world was or not created on the 13th of September; not by calling him "a learned native" when he had mastered all these points of knowledge; but by teaching him those foreign languages in which the greatest mass of information had been laid up, and thus putting all that information within his reach. The languages of western Europe civilised Russia. I cannot doubt that they will do for the Hindoo what they have done for the Tartar. (Macaulay 1835: Para 16)

He was writing in 1825 and saw Russia's emergence as an equal member of the comity of nations of Europe as based not in the fact of empire, or the elevation of "national prejudices" to official fact, or the glorification of fictitious "legends" as history, but in the adoption of the languages and knowledge of Western Europe. One would be forgiven if one thought he was talking of India today and not Russia 200 years ago.

He was confident that English education would do for the "Hindoo" what it had done for the Tartar, making the former highly competent and versatile. The Hindoo, he believed, would be better than other foreigners who have also been schooled in the English education system. In the *Minute*, he writes,

> There are in this very town natives who are quite competent to discuss political or scientific questions with fluency and precision in the English language. … Indeed it is unusual to find, even in the literary circles of the Continent, any foreigner who can express himself in English with so much facility and correctness as we find in many Hindoos. (Macaulay 1835: Para 32)

Macaulay's certificate given to the English-educated Hindoo is unambiguous. Indians educated in English are better than "any foreigner" similarly educated. They have acquired a "fluency" of thought and expression, of professional composure, that enables them, as a class of Indians, to assume positions of leadership wherever they may be. English education in India, he believed, would form "a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect" (Macaulay 1835: Para 34).

He seemed to prophecy the arrival of Suella Braverman, Britain's home secretary in 2023, who, born of a migrant parents, a Mauritian Tamil mother and Goan father, and being an active member of the Triratna Buddhist Community, publicly announced that she "loves empire" and actively seeks to send migrants who arrive by boat to Rwanda.

> I want to exorcise Macaulay's ghost ... and also to engage with the second theme in his 'Minute', which card-carrying anti-colonialists like me have inadequately done.

At this point, one may legitimately ask why I expend so much effort analysing a note written by a senior British colonial administrator two centuries ago. Is it just a perverse attempt to exorcise Macaulay's ghost, which I have admitted has haunted me for several decades, or is there a bigger ambition? The answer is "yes" to both questions. I want to exorcise Macaulay's ghost, which I believe I will have done by the end of this essay, and also to engage with the second theme in his *Minute*, which card-carrying anti-colonialists like me have inadequately done.

What does it mean to be English in tastes, opinions, morals, and intellect? Each word is important here and needs deconstruction. How wide is the cultural universe of taste? Does it extend from wine to opera, fashion to furniture? Will it, for example in architecture, mean experimenting with new forms, as showcased by the exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York on *The Project of Independence: Architectures of Decolonization in South Asia 1947-85*, or will it just be redesigning Rajpath?

Will education in morals mean reading R.M. Hare and Bernard Williams after mastering the intricacies of Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative? How will the product of this training, "Indian in colour, English in tastes," manifest itself? Only in thought or also in action? Will it produce "enslaved minds," as Bhattacharya warned, or will it be gripped by "utilitarian ambitions" rather than being filled with a yearning for "spiritual freedom," as Tagore suggested (1927: 6)?

Or will it produce a class of Indians confident, competent, clever and ready to lead? Will they display a fluency that will be both applauded and rewarded? How should Freddie Mercury, the Parsi pop legend and one of the greatest pop vocalists in the world, who was born in Zanzibar and sent to study in Panchgani in Maharashtra, be regarded? As an Indian artist whose mind was colonised or one who as a citizen of the world chose his cultural expressions from all over?

Indians in colour, English in taste

This second question has surfaced in recent months as we in India speak with different voices. A new political stridency, coming from the ideology of Hindutva, has entered our political discourse. Our elected leaders glibly talk about challenging the colonial mindset, which they believe still exists amongst us and must be exorcised. They therefore do silly things such as dropping M.K. Gandhi's favourite hymn *Abide with Me* from the musical repertoire of the all services bands at the Beating of the Retreat while retaining, at the same time, the event and the brass instruments and bagpipes. Are these also not a legacy of colonisation?

There is a lot of silliness on display by these decolonisation warriors who have not understood the philosophical depths required for building swaraj. Gandhi did understand. From this understanding came his choice of the hymn *Abide with Me*.

Yet these same leaders simultaneously celebrate the arrival of the global Indian. They map the Indian genealogy of prime ministers such as Rishi Sunak of the UK and Leo Varadkar of Ireland, of vice-president Kamala Harris of the US, and of global CEOs such as Arvind Krishna of IBM and Leena Nair of Chanel, and claim it as a sign of belonging. Professionals in every field, from university professors to artists and film makers, are identified, all of whom have some Indian heritage.

We announce them as ours. They look like us, come from similar middle-class backgrounds as us, love idlis, speak Hinglish, and discuss, with unflagging enthusiasm, the legendary duets of Lata Mangeshkar and Mohammed Rafi. They must be us. They are.

Neeraj Kaushal, professor of social policy at Columbia University, has done the maths to conclude that of the top 500 Standard and Poor companies, 58 have "Indian born CEOs." Satya Nadella and Sundar Pichai, our poster boys, top the list. They studied at MIT Manipal and IIT Madras, respectively. In other words, they received an Indian education, read a curriculum designed internally by the institution, and acquired levels of proficiency that enabled them to rise to the very pinnacle of the global corporate ladder.

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Similar is the case of Indira Nooyi of Pepsico (IIM Calcutta), Ivan Menezes of Diageo (IIM Ahmedabad), Shantanu Narayen of Adobe Systems (Osmania University), and others who acquired their leadership skills and knowledge of the world through an English education. As far as I know, none of the IITs and IIMs impart education in any other language than English. We may drop *Abide with Me* but we still teach physics and biology in English. We may make a few cosmetic changes to the curricula but in substance the education in our institutions of excellence (IITs, IIMs, IISER, IISc, JNU, and central universities) mimics the system of education prevalent in the global North.

> If one looks at any area of international achievement, from science to culture, one is likely to find an Indian up there with the leaders. English education is the culprit.

To this list of global CEOs can be added eminent professors such as Raghuram Rajan (economics) at Chicago, Mahzarin Banaji (psychology) at Harvard, Akeel Bilgrami (philosophy) at Columbia, Abhijit Banerjee (economics) at MIT, Venki Ramakrishnan (molecular biology) at Cambridge, Shrinivas Kulkarni (astronomy) at Caltech, Sanjay Subramanyam (history) at UCLA, and so on. All have had some part of their higher education in India, when their world views were being formed and when they were acquiring the "fluency" of thought and expression.

The story remains the same when we look at writers such as Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, or Vikram Seth, or dancers such as Astad Deboo, or statisticians such as C.R. Rao. If one looks at any area of international achievement, from science to culture, one is likely to find an Indian up there with the leaders. English education is the culprit.

Macaulay's claim that an English education gave the student the "fluency" to navigate a complex world thus seems to have some credence. None on the short list above has achieved stardom because of their work on Vedic mathematics or ayurveda or jyotisha or

anekantavada or the dharma shastras. They may have these as interests but their core competences have been acquired in the northern epistemological universe.

This is not to say that English (read northern) education cannot accommodate scholarly inquiry into the other knowledge systems but only to suggest that these others exist on the periphery of the core, which is an English education. The work of David Shulman on Tamil literature or Sheldon Pollock on Sanskrit texts are illustrations of the ability of the Northern episteme to accommodate and promote scholarly reflections on classical Indian literatures while still remaining essentially Northern.

The core of an English education would remain what Macaulay imagined it to be, training people in "metaphysics, morals, government, jurisprudence, trade". In other words, training them in the knowledges of the North. The latest to join this growing list of Indians who have arrived is the new president of the World Bank, Ajay Banga.

We in India hail their arrival. Is it because they look like us? Is it because they have an Indian passport? Is it because they share our views on decolonisation and have, at some time, been stirred by Gandhiji's critique of Western civilisation in Hind Swaraj? Or could it be because they occupy positions we value but are difficult to achieve, and have done so through their sheer grit, hard work, and a dash of luck. Is it not fair that their achievement is appreciated?

But they have taken the Macaulayan road to success. So what should be our position? Should we accept it as valuable - the glories of the new Greece - or reject it as damaging of the things we value - the destruction of Nalanda?

> Global Indians are collaborators in the West's narrative, and not just as foot-soldiers, but as strategists, as decision-makers, and implementers.

Most of the new arrivals, I believe, gave up their Indian passports long ago. It is therefore racist to celebrate their achievements just because they look like us. We must look at their political philosophies, their sense of what is good and bad, and what they defend and what they oppose. Are they Indian in colour but English in taste, or Indian in colour and Indian in taste?

Today, the global Indian occupies important places in the world of power whether these be political, financial, corporate, technological, or knowledge power (deSouza 2017). In these positions, they consolidate the West's dominion over the world. They are collaborators in the West's narrative, and not just as foot-soldiers, but as strategists, as decision-makers, and implementers.

Is this because of compulsion or is it because they have freely chosen to speak the language of the West because they believe in its capacity to deliver a good society? Have they, like good products of Macaulay's education, internalised the logic of the West? Would they be considered, in the language of the 1970's Left, as compradors? How then does the arrival of the global Indian affect our reading of Macaulay's *Minute*?

What do we make of it?

Despite the success of English education in India producing the global India who is Indian in colour, English in taste, and perhaps South Asian in food preferences, the body of decolonisation arguments made in opposition to the knowledge consequences of such an education, remain as valid today as they were yesterday. Amnesia, erasure, inferiority, suppression, exclusion, invisibilisation, denationalisation, and disconnect with the local are all real consequences that such an education produces and enhances. They must concern us. They cannot and should not be ignored.

> We need to develop what UNESCO labelled "reconciled universalism" when celebrating the work of three intellectuals from three continents, Rabindranath Tagore, Pablo Neruda, and Aimé Césaire…

As a result of the spread of English education, India and Bharat grow into two nations, the global and the local. The divide, however, needs to be bridged in post-colonial democratic India. What stand should one, therefore, take between these two contending positions, the campaign for decolonisation of the Indian mind, on the one hand, and the policy of anglicising it, on the other?

I believe there is a third position available to us. We need to develop what UNESCO labelled "reconciled universalism" when celebrating the work of three intellectuals from three continents, Rabindranath Tagore, Pablo Neruda, and Aimé Césaire (UNESCO 2008).

Césaire (1913-2008) "denounced the drift towards a hegemony of 'fleshless universalism', stressing that "there are two ways to lose oneself: through segregation, being immured in the particular, or through dilution in the universal." Elaborating, he added, "I have a different idea of a universal. It is of a universal rich with all that is particular, rich with all the particulars there are, the deepening of each particular, the coexistence of them all" (UNESCO 2008).

> UNESCO, specifying the idea of a 'reconciled universal', suggests that it is possible to abstract from local experiences and local cultures and still derive some principles that are common to many of these cultures.

This is an interesting idea since it offers a way out between narrow parochialism and Eurocentrism (Wallerstein 1997). To begin with, the UNESCO's choice of three public intellectuals from three cultural zones is symbolic. It suggests that even though they have distinct positions they share an overlapping space from which it is possible to develop a universal that is attentive to local cultures but still speaks to a common humanity.

UNESCO, specifying the idea of a "reconciled universal", suggests that it is possible to abstract from local experiences and local cultures and still derive some principles that are common to many of these cultures. Reconciled universals appear to bridge the seemingly unbridgeable gulf between parochialism and eurocentrism. But establishing a reconciled universal is a new challenge in the humanities and social sciences since now we, in India, do not have to choose sides but can still aspire towards a shared humanism.

Amartya Sen in his carefully constructed lecture on 'Universal Truths: Human Rights and the Westernizing Illusion' makes the persuasive argument that the idea of universal human rights as a recent development in intellectual history, which have their roots in Western civilisation, is an exaggerated claim since ideas of tolerance and free speech had a robust presence in the non-West as well. Further, the converse is also equally true in that in both societies, in addition to champions of free speech and tolerance, there were also illustrious champions of authority and order (Sen 1998).

Sen's work can be seen as that of a philosopher who is seeking to establish such reconciled universals. His theory of human capabilities or human flourishings can be seen as an example of such a universal set. Perhaps Gandhi's concept of swaraj could also be regarded as belong to that set. Developing a thick body of philosophical arguments which demonstrate both the universality of the argument as well as its validity in several particular contexts is, however, still a work in progress (Ackerman 1994).

> Is this goal of finding and crafting reconciled universals only for the humanities and social sciences ... and not for ... science, technology, engineering and mathematics, where a European episteme prevails? That seems to be the case.

A more modest strategy to get there was attempted in the book, *Keywords for India: A Conceptual Lexicon for the 21st Century*, prepared by Rukmini Bhaya Nair and Peter Ronald deSouza, where 200 authors submitted 250 entries, along seven rubrics, of words and concepts that have their origins in India but can also be used globally.

To disrupt the hegemony of the Northern/Western episteme the lexicon adopted a four-part strategy-*infiltrate* the conceptual landscape of the Northern episteme with words from outside the field, such as ahimsa and leela, *elevate* local words and give them conceptual status, such as jhanjat and dharna, *appropriate* western words and inhabit them differently in India, such as file and tension, and *populate* the field with many words and concepts so that they become visible, acknowledged, available, and appreciated.

In doing so one would expand the vocabulary of humanities and the social science, making more concepts that have a local resonance available for the task of representing Indian reality. A conceptual landscape would emerge from such an exercise which would be more democratic and would partially reduce the conceptual asymmetry between English and Indian languages.

At this point one realises that an important question remains unanswered. Is this goal of finding and crafting reconciled universals only for the humanities and social sciences, the HSS disciplines, and not for the STEM disciplines, of science, technology, engineering and mathematics, where unapologetically a European episteme prevails? That seems to be the case.

Computer programming, I am told, can only be done in English. We can build a Mangalyaan-2 for $75 million and take a small model of the satellite to Tirupati to reduce the uncertainty of failure, which is what the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) chairman, K. Radhakrishnan, said when asked about it. But he still had to do the complex mathematical calculations to lift the rocket

through seven stages to allow the ISRO, which did not have the big booster rocket available to send the satellite directly to Mars, to use the earth's gravity to catapult the rocket towards its destination.

Perhaps L.Subramaniam and Stephane Grappelli in their 1984 album *Conversation* showed the way.

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