Bard Mukunda Das as a Social Reformer: A Critical Analysis

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Abstract

The article focuses on the role of Mukunda Das as a social reformer in the context of subjugated British India. Bard Mukunda Das (1878-1934) made himself dedicated in various benevolent activities of the society in India since the Bengal Division act in 1905. When Mukunda was born, India subcontinent had already been under British imperialism. In fact, the British then captured and brought most of the countries of the world under their regime. Inspired by the mantra or principle of independence, Mukunda Das took an active part in driving out the British from the soil of India through his innovative cultural activities called jatra (a kind of dramatic performance in rural Bengal). He excelled in drawing the attention of the mass people to the contemporary socio-economic-politico-cultural issues of the time. Mukunda Das was not to yield to the socio-economic-politico- cultural assault of the British imperialism on India. As a true patriotic social reformer, on one hand, he thought of a corruption free, malpractice free, traditionally ideal and sagacity- producing India; on the other hand, he pointed to the obstacles responsible for making an ideal India. His mission was to drive away the British from India, inspire people for ideal life and rejuvenate the past glory of India. Sometimes through worshipping Goddess Kali, incarnation of power; sometimes by rebel tone; sometimes by lamenting the lost old heritage of ancient India and sometimes with awakening songs and ironical remarks he tried to invite, unite and revive people from every walk of life. In this study, the role of Mukunda Das as a social reformer has been discussed through critically analyzing his different songs, poems and other writings.

Key words Mukunda Das, Social Reformer, Song, India

A Brief History About Mukunda Das

Mukunda Das (1878-1934), Charan or ballad singer, is well known as a poet and composer of Swadeshi songs. He also composed Swadeshi jatrapala. In undivided British ruled Bengal, his songs inspired the common people with the motivation of freedom and exploitation. His parental name was Yajneshwar. When he was initiated into Vaishnavism, he was named Mukunda Das (Sengupta, 2002). He was admitted in Brajamohon Vidyalaya founded by Mahatma Ashwini Dutt. The ideal of 'Truth-love-holiness' of the institution had a profound impact on the mental set-up of young Mukunda Das (Sengupta, 2002). He was gifted with a highly tuned amazing voice which brought him wide name and fame. This voice was helpful in creating public awakening during the anti-British Movement (Islam, 2011).

Objective of the Study

The objective of the present study is to evaluate how Charan Kabi Mukunda Das became a social reformer in British Bengal by playing a great role in Swadeshi Movement through upholding his songs, poems and other writings.

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Method of the Study

The present study is mainly library based. Necessary Information have been collected from some written books on Mukunda Das of different writers and some from online books and journals. Documents and content analysis method have been used to interpret and analyze the present study.

Socio-Economic and Political Scenario of Bengal in British Period

Long before the arrival of the European countries in India, India was defeated and ransacked so many times by different countries and powers for rich treasures specially spices of various types viz. cardamom, chili, black pepper, sandal wood, pearl, ivory etc. (Chanda, 2011). Different types of chaotic situations were prevalent in India over plundering of those resources (Sengupta, 2002).⁵ After the coming of the East India Company in India many mercantile British were seen to come here to earn high profit from the cultivation of indigo and merchandising of different goods including victuals, mine products, textile materials etc. (Dasgupta, 1972). In course of time, the people of the company gaining solvency, became very powerful and influential which instigated them to disobey Siraj-Ud-Daula (1733-1757), the last independent Nawab of Bengal, Bihar and Odissa in many issues and declined to subscribe due taxes for the royal treasury. Their different unruly and unlawful activities led to the dissatisfaction and anger of the Nawab which gradually gave birth to the battle of Plassey in 1757 resulting in the defeat and murder of the Nawab and bringing the company in shadow power. Since 1857 the British regal power began to rule India directly. From that time, exploitation and domination were going hand in hand (Sen, 2011). In 1905 Lord Curzon, viceroy of India, passed orders of dividing Bengal on the basis of "Divide and Rule" policy for materializing his political ill motive-disintegrating Hindus and Muslims. Protests from different corners arose which turned into anti British-rule movement and gave birth to "Boycott and Swadeshi Movement." British commodities were boycotted, national festivals were postponed, and use of clothes made in Manchester was banned. This movement had another purpose of establishing the economy and spreading the industries of India. It gradually paved the way to nationalism movement of India (Dasgupta, 1972). 8

Active Participation of Mukuna Das in Swadeshi Movement

Immediate before the Bengal Division Movement, our discussible Mukunda Das ((1878-1934) was leading a purposeless, bohemian life. But when the movement started, he grew a different man and emerged as a Charan or bard with the blessings and guidance of noble Ashwini Kumar Dutt (1856-1923) on head. Known as Gandhi of Barishal Mr. Dutt was the founder of Swadesh Bandhob Samity. The purpose of this organization was to upgrade the use of national commodities and boycott foreign commodities (Sengupta, 2002).⁹

Mukunda Das Started Different Activities as a Social Reformer

In that time, Mukunda Das not only saw the subjugation of India subcontinent but also realized minutely the causes behind it. He saw the dead souls of the native people filled with prejudices and narrow-mindedness deviated from the path of high ideals. He, necessarily, appeared in the role of a social reformer. Where he saw the weaknesses, malpractices, injustice, inequality and domination, he presented those through his songs and dramatic acting (Goswami,1972). ¹⁰

As a social reformer Mukunda Das at first tried to unite mass people without whose participation any movement was impossible. He believed in the importance of mass people for a tremendous change in the movement. He always regarded the dormant vigor in men. But that needs to bring the people together to be kindled with a spell. Mr. Das did that job. An unimaginable vigor acted in him which he passed in people when he sang-

With Bande matarm dance all, Taking weapons in hand. Let intruder see laughter, Let earth be trembled by kick violent. (Goswami, 1972) 11

During critical moments of the nation inspiring the people through cultural activities is the work of a bard. Mukunda did that work through his songs and jatra performances. He talked against British imperialism, exploitation, domination on one hand; on the other hand, pointed to various contemporary problems and their probable solutions. Successive foreign onslaught and domination, cruelty of Brahmanism, untouchability, discrimination among different castes and creeds, some ancient inhuman traditions like early marriage, burning of the widow on the funeral pyre of the dead husband and many other problems like these cast a negative effect on the people's mind which thoroughly chained them —made them ruined and dead. Common people had no say in any matter; so, they were not careful about anything. Kings ascended and kings descended but their fate remained unchanged. Mass people were completely unattached about the state affairs. They were physically, mentally, religiously, economically and politically were oppressed and deprived by upper class people and treated as the senseless instruments for serving them. Oppression and domination for thousands of years forced them dragging a miserable existence.

Great men like Devendranath Tagore (1817-1905), Keshab Chandra Sen (1838-1884), Raja Ram Mohan (1772-1833), Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820-1891) and many other Bengali reformers of top level of that time tried first for a positive change in the Indian society from their respective views. In line with this, later Mukunda with songs in his voice was seen to participate in the act of reformation. He glided his messages through his songs applying many techniques. Sometimes he adopted the shelter of Goddess Kali and sometimes sought for the bliss of Lord Krishna. Sometimes as a narrator he himself presented his desired information and sometimes through the mouth of the victims. In a song mentioned below he is seen to appeal to the Goddess Kali-

Except thy move no one will wake, Our unending sleep won't break, This dark night has no daybreak, Mother, all's quite dead. 12

Different Rebel Songs of Mukunda Das Kept Impacts on Mass People

Again, in another song he is seen in the role of advising people to move ahead with the name of Jagadamba (other name of Mother Kali) and he reassures that then there will be no fear. This rebel song had tremendous effect on the people from various walks. Let us look at the few lines of one song out of many –

Let's move drumming with Mother's name fear will be away-Don't you hear Time's drum's sounding in strange way? 13

In the last part of the song, he is interpreting the cause of his inviting the people which he did in many other songs time and again. In the language of the bard-

Crazy Mother is crazy, no fear, die for living; The Indians aren't lazy let world people see it today. ¹⁴

Political consciousness of Mukunda Das

Political consciousness of Mukunda Das is worth mentioning. Like many inhabitants of India, he was also in favor of Swaraj system. After the cessation of the non-co-operative movement led by Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948) in 1922 Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das (1870-1925), Mati Lall Nehru (1861-1931) and other leaders formed a political group named 'Swarajya dal' (self-government party) with the spirit of protest against the government activities, refusal of government budget, assisting nationalism moving ahead and stopping of foreign exploitation. "To baffle the ruling policy of Montegu - Chelmsford was the sole motive of the Swarajya dal" (self-government party) … "The aim of the party was to achieve the rights of self-government within the British ruling", (Ray, 1999) ¹⁵ which was not at all an easy task to gain from the clutch of the British rulers. Mukunda Das, being a socially and politically conscious man, realized the difficulty of attaining it. Unity among different castes and creeds, classes, groups, regions, ways and opinions was a must for it. He ventilated his study in a number of compositions -

You demand swaraj earnestly Is swaraj an easy matter? In neglect you pluck down that, Licking others' feet chicken-hearted you are...¹⁶

In the very song Mukunda expressed the demand of the age and the people of India. India was trodden by foreign powers for hundreds of years which the poet could not bear. He felt the urge to awaken the insensitive and dormant nation by making an appeal to them to be heroic and devoted to Goddess Kali. He very emphatically urged and invited the people to sacrifice blood for attaining the fruit of freedom –

Mother seeks for sons' blood now-Let's give it mind it brother, Oh the pilgrims of Swaraj; You have to greet freedom fruit cherished Through demise. ¹⁷

Efforts of Mukunda Das Against Rigid Caste System Prevailed in Indian Sub-Continent

Caste classification of different types in India was very dominant and deeply rooted. Besides the discrimination between the rich and the poor, there were contradictions between the opportunist Brahmins (people born in high caste) and the deprived Shudras (people born in low or schedule castes), conflicts among many sects of the same Hindu religion, namely-Shaktism, Shaivism and Vaishnavism.

The domination and exploitation of the people born in the schedule caste by the Brahmins were indescribable though they both were born in the same country, in the same religion and by the same Creator. Discriminations in every sector of the society caused idiosyncratic mentality of inequality and detachment. Sensing its bad effects, Mukunda Das sang of equality of caste and creed in the same country. Forgetting all pettiness of mind, he invited all to stand on one footing to serve the country. He treated Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, Christians, and Persians etc. equally. Rabindra Nath Tagore held the same outlook which he expressed in one of his famous poems named 'Bharat Tirtha'

Come Aryans, come non-Aryans, Hindu Musalman Come today you the English, come the Christian. Come the Brahmin with pure mind hold arms each other...,¹⁸

Emphasis on Cosmopolitanism

His giving importance on cosmopolitanism was very pragmatic and ideal. Be it Makka or Madina, or Vrindavan or Gokul –all bear the same holiness and importance for him. He felt same entity and identity within all. Ways can be different but not devotion. This ideal encouraged him to utter boldly the songs below -

Get ready children Hindu Musalman, Either life will be safe or will be gone... ¹⁹

In his songs communal strife was not at all entertained. Non-communal humanism was evaluated truly both in his songs and everyday life behavior-

Hindu Persian Jain Sai follower Cobbler corpse-burner sweeper butcher-We are all same mother's sons This great mantra we must remember ...²⁰

11.5 as a human being. The poet supposes all things, be it money or education, trash if real practice of life is not exercised. He sang in grief-stricken tone-

There's no man in this land, oh brother, All things are fake and false here, All are in their pleasure...²¹

Participation of Mukunda Das in Different Reformative Movement

Untouchability was a bad habit practiced in the Hindu society since long past. The traditional Hindu community was divided into four castes; namely-the Brahmins related to religious activities, the Khsatrios related to the ruling of the country and people, the Vaishyas related to trade and commerce and the Shudras related to the services of different types for the upper three classes of people. The upper three classes of people treated the Shudras or schedule castes inhuman. They had no right to education or to religion. Freedom of life was absolutely denied to them. This inhuman behavior creates distance between man and man whereas the Holy Geeta proclaimed God has arranged four types of castes according to their profession and quality. (Sri Madhbhagvata Geeta, chapter 4, shloke no. 13, published by Swami Akshyara Nanda, the Ramakrishna Math, Dhaka). ²² But the leading groups of people always acted against the legal interest of the mass people. They kept them illiterate; deprived them of their rights and threw them into a world of darkness. There was a time in the history of India, not long back, when the people belonging to the schedule caste had to tie an earthen pot around their neck for spitting because they were not allowed to spit on the way the upper classes of people walked and so many inhuman, indescribable things like these happened then. The Kulin system in India worsened during the regime of Ballal Sen (reigned-1160-1179) which eroded India into hollowness. An age of darkness prevailed in once-enlightened India. So, in spite of their being the citizens of the same land, there was a breach of relationship.

Upholding The Significance of Education Through His Writings

Importance of education was duly evaluated by Mukunda Das. His ideology about education was not merely confined to getting degrees or certificates. Man is born with a mission and it is education which carries that mission towards culmination. He was in favor of the ancient teaching of India where, among many things,

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ethics was of the greatest importance. Material prosperity can expand the dimension of imperialism but this does not satisfy spiritual appetite and necessity. Man is born to die; so, if he passes away without leaving any trail, it will be a life of a pig that becomes satisfied with food, pleasure and copulation – it is a teaching of the holy treatise- the Bhagavata. Mukunda noticed the teachings that the then institutions were offering were failing to transfigure the mankind. The modern education provided by the British teaches only the materialistic and self-centered knowledge which ushered the road for earning wealth, name and fame. This education loosens the tie between man and man, teaches man to hate and maltreat others. So, he is seen to take shelter of spiritual, utilitarian teaching of ancient India. Flattering the people in power, some became land owners; some managed to run business or farm; some became clerks of office where petty people with little education and gaining economic solvency became dandy. These self-proud persons used to insult and maltreat their illiterate fathers, mothers or poor relatives. Taking wine, speaking improper English instead of Bengali, going to brothel or enjoying the company of the kept in spite of having married wife became a fashion to show them important and civilized –

At dandy's feet obeisance I offer I saw, brother, in mid Koli* in this world There's no judgment of good 'n evil nature. Whose mother's unfed sister's a maid at dandy's house That son goes to harlot's house. Dandy is worthless in learning But say goodnight, good morning mere... ²³

Emphasize on Physical Labor for Developing Cottage Industry by Mukunda Das

Manual labor was always preferred by Mukunda. He put emphasis on the practical measures to be taken for the advancement and development of the country. To be plain clerks is not the motto or solution of the problems the country faced at that time. Mere thinking idly or passing time in depression can never be the solution. His reasoning was that God has endowed us with every potential. He invited the Indians to come forward first for their own survival unhesitatingly. Realizing the necessity of cottage industry, he supported technical education rather general education. The song mentioned below is a nice example of his positive mentality as a social reformer-

You all take up spade Let's drive malaria from the land. Thinking with head nodding won't be good for land All come forward with spirit uplifted ...²⁴

Mukunda Das Was the Supporter of Non-Co-operative Movement led by Mahatma Gandhi

He encouraged salt producing movement, establishing of the charka or spinning wheel movement which Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948) introduced as a means of non-co-operative movement protesting against the British imperialism. Gandhi's ideology was to make the country self-dependent by building up mills and factories in the country as to keep the country's money within. The tone of nationalism is vividly exposed in the following song. Mukunda addressed the wheel as invaluable assets-

Run the looms be ready weavers, Let the foreign weavers see Let them realize we all are in the whole world...²⁵

The same picture is noticed in the song below-

In Bengal what a joyous sound grows. In Bengal in Bengal in Bharat grows. The Indians wake up today would they anything care; They are set to respective work as per desire.

...

Wheel is my father mother wheel friend peer; By wheel food clothes conch shell, we acquire...²⁶

Mukunda felt shocked by those Indians who, being captivated, by the dazzling light of the British culture did not pay heed to his appeal. He sighed but was not hopeless. Man is prone to enjoying pleasure and comfort. It is the duty of the leader to raise people from slumber. Mukunda did that job by singing awakening song of uniting-

We won't go by judging Won't indulge huff 'n anger Nor rich or poor consider. We have known our brethren We are yet native Made Unity our base Won't leave any one...²⁷

Unveiling the Fake and Hypocrite Leaders' Characters Through His Writings

As a dedicated soldier of the land, Mukunda despised leaders who talked tall. He perfectly and nicely delineated the characteristics of the then Indian leaders who didn't have humanity, truthfulness or essential devotion but they must have been recognized leaders. Mukunda very firmly demanded removal of these fake and hypocrite leaders.

With high degrees big guns
They are to be greeted leader.
Humanity is present or not
We are to follow their order.
You will be trampled truth under feet
Through the world expect seat,
That cannot be done in new are
Howsoever you may be older...²⁸

Mukunda saw with his own eyes the hypocrisies and outlined those experiences with words and tune. He defined the unwholesome pitfalls of the society and presented those before the audiences to teach the people in general.

I am religion-loving.
Father runs my family; I am all sacrificing.
I am nothing good in study, utter tall talk;
I call father as 'old fool' mother 'rascal' something,
Broom-stricken by wife I've been stoical feigning. ²⁹

Contribution of Mukunda Das for Stopping Early Marriage and Dowry

For example, early marriage had been a great problem in India since long past and still it is in practice in this subcontinent. Some sociological and cultural sicknesses have been made responsible for the marriage of the girls before reaching puberty or before they could realize the meaning of marriage. Illiteracy, caste classification, poverty and petty mindedness are some of them. This malpractice became epidemic gradually. Uncountable numbers of girls were to lay down their lives owing to this. They had no rights in the world as the men enjoyed. Marriage then became a nice means of income for grooms as girls were considered liable. To maintain the caste classification or for poverty a tender aged bride was married to a decrepit old aged groom who could not survive long after marriage. So this girl had to remain widowed, before knowing its meaning, for the rest of her life wearing white sari and short hair. Mukunda has drawn a melancholic picture of this malpractice in a song to draw the attention of the leaders of the society as well as to abolish the system-

Amid Bharat cremation ground/ I am widow teenager.

God has sent me, / Making a poison- figure.

My parents out of cruelty, / Handing me on others' duty,

Tearing off lotus- tender, / Made wreath with thorn wire.

Know not I how is he as husband, / I can't remember his appearance,

Yet as a young girl, / I can't get meals regular.

I know not what marriage is, / Only I can reminisce,

Unwillingly in childhood, / This game of pathos I share.

I tasted not care;

Cherished no delight, no desire, / Whom I'll tell this disaster,

Of this heart burn who'll be aware? 30

Dowry system, another heinous practice, paralyzed the social life of India. It was not a malpractice in the beginning of its history. As both male and female child had the inheritance right on the father's property, so during daughter's marriage, a father gave her portion of property as dowry. It was called 'Stree Dhon' (or property of the wife) according to the Code of Manu which includes any kind of ornament, wealth or utensils and it was not then used in negative sense. Besides this, it was a matter of dignity for the bride's parent to give presentation during her arrival at in law's family. It had a positive outlook too because it gave the bride self-dependence. But afterwards it became a source of income and means of exploitation for the groom's part. Innumerable lives have been lost; lots of lives have been damaged, destroyed and crippled. Many girls had to remain unmarried owing to this system. Killing and committing suicide were not infrequent. Whenever greed grew, the white system became dark. Mukunda in some of his songs presented the matter-

Leave my matrimony,
I want not M. A.B. A. any,
Who is to buy with money
Like cows and goats
At groom's market appearing
...
Then kulin, porter is better
Cobbler corpse-burner and butcher... 31

He Gave Importance on Female Education

The Charan poet gave importance on female education. But he satirized women with baseless, immoral modern education. Before the arrival of the British, women were not allowed to education institutionally. When the British regal power settled here, some humanitarian persons like Mr. Hare (1775-1842) were found devoted to teach the girls. Whatever might be the cause the movement was undoubtedly a positive one. They had a look to awaken the neglected and tortured group. In many fields they were successful but, in the society, there were some women who could not assimilate the motto of teaching. They were seen to indulge in anti-Indian female culture like going to the parties or enjoying so-called taboos etc. Education is supposed to teach prudence, tolerance and obedience but in their case, it did the opposite...

Country's fortune is departed. Woman is idol of worship, Husband is with hands folded, Country's fortune is departed... ³²

In Favor of Conservation of Ancient Indian Customs and Values

Mukunda talked in favor of the ancient Indian values. He reacted when he saw the anomalies in the society. He very boldly and openly satirized these women. He realized that the loss of character can never be an object of praise. For the time being it can be tasted delicious but at long last it brings only sufferings. Let us look at the following songs replete with hard criticism on women-

We've entered elation- hall abandoned cooking vocation. So cooking is kicked off, now Brahmins do the profession. So long we are asleep wearing veil forever, By mother and sister in laws we are abused forever, Now uncovering 'mid gathering we are going with new If mother and sister in laws are thorns on the way... ³³

In the Indian culture woman is the representative of Goddess Laxmi. The Goddess always prefers calm and virtuous women. The following song outlines lascivious-typed women who are characterless-

Move from place to place, They only quarrel, none to be afraid... ³⁴

In comparison to these vile women, Mukunda Das showed us we had many notable ancient Indian ladies namely - Gargee or Moitree or Leela who were highly esteemed in the royal court as well as in the society for their wisdom as to make us know and realize the magnanimity of ancient India and her state policy.

He Keeps Importance on Brotherly Attitudes, Unity, Strong Family and Social Bonding

Self-centeredness is a tragic history for the Indians. The onslaughts one after another occurred in India because of this characteristic. Everybody is busy with himself. May be different religious views, amalgamation of blood from different nations and countries, different geographical and climatic sites are liable for it. Brotherly attitude is sometimes out of the scene. Whereas the ancient epics- the Ramayana and the Mahabharata and other noble literary pieces prove the exercise of unity and strong family or social

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bond. Great treatises like these teach fraternity, solidarity, self-sacrifice and many sublime practices of life. But it is unfortunate to say those teachings and ideals are lost. The Indians have become confined in themselves. Self-confinement can produce nothing better and nobler. What is one's must be delivered to other's-it should be the motto of life. Here lies the fulfillment and satisfaction of life. When man was gregarine, there was also co-existence of mankind. But with the advancement of so-called civilization, spirit of centeredness grows and it continues on. Because of caste classification, the largest group of people namely the Sudras were bereft of every kind of light of teaching, knowledge and opportunity. The Brahmins and the pundits cooped up themselves in a certain circle. They did not preach the great teachings of the great saints of India among the mass people. Mukunda Das felt shocked as the people of 'large-hearted Bharat' are practicing petty mindedness abandoning liberality.

Who is absorbed in himself
Can't know own's man.
...
Leaving own self who's gone out,
Submitted soul at the world's foot... 35

Mukunda felt shocked by those Indians who, being captivated, by the dazzling light of the British culture did not pay heed to his appeal. He sighed but was not hopeless. Man is prone to enjoying pleasure and comfort. It is the duty of the leader to raise people from slumber. Mukunda did that job by singing awakening song of uniting-

We won't go by judging Won't indulge huff 'n anger Nor rich or poor consider. We have known our brethren We are yet native Made Unity our base Won't leave any one...³⁶

Concluding Remarks

From the above discussion it is clear that Mukunda Das very truly appeared in the role of a social reformer in the British ruled India. The hapless condition of once-torch-bearing India made him conscious, rebellious and devoted and the inspiration of Ashwini Kumar Dutt helped him emerge as a patriotic bard. It was Mukunda's effort to raise the plunged country from humiliation and restore its people well- organized and help them lead an ideal life. His awakening songs and dramatic performances inspired the subjugated people of India. He used music as his only weapon to arouse the people. His political prudence, social and religious outlook-all is expressed through his songs. Instead of indulging physical love between man and woman, he chose love for the soil and its human beings in general. In the history of India, the name of Mukunda Das as a social reformer will be always remembered with respect and gratitude.

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 - 30. Ibid. Song no.104, p.294(translated by the author).
 - 31. Ibid. Song no.92, p.281 (translated by the author).
 - 32. Ibid. Song no.47, p.267-68 (translated by the author).
 - 33. Ibid. Song no.76, p.269-70 (translated by the author).
 - 34. Ibid. Song no.74, p.267-68 (translated by the author).
 - 35. Ibid. Song no.77, p.270(translated by the author).
 - 36. Ibid. Song no.61, p.258(translated by the author).

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