

Draupadi's Resistance in Saoli Mitra's *Nathabati Anathabat*

Suryakant Yadav

Research Scholar

Department of English and Modern European Languages

University of Lucknow, Lucknow

Abstract:

This paper deals with the character of Draupadi depicted in the modern retellings of The Mahabharata. Draupadi, like the great Indian epics, is a pan-Indian phenomenon that has been portrayed in a number of Indian texts, be it poem, prose or drama. There have been many women who have come out as powerful characters in Hindu mythology and women writers such as Saoli Mitra bring out the discourse of such personalities. The status of woman in myth making is very significant, and Draupadi stands as the embodiment of woman empowerment as she elevates herself above the male dominated social order. Saoli Mitra represents Draupadi as the image of retaliation and exemplifies her agonies, her subjugation and ultimately her liberation from the clutches of patriarchy.

Keywords: myth; retaliation; upliftment; stereotypes; power; protest.

The Mahabharata is a veritable treasure house of Indian philosophy, religion and culture and has rightly been considered the 'fifth veda'. A graphic tale of men and women, some with divine attributes, dwelling on all conceivable situations in life, this epic is a whole literature in itself, ageless and everlasting. Irawati Karve writes that the scope of *The Mahabharata* "is wide ranging in time, in space and in its cast of characters. Heroes and cowards, villains and good men, impulsive fools and wise men, ugly men and fair ones are all depicted in the course of its narrative. Almost no person is portrayed as all good or all bad." (Karve 80)

The Mahabharata and *Ramayana* are the two great epics of India. Since two millennia, these epics have been the main instruments and sources shaping the Indian psyche and society. S.L. Bhyrappa opines, "*The Mahabharat* is like the Himalayas and that every artist views it from his own point of view and portrays it in his own way". This epic, in Indian psyche, constitutes the most infallible source of 'dharma'. The term 'Dharma' is to be

interpreted in the larger context of a ‘code’ of conduct. Many women writers, such as Pratibha Ray, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Saoli Mitra and others, have proved their mettle in Indian literature by revising and reinterpreting the old myth according to their own understanding, pointing out the injustices carried out on women.

Women form an integral section of any society they become a part of. Society has its own stereotypes and biases against women in all quarters of life and these biases can be easily discerned in *The Mahabharata*. A constant struggle of these muted beings of the society, identity crisis and establishment of self-respect strongly echoes throughout the epic. Since the ancient times women have been disallowed to enter the male strata of society and they have been confined to the spaces allotted to them by the males in their male-dominated social structure. In the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, the first Indian treatise on dramaturgy, Bharatamuni has portrayed women in enclosed spaces whereas men performed in the theatre. The men performed even the role of women characters while the women did the household chores within their confined spaces. In chapter twenty of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, Bharata talks about the women’s dance form ‘lasya’. There were twelve variations of ‘lasya’, all of which were performed solely by women. According to the British feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey during the ancient times there was a constant reproduction of the ‘male gaze’ which viewed women as objects of the male desire. It may be considered that ‘lasya’ was such a form of dance tailored for the androcentric world.

In the ancient Sanskrit theatre, the doors for women were not totally shut. Through Kautilya’s *Ganikadhyaksha Prakarana* the concept of ‘streepreksha’ comes to light. Women were allotted their own small space where they could perform but a prior permission had to be sought from the head of their families to perform in the ‘streepreksha’. If a woman wanted to watch the performance of the women in the ‘streepreksha’, then too permission was required. Through these restrictions put on the females we become aware of the society’s codes of morality practised by the males to keep a check on the women and the portrayal of a woman’s ideal role as wife.

Saoli Mitra has been an eminent figure in contemporary Bengali theatre. She was keenly interested in theatre since her childhood due to her parents Sombhu Mitra and Tripti Mitra, who were theatre personalities themselves. Mitra is also the founder of a Bengali theatre group Pancham Vaidic for which she has written two plays: *Nathabati Anathbat* (1983) and *Katha Amritsaman* (1990). In plays like *Pagla Ghora*, *Dakghar*, *Daschakro*, *Chera Taar* and others, she has performed as an actor. She is also when known for her role in Ritwik Ghatak’s Bengali movie *Jukti Takko Aar Gappo*.

Nathabati Anathbat gives us a feminist interpretation of the grand epic *The Mahabharata*. This play was translated from Bengali into English by Rita Datta in the year 2005 as *Five Lords, Yet None a Protector*. Mitra narrates the life and struggles of the common wife of the Pandava brothers, Draupadi. The title of the play *Nathabati Anathbat* “means that despite having a husband, a woman remains as if without one” (Banerjee 102)

i.e. although Draupadi is the wife of five powerful husbands yet she is left to feel that she doesn't have any husband. Saoli Mitra justifies the title by narrating the incidents from the great epic wherein Draupadi's vulnerability has been exposed. Despite having five husbands, and that too the most powerful men, she becomes the victim of inhumanity. Mitra says,

It is quite surprising how I came to write plays. I never intended to write any. I was basically a performer and wanted to depend totally on the director. But, unfortunately, when I grew up and started acting seriously, the productions that were being done did not satisfy me. So, I left theatre. But the thought of doing something meaningful did not leave me. (Banerjee 102)

When Saoli decided to pave her own way as a playwright, she came across Irawati Karve's *Yuganta: The End of an Epoch* (1967). Through this book, Mitra developed the idea of writing a play on *The Mahabharata* but from a feminist point of view. She writes,

Draupadi, the beautiful queen in the *Mahabharata*, had to get married to five Pandava brothers simultaneously. The immense sufferings she had to go through her life, the courage with which she faced them, and the dignity she maintained till the end moved me. My first play, *Nathabati Anathbat*, depicts the story of this beautiful queen. You may call it a reappraisal of the epic. (Banerjee 102)

She was quite influenced by Karve's feminist reading of Draupadi and in her play she unveils the patriarchal ideology that led to the formation of the myth of *The Mahabharata*. Draupadi is the victim of male sexual desire and she is always exposed to the male-gaze. Saoli deconstructs and reconstructs the neglected women characters, the sufferers in the male-dominated society. *Nathabati Anathbat* becomes the portrayal of the hidden and suppressed emotions and desires of Draupadi. The narrative technique Mitra uses to unfold the story of Draupadi is known as the 'kathakata'.

Kathakata tradition is a popular Indian folk form, which is based on 'katha', that is words. The main reason for Saoli to use the kathakata technique to narrate the story of Draupadi was the ability of the narrator or the 'kathakthakurun' to switch roles. The narrator can turn into a character itself to tell his/her own story, the kathakthakurun can also become a critic and look at a sequence with critical eyes. In this manner, the narrator could reach out to a wider audience and the kathakthakurun could easily go to the core of the story directly without depending on characters to unfold situations. This technique gave a free-flowing characteristic to the narration. There is live music, dancing, and the actor, who is also the narrator, acts out multiple roles. In *Nathabati Anathbat*, Saoli Mitra is the 'sutradhaar' or the narrator or the kathakthakurun.

The play opens with the chorus singing while the kathakthakurun sit beside them singing and contemplating. The chorus sings about the heart's yearning desire of Draupadi and at the same time Saoli Mitra, being the narrator and the actor too, gives matching expressions to the sorrowful melody.

Kathak: Namaskar

[Immediately, it occurs to her that the greeting was not respectful enough. She bites her tongue in coy embarrassment, loops her ‘anchal’ to the loose end of the sari, round the back her neck, bows low and says]

I bow before you, Good Sirs! But what story shall I tell? I can’t seem to find any! I mean, well, there is so much to say, so many stories. But which one to choose? And how to say it? And pondering on this it suddenly struck me that...

The words of the Mahabharata

Are ineffable, like ‘amrit’

In every age there unfold

New meanings from the old. (Mitra 5-6)

The chorus gives the audience/readers a taste of what is going to take place. Saoli makes excellent use of the narrative technique, going forward and backward in her narration, she simultaneously comments on the events of happening in the life of Draupadi as well. In the beginning of the first act, Saoli narrates the story of Draupadi’s birth, beauty and marriage. She describes the daughter of Drupada as “A queen– yet not a queen. An empress– yet not an empress. Mistress of a kingdom, yet a queen without a kingdom. This tale of a helpless woman, who had everything yet nothing.” (Mitra 6). This description of Draupadi by Mitra tells us about the great mythological character of Panchali and also a woman as the prototype of the suffering women in the Vedic ages and also in the contemporary era.

The physical beauty of Draupadi is such that in her ‘Svayamvara’ kings and princes from faraway lands come to compete for Draupadi’s hand in marriage.

Kathak: [The kathak now sits facing the audience, in the middle of the stage]

Certainly, those who had come as suitors, even those who had come as mere spectators stare at her in wonder. Born out of fire, after all, the maiden’s beauty is as dazzling as a flame. And she now stands in the middle of the assembly. Meanwhile, Dhrishtadyumna calls out to those assembled and says, ‘Come, honourable gentlemen, whichever high born person can string the enormous bow and hit the target with five arrows through the aperture in apparatus above... (Mitra 14)

The young and the old desire her and it is evident in the fact that many princes and their fathers participated in the svayamvara. Draupadi has been described having a slender waist who emits the sweet fragrance of the blue lotus which easily entrances men. The svayamvara is held by the king of Panchala and Draupadi’s father Drupada which is designed in a such a way that only men possessing superior skill in archery could win Panchali’s hand. The

svayamvara was designed that Arjuna, the third of the Pandava brothers, or someone of Arjuna's calibre could win the 'svayamvara'.

Saoli Mitra in one of her interviews taken by Professor Anita Singh on 15 May 2011 talked about this retelling of the Draupadi's tragic tale of suffering and sacrifices, she further talked about her as the most misinterpreted heroines of Indian Epics. Interview as follows,

A.S.: Your play *Five Lords, Yet None a Protector* poignantly paints the life of Draupadi viewed from a woman's lens. Why this fascination with Draupadi? In our society Sita is considered the icon of morality and she is very often revisited in contemporary works. Portraying Draupadi has been problematic; somebody rightly pointed out no one names their child Draupadi, so what provoked you to take up Draupadi's case?

S.M.: Hm! That is true! But the writer is a woman. So could it be helped?

Your view about Sita is all too simplified. In my opinion Sita has a journey, a journey of her own. Naturally the journey is much more complex than the definition as "the icon of morality"!

Draupadi is a person who suffers most of the time for no fault of hers. The patriarchal society, it seems, becomes more dominant. She is abused both verbally and sexually. Moreover, she silently bears the humiliation of passing her life with five men! Though, the epic states, she loves Arjun most. It is a decision of other people she carries out and that too with dignity. (Singh 602.)

Neither is Draupadi an ordinary woman nor is her life an ordinary life. She is born from the sacrificial fire and born as a young, virgin girl. In Drupada we do not see the fatherly affection for his children but he cherishes the fact that now he can carry out actions to take revenge against his old friend and now foe, Dronacharya. Thus, he organises the Svayamvara in order to incite Arjuna to win the hand of Draupadi and later help him in taking his revenge. Here Draupadi can be seen as an object that Drupada uses to gain his ends. Saoli Mitra narrates what might have gone on in Drupada's mind after the birth of the twins Dhristhadyumna and Draupadi:

So, King Drupada gazes at his beautiful daughter and wonders about her marriage. And, rightaway, Dear Sirs, he thinks of the third Pandava son, Arjuna. Can you think of a worthier Kshatriya, one more valiant and more handsome? Yes, Sirs, this thought was very much in Drupada's mind from the beginning. [...] So, King Drupada thinks, all right, let us arrange for a 'Swayambar Sabha', an assembly of suitors. He who succeeds will be chosen by the bride, and there, let the suitor-kings face a most difficult test. If Arjuna were anywhere about and heard this announcement, he would be sure to turn up and be caught. And if Arjuna did not come, his daughter would still wed a true and tested warrior. (Mitra 7)

The capital motive behind the svayamvara ceremony is not Draupadi's well-being but the fulfilment of Drupada's revenge. A man who could complete the task of hitting the target in the appropriate manner could also become a major help to Drupada because of his prowess with the bow and arrow.

The kathakata style, being a folk tradition, gives the story a non-mythical characteristic. The story becomes more palpable and acceptable. The kathakthakurun can avail the spatial availability and make the story even more comprehensive. Saoli narrates the story in her own pace allowing the audience to comprehend and connect with every incident and every action. She makes it clear to the audience that the marriage of Draupadi was an alliance between Drupada and the Pandavas. When the French anthropologist Claude Levi Strauss was doing his research on the origin of arbitrary social categories, he opined that the reciprocal bond in marriage is not set up between the spouses, the men and women, but between men and men with the woman being the means. *The Mahabharata*, especially in the case of Draupadi, becomes a fine example of Levi Strauss's theory, which came to be known as the alliance theory.

In one of her popular essays titled "Sorties" (1975), Helene Cixous describes the process by which male reason is ordered into a series of binary oppositions in which one half of the binary is always superior to the other half, like male/female, culture/nature, life/death, truth/lie, dharma/adharma and so on. According to this equation, women always become the inferior half of the binary. In *Nathabati Anathbat*, Saoli has not been hesitant in pointing out the forced superiority of the males over the females. In the same essay she points out the futile existence of Sleeping Beauty which is a metaphor of femininity itself. Draupadi's life is similar where she does not live for herself but she is born to serve her father and then given to the Pandavas to serve them.

Draupadi was the victim of male and motif of revenge, an easy prey in the patriarchal setup. In the game of dice, Yudhishtira loses everything to the Kauravas. They are stripped off their upper-garments which symbolizes the stripping of all the glory and grandeur. But in Draupadi's case the stripping off her single cloth is just to expose her body, which is plain and simple humiliation of the female to show her where she belongs in the patriarchal society, no matter how high her status. But Draupadi's nature doesn't allow her to bow down in front of the male oppressors. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni opines the views of Draupadi after her husbands have lost themselves to the Kauravas in the game of dice:

"I am a queen. Daughter of Drupad, sister of Dhristadyumna. Mistress of the greatest palace on earth. I can't be gambled away like a bag of coins, or summoned to court like a dancing girl. [...] If perchance a man lost himself, he no longer had any jurisdiction over his wife." (Divakaruni 190)

Draupadi is a well read, a learned woman who knows her shastras. She remembers that the *Nyaya Shastra* states that a husband loses his rights over the wife when he loses himself to

slavery. But nobody, not even Bhishma, listens to her query except for Vikarna, younger brother of Duryodhana. But Vikarna's voice is suppressed by Karna. A famous Sanskrit sloka signifies the status of women in the era, "Yatra naryastupujyante, ramantetatradevta" meaning, "The place where women are worshipped, god themselves inhabit that place". However, this was not true with the character of the Draupadi, she was reduced to an object both by the Pandavas and Kauravas. Anyone who is born and brought up in Indian land will surely notice the subordinate position of women which has been the same since time immemorial. Not only in the ancient myths but also in 21st century, most of the women in the country, struggle for living. 'Draupadi' as being won by Arjuna in a grand competition she was brought to the family and she was forced to accept four other brothers of Arjuna as her husbands. Nobody was there to take her opinion not even Kunti. She had a great love for Arjuna but in return, she received nothing from him either. Yudhishtira, the eldest brother of the Pandavas, used her as a piece of property or say she was only an object of play in the dice game in which he was defeated.

Draupadi occupies the central position in the epic, an embodiment of suffering and sacrifice who has set standards of comparison for the contemporary women. The mythical stereotypes are so deeply engrossed in the Indian subconscious that they do not only serve as definitions, but the meaning of existence, especially in case of women. The Indian epics, especially *Mahabharata*, contains in itself, multiple possibilities for re-creation and re-interpretation due to its varied levels of narrations, different narrators and various digressions which include stories, fables, philosophical treatises etcetera. Saoli Mitra in *Nathabati Anathbat* chooses to narrate the story of Draupadi with a deviation from the epic *The Mahabharata*. Mitra follows the framework of the story very closely but she ignores the divine interventions included in the original text.

Saoli Mitra's stunning individual performance focuses on the stripping of Draupadi's chastity, honour and pride. She was passively forced to accept five men as husbands at the same time. Not only did her husbands betrayed her at several junctions in her life but she was also pawned and humiliated in an assembly full of men with demonic instincts. Sharad Patil, a sociologist, observed that the practice of polyandry took two forms: maternal polyandry and fraternal polyandry. Maternal polyandry referred to that when a wife could have multiple husbands who did not share any kinship. Whereas, in a fraternal polyandry, the one in which Draupadi is trapped, when a woman is married to several brothers. The latter marks an important step towards patriarchy. Saoli Mitra's Draupadi repeatedly focused on her incessant and innumerable trials to progress towards and finally achieve 'stree-dharma'.

Nathabati Anathbat was unique in its presentation; this piece of art was very close to Irawati Karve's *Yuganta: The End of an Epoch*. The earlier play was centred to the tragedy of Draupadi as an epic heroine and can be seen as gender issue. This performance deals with a much wider theme, the question of human values in general, with the tragedy of war, the ultimate meaninglessness of greed and egotism in the context of morality. Saoli Mitra wrote

it originally in Bengali language and that was much lyrical, but much of its lyrical beauty is lost in the translation. Writing the original play, directing it and performing in it, not all three major talents usually combined in one individual. The stories of the great epics have inspired, moved and enlightened people for ages. According to the Western philosopher Joseph Campbell, “Myths are stories of our search through the ages for truth, for meaning, for significance. The story of human suffering, striving, living- and youth coming to knowledge of itself, what it has to go through.” (Campbell 168)

Draupadi, the obedient, submissive wife of Pandavas, the symbol of male sexual desire and fantasy, viewed as an ‘Object’ in this man’s world. Draupadi becomes not only the great mythological character, but also a prototype of the suffering women of day-to-day life. Mitra’s play is an attempt to interpret Draupadi in new light; as Nabaneeta Dev Sen remarks, she has seen Draupadi from ‘a pair of woman’s eyes’. Draupadi’s ‘Svayamvara Sabha’, the place where a virgin girl chooses her own husband among her competing suitors. Arjuna in the ‘Svayamvara Sabha’ won Draupadi. This episode of *Mahabharata* also depicts the politics of caste, depicted through the character of Karna– who was rejected to take part in the ‘Svayamvara’ just because the virtue of his low birth. The marriage was a political alliance between the King Drupada and Pandavas. According to Badrinath Chaturvedi, ‘Draupadi’s ‘svayamvara’ was not a contest for gaining her but a contest for a kingdom, a ‘mahotsava’ for a future great war’. Women are as fragile and lacking in the qualities that are considered beneficial to the effective leaders. Traditional masculine traits have higher perceived value than the feminine traits in the world then and today. The anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss, discussing the marital relationship as the basis of society opines: ‘The reciprocal bond basic to marriage is not set up between men and women, who are only the principal occasion for it’.

Draupadi was the victim of male lust and a motif of revenge, easy prey in the patriarchal society. According to the Kate Millett,

Patriarchal force also relies on a form of violence particularly sexual in character...[which] has been viewed as an offence one male commits upon another- a matter of abusing ‘his woman’... [It] is carried out for masculine satisfaction, the exhilaration of race hatred, and the interests of property and vanity (honor). (Millett 44)

One often relates *The Mahabharata* with Draupadi and making her responsible for the great war of Kurukshetra. With Draupadi the ‘disrobing scene’ becomes important where the patriarchy is put to a question, the King who was not only blind but also becomes dumb and deaf. The character of Dhritrastra becomes the symbol of blindness and of powerlessness too. Draupadi is a pan-Indian phenomenon and a universal character and has been dramatized- especially the ‘Disrobing Scene’- in the folk- theatre of almost all Indian languages. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s novel *The Palace of Illusion* (2008) and Mahasweta Devi’s short fiction “Draupadi” translated into English by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1997) are two

notable examples of remythified works powerfully depicting the different facades of this phenomenal mythic character. The formal is the re-narration, from Draupadi's point of view and later is the story of a tribal girl, who raises her status from a voiceless creature to a voiced being.

There are variations in the different versions of The Mahabharata regarding the disrobing and Krishna's involvement in it. Saoli Mitra's Draupadi is not a submissive woman as one finds in the other versions of Draupadi's story. She is outspoken, not afraid of chastising her husbands, capable of saying whatever she has on her mind. She confronted Yudhishtira, asking the cause of her misery, 'why am I in this state? Why have I to endure this misery?' not only to her husband's but also those who were there in the sabha.

Kathak- Draupadi: No! Duhshasan, no! Don't take me to sabha.

I'm a woman. I belong inside the home. Don't take me to the sabha. [Duhshasana seems to grab hold of her hair and yank at it. This is revealed in the Kathak's expression and movement. She says, wincing in pain and humiliation.] Oooh! Let go of my hair, Duhshasana, let go! Please don't take me to the sabha, I beg of you, have mercy on me! [Duhshasana pays no heed to her pleas and so, utterly helpless, she cries out.] I'm menstruating. I'm wearing only one piece of cloth. Don't take me before the court in this condition. I beg of you! Have mercy on me! Please, Please...! (Mitra 35)

Irawati Karve sees Draupadi "as a woman who suffers, endures, rebels and asserts herself a 'true daughter of the earth' unlike the Sita of *Ramayana*". Mitra presents Draupadi using her as a voice and her story as a 'means to indicate oppression, war and the structures of male power'.

Kathak-Draupadi: Bhisma, Vidur, Dhritarastra, Drona- have they no feelings? I'm a daughter-in-law of Kuru clan. I've been dragged into this assembly before everyone, and nobody condemns it! [With a stricken cry, she says] Say something, somebody! [Again the male guffaws] (Mitra 35)

A woman in danger tries desperately to escape in such situation, but she cannot. Kauravas, they laughed and laughed, on the situation of Draupadi and on Pandavas too. In the Kathakata performance Mitra mimes, the episode of Draupadi's attempted disrobing. Draupadi shows her retaliation and screams aloud in the centre stage of the arena/ court. Deviating from the age-old story of this particular scene where Krishna comes to save Draupadi from this disrobing, Mitra's Draupadi is self-sufficient, not a powerless or voice less being of the female race; she herself gains the consciousness and questions each one of them about her status. Mitra transforms her from an 'object' to a 'subject'. And the kathak addresses the audience:

Kathak: Remember, what I said right at the beginning? That I'd tell you about a woman who had everything, yet actually nothing. For thirteen years she found herself because of Kauravs. (Mitra 39)

Draupadi finds an unusual treatment in Mitra's narration of her story in kathakata performance. She even questions to the Pandavas about the righteous path he has vowed to take, "You speak of Dharma and the Scriptures. Why then did you play the game of dice? You know what the Shastras say? The Sastras say that gambling is a vice. Yet u played the game of dice." Mitra tries to make Draupadi a complete woman, not a mythical one but a real one, who is caught in the web of relationships- an obedient daughter, a dutiful wife and an affectionate mother.

'Draupadi' of Saoli Mitra in *Nathabati Anathbat* always longs to establish 'dharma-rajya', the reign of righteousness through the war, a 'dharmayuddha'-let there be a war for justice to reinstate morality. Mitra's Draupadi had wanted a kingdom where women will be respected; no women should experience what she had gone through. The Kathak performer shows another aspect of her personality, when Krishna advocates peace she challenges him saying,

Kathak- If I forget the humiliation inflicted on me, dear friend, will it usher a Dharmarajya, the rule of Virtue, into this world? Can you promise that in the future no women will ever be persecuted and demeaned like I was? Will my forgiveness usher in that heavenly state? Tell me, Krishna [with an agonized cry] tell me! (Mitra 60)

According to Saoli Mitra, "Draupadi's suffering is the suffering of flesh and blood and Draupadi has endured the agony and suffering of entire era; she has encompassed the agony of whole era in her persona".

Kathak: [Weeping] If you would promise me this, Krishna, I would forget everything...everything... (Mitra 60)

...[Chokes with tears, can't speak, but recovers quickly and says]

Draupadi found every empty, everything meaningless. She felt her life was worthless. Vyasdev has described her as *Nathabati Anathabat*, with lords but none a protector, Good Sirs.

[sings]

Married to valiant lords,

Yet none a protector,

Such is the fate of

Drupad's darling daughter;

Unbelievable pain and bitterness...

[The girls of the Chorus join in on a higher key]

Married to valiant lords, yet none a protector,

Such is the fate of

Drupad's darling daughter.

Unbearable pain and bitterness

Are all that life brought her.

Married to valiant lords, yet none a protector. (Mitra 62-63)

The Mahabharata's re-tellings are at once a re-creation and re-interpretation of the epic from a realistic perspective. It is a general trend exhibited by the writers, to adopt a realistic form in terms of human experience and its possibilities and 'Draupadi' has become the flaming symbol of protest invoked by feminists and other social activists of the day.

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