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A R T I C L E S

Contentious Politics, State Repression and Civil Dissidence: The Discourse of Resistance in Utpal Dutt's *Nightmare City*

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Abstract: In the Post-Independence era, the prolific playwrights of India started using the aesthetic form of theater to contest authoritarian structures, and to voice their anti-establishment dissent. Utpal Dutt, a pioneering figure in Modern Indian Theater, used the medium of drama for propaganda and political conscientization of the oppressed. The indefatigable thespian contributed significantly towards the formation of modern Bengali theater, as his plays voiced his intransigent protest against the authoritarian government and concurrently, showed his impressive experimentation with different dramatic techniques, theatrical devices and theatrical genres. Dutt's anti-establishment play, *Nightmare City* presents a fastidious account of the turbulent years of late-1960s and early-1970s Bengal gripped by Naxalite violence and police brutality. Set against the backdrop of Naxalite insurgency, the play savagely exposes the ideological hypocrisy of the autocratic government leaders of the time and their violent hooliganism. However, the playwright, in sync with his earlier plays, has not only portrayed the tumultuous socio-political ambiance of the 70s Calcutta, but has also constructed a soul-shattering voice of resistance to the political oppressions perpetuated by the state apparatuses. The objective of this paper is to study the revolutionary propaganda of Dutt and redefine his concept of "political theater" with special reference to his intricately structured political satire, *Nightmare City*.

Keywords: political satire, violence, activism, political theater, repression

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... theatre is the child of changing, restless, crisis-ridden and violent times.

—Himani Banerjee

It is the conventional dictum that theater is often born amidst chaotic political conditions and

seasons of discontent. In times of turmoil, theater becomes a powerful medium for expressing dissent against capitalist exploitation, social injustice, authoritarianism, and other forms of oppression perpetrated by those in power. In India, the rise of Communism and Marxism prepared the stage for a socio-political revolution through theater. In the 1930s, a new political theater movement emerged that became a significant means of political emancipation and liberation from social oppression for the marginalized populace of the country. These theatrical movements aimed at raising awareness among the oblivious Indian masses about their current political and social situation and also to provoke them to raise their voices against social and political injustices perpetrated by the autocratic government. IPTA (Indian People's Theatre Association) was formed in 1943 with the object of fostering socio-cultural awareness among the masses through cultural activities. The prominent members of this cultural organization proclaimed their vision and objective in the following manner:

Those who grouped together in our movement were inspired by a deep and abiding faith that our ancient culture cannot be allowed to die, that it must be used to serve and save our people; that art can and should flourish not as a weapon of luxury but as a means of portraying life and reality of our people, of reviving their faith in themselves and in their past, and of rousing them to the will to live and the will to be free. (Joshi and Abbas 237)

Furthermore, they held the belief that literature serves as the only means of attaining liberation from cultural, political, and economic imperialism. They placed great emphasis on the notion that literature can thrive only when it authentically portrays the struggles faced by individuals.

In recent years, the depth and sweep of the titanic events of contemporary history, grim brutality of the Fascist attacks on culture and freedom [...] art and literature can have a future only if they become the authentic expressions and inspirations of the peoples' struggles for freedom and culture. (Joshi and Abbas 241)

The trailblazing theater activists of this movement held the belief that theater is more than just a majestic form of artistic expression intended to amuse spectators, rather it is a powerful instrument for liberation and social transformation. These theater practitioners harnessed the power of stage performance to sensitize, radicalize, and conscientize the oblivious masses, paving the path for a collective awakening and empowering them to challenge oppressive norms and envision a more just and equitable society. These trailblazers primarily comprised of Marxist intellectuals, who strived to instill a spirit of rebellion in the hearts and minds of individuals through their art. Through their soul-shattering plays, they aimed to incite people to rise up in revolt against oppression. In the aftermath of Indian Independence, the socio-political mayhem prevailing in the country, inspired the theater-enthusiasts to pen provocative anti-establishment plays to criticize and challenge oppressive systems. Some of the most prominent torch-bearers of this movement

were Utpal Dutt, Badal Sircar, Ajitesh Bandyopadhyay, and Sombhu Mitra. These theater activists paved the way for the rise of the indigenous resistance theater of the proletariat through their politically-charged works. They were high-class intellectuals, who were largely exposed to world literature, culture, art, and politics. Besides that, the rising power of the Communist Party in Bengal opened the doors to Russian and European art, culture, and theater. Their overwhelming influence on the Bengali writers transformed the literary canon of Bengal. Being profoundly influenced by Erwin Piscator and Bertolt Brecht, Utpal Dutt, the prolific, versatile, and one of the most acclaimed writer, director, and actor of his era, started infusing their stylistics into his plays. Thus Bengali epic theater started breathing through Dutt's art. Being a radical and avowed Communist, Dutt, revolutionized the Bengali stage with his off-center thoughts which acted as a catalyst in bringing an epoch-making change in the realm of Indian theater. His revolutionary and radical thoughts were expressed in Brechtian style. Being one of the most prominent dramatists and pioneers of the "Revolutionary Theater," Dutt produced many radical anti-establishment plays to ignite the spirit of revolt in the minds of common people of the country. He blatantly exposed the wrongdoings, corruption, duplicity, and the ideological hypocrisies of the Government in his radical plays. Set against the backdrop of the Indian Naval Mutiny of 1946, Dutt's play *Kalol* voices his intransigent protest against the authoritarian government. The play *Teer* portrays the heroism of some tribal peasants who rose in revolt against the tyranny of Government. In an interview in 1970, Dutt stated:

In 1967, the peasants of Naxalbari in northern Bengal suddenly burst into armed revolt and guerrilla warfare of the most advanced kind, panicking the ruling classes. Plays and songs came forth almost spontaneously. *Rakter Rang* [*The Color of Blood*] by Anal Gupta and my play *Teer* [*Arrow*] tried to recount the daring and heroism of the peasant-guerrilla and expose the brutalities of the soldiers and policemen sent in droves to the area. But there was a hue and cry among "Marxists" and "Communists" that the leaders of the Naxalbari uprising were adventurists and therefore all references to it were taboo. We disagreed. We held that the heroism of armed peasants was important material for revolutionary theatre. (Gunawardana and Dutt 226).

This yearning for revolution reverberated in all of Dutt's plays. Dutt penned inspiring political satires with the purpose of forming a public opinion in favor of the rising Communist party. Dutt did not write plays to entertain the common masses, rather to inspire them, to motivate them, and to persuade them to rise in revolt against the oppressive forces in play. He wanted to bring revolution into society. That is why all Dutt's plays are politically charged and brimming with his revolutionary zeal. For Dutt, theater was a weapon which can be used to raise political awareness among people, to make them aware of the oppression, injustice, and exploitation they have been subject to, and to motivate them to rise in protest against the domination of a tyrannical government. As Hiren Bhattacharya observed:

Dutt was a playwright completely devoted to his political purpose. The subjects of his plays were varied, but his political point of view was always constant. Further, Dutt never attempted to disguise the political content in his plays. He has always directly attacked the ruling class. His indomitable courage has lent a new dimension to his plays. Even in the worst of times, he has never attempted to disguise his political message. When the theatre world was struggling to cope with the dictatorial regime of the seventies, Utpal Dutt attempted to fight the ruling class with a play like *Duswapner Nagari* [*Nightmare City*]. In this respect, he was completely different from his predecessors. (185; translated by Abhishek Dev)

Dutt, the revolutionary thinker, playwright, and theater activist of 20th century, endeavored to raise the social consciousness of the downtrodden proletariat with his “Revolutionary Theater.” Although Dutt has been acknowledged as a trailblazer of the Indian Political Theater Movement, his theatrical productions cannot be strictly categorized as political and propagandist. His voluminous dramatic oeuvre has dealt with the social issues of gender discrimination, social inequality, racial discrimination, unemployment, poverty, corruption, and all forms of social, political, and economic oppression of the masses. His theatrical productions aimed to rouse the consciousness of the oblivious Indian masses through a glaring portrayal of the contemporary social, political, and economic problems on stage. He used theater as a tool to preach revolution to the common people. His socio-political satires attempted to create a strong sense of hatred in the minds of the spectators against the oppressive forces in play. His plays have strongly voiced his dissent against all forms of oppression that permeates Indian society at all levels: “Utpal Dutt experimented with theatrical forms in the hope of creating a political theater and fomenting a proletarian social revolution” (Banerjee 222).

Dutt’s anti-establishment play *Nightmare City* presents a fastidious account of the turbulent years of late-1960s and early-1970s, when Bengal was gripped by Naxalite violence and police brutality. Set against the backdrop of Naxalite insurgency, the play savagely exposes the ideological hypocrisy of the autocratic government leaders of the time and their violent hooliganism. However, in sync with his earlier plays, the playwright has not only portrayed the tumultuous socio-political ambiance of the 70s Calcutta, but has also constructed a soul-shattering voice of resistance to the political oppression perpetuated by the state apparatuses.

The deeply political drama presents a macabre tale of a war-torn city, Kolkata of 1970s, when the state was in the throes of terrorism, governmental hooliganism, and vicious police brutality. It is a part of Dutt’s “Emergency Trilogy,” a set of three radical plays written to criticize Indira Gandhi’s blatant violations of democratic norms during the Emergency. The other two plays in this series are *Barricade* and *Ebar Rajar Pala* (*Now It’s The King’s Turn*). Riddled with political satire, physical violence, and vaudeville routines, the play is considered a milestone in the history of Bengali theater. According to Dutt, *Duswapner Nagari* (*Nightmare City*) is “a play about the murder of Communists in Calcutta by Congress gangsters, and the way police, the press and the

so-called Congress youth leaders cooperate in the task” (Mukhopadhyay 163). The play opens with a harrowing description of the tumultuous political and social climate of the state, Kolkata:

She is veiled in smoke (talk of pollution!)
Tattooed with slogans scribbled on walls,
The black tarred roads her braid of hair,
Muck and turd make her an empress,
Her white fingers rise in concrete straightness,
With neon rings wherein you can read my name,
And Calcutta's her name. (Dutt 225)

The song aptly justifies the grave significance of the title of the play, *Nightmare City*, that is, Kolkata. In the opening scene, the playwright draws the attention of the readers to the chaotic social conditions of the state. The song is immediately followed by the brief introductions of the lead characters of the play, Lakshman Palit, a formidable industrialist and hoarder, the antagonist of the play; Gobindo Chatterjee, the editor of *Voice of Bengal*; Mriganka Roy, the Chief of Police; and Chinmoy Goswami, a youth leader. The scene describes how a Fascist government and the power-hungry industrialists like Palit are contaminating the social ambience of the city by mobilizing armed hooligans on the streets of Kolkata. The scene describes how the police, newspaper editors, and political leaders worked hand in hand to cause Bengal's devastating descent into social and political chaos during the turbulent decades. Palit, the arch-villain of the play, is a part of the repressive state apparatus that operates primarily by means of physical coercion and violence. The primary focus of the playwright is chiefly on depicting the hypocrisy and double-standards of the Fascist government that ruthlessly discriminated against the people of Bengal. Patil brazenly used the police and state machinery to serve his own petty interests; he deliberately provoked lawlessness in the city and polluted the social milieu of the state through his illegal black marketeering. Dutt depicts a harrowing and disturbing portrayal of police brutality that ran rampant during the 1970s Bengal:

Roy: But I must point out immediately that the policemen are not cowards. No, by no means. Inside the Presidency jail the other day, as you must have heard, they beat 10 violent Naxalites to death and not a man of them so much as flinched. For example, at Belgachia, in north Calcutta, only 300 of them sought out and destroyed as many as five Naxalites. At Tollygunge, in the south, 200 of them defeated in battle and then killed two toughs belonging to the Marxist Communist Party.

Palit: Apart from the heroic rape of the girl Ashima Poddar by only four of them inside a police station. (227)

Dutt's glaring portrayal of such horrendously violent incidents made it crystal clear to the readers

that the play is set in a nightmarish city of Kolkata where the people witnessed a complete collapse of law and order of governance. Dutt's adroit portrayal of the malicious socio-political milieu of the city reminds the readers of Louis Althusser's concepts of "Repressive State Apparatus" (RSA) and "Ideological State Apparatus" (ISA). In his seminal essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," Althusser has asserted:

The "State" is defined in the Marxist tradition as a force of repressive execution and intervention in the interests of the ruling classes in the class struggle conducted by the bourgeoisie and its allies against the proletariat. This is its basic "function." It is, in that sense, an apparatus or instrument by which the ruling class cements its hold on power. (95)

Nightmare City revolves around the ideological hypocrisy and hooliganism of the Congress-led government of Bengal in the turbulent decades of 1960s and 70s. Dutt adroitly demonstrates the unthinkable oppressive and genocidal acts of the government, aimed for suppression of the Communist rebellion. Dutt shows how ghastly profiteers like Palit used unemployed proletarian youths to serve their own interests. He has portrayed Palit as an arch enemy of Democracy and Socialism. He acts all lofty and superior just because he is a formidable businessman backed by the ruling congress party of the time. He is a notorious criminal and an employer of gangsters who deftly uses state machinery to illegally burgeon his black marketeering. Dutt has portrayed Palit as a brute, blood-sucking capitalist who rob common people and prey on the helpless, the defenseless, and the innocent. He has been illegally hoarding stocks of kerosene and food in his many warehouses that has led to the creation of an artificial scarcity of daily essentials in the Indian market. In the first act, he summons police officer Roy, youth leader Goswami, and the newspaper editor Chatterjee, to inform them that his storehouses were looted by a group of bandits led by the CPI(M) workers, Swapan and Mustafa. Palit is a person who regulates and controls the entire economy and administration of the state. The standard of political discourse in the state has been dragged to the lowest depths of degradation. The situation has worsened to such an extent that even law enforcement agencies, police, and political leaders are responding to the orders of criminals like Palit with puppet-like submission. Just because he has amassed huge wealth illegally and the current government extends him support, Palit shows off his political arrogance by treating everyone around him like dirt. He throws disdainful remarks at others for neglecting their duties even after taking huge sums of money from him:

Palit: Considering the troubles we are in, fuck work! You know me. If I raise my little finger, I can make your cocks drop off—without the help of any surgery. What do I get for the cheques I sign every month? If you are no help to me, why should I pay good money to shit like you? (227)

Palit is a representative of the oppressive force of the Congress-led government, who used

well-educated but unemployed proletariat youngsters of Bengal for his own personal interest and benefits. He tricked people like Moni into carrying out a range of criminal and illegal activities in exchange for money. He brazenly took advantage of the disillusionment, frustration, and desperation of the educated jobless members of the proletariat to further his own interests. Moni was blindly serving as the lumpen weapon of gangsters, political leaders, and black marketeers like Palit, Goswami, and Roy, until he realized that his activities may have disastrous emotional and psychological impacts. The inner turmoil arising from the clash between his sense of righteousness and his engagement in criminal activities led to a profound psychological distress. Being continuously haunted by the horrific memories of his crimes, he loses touch with reality and starts having hallucinations and schizophrenic attacks. It may be ascertained in this context that Dutt's sympathetic portrayal of Moni's disillusionment was a deliberate political strategy adopted to emphasize the deplorable condition of Indian unemployed youth who despite being virtuous people, indulged in criminal activities only to meet their financial obligations. Rustom Bharucha questions Dutt's true motive behind the portrayal of Moni:

Was this a political strategy? Was he pandering to a certain section of the goondas by making them believe that they were more sinned against than sinning? Did he hope to persuade them to support the CPI(M) party (for even the Communist Party needs goondas)? Or did he want to vindicate those Communist goondas who had been accused of murdering policeman? (112)

Moni did try a number of times to free himself from the clutches of the brutal capitalistic enslavement system, but every time his yearning was savagely suppressed by threats of violence. Palit is never going to spare him, so his fate is sealed. He is going to face a violent death either at the hands of his enemies or by the state police in fake encounters. Moni is an innocent, virtuous man entrapped in committing heinous crimes, mercilessly attacking and killing opposing party workers under the instruction of Palit. Through this character, Dutt has endeavored to heighten a grim image of Bengal of 1970s, which was wracked with chaos and violence. The evil collusion between law enforcement, political leaders, and hoarders unleashed a reign of terror that gripped the entire state during Congress rule. Police vigilance and rampant killings marked the city's evolving culture of violence. Amidst this political chaos, the mounting discontent, hopeless, and debasement of morals among the educated unemployed youth of the city have been saliently exposed in Moni's speech, "An Encapsulated Biography of the Calcutta Gangster":

We were the down-and-outs, beggars without work,
Insulted at home and pitied in the street,
Pursued by coppers like queers on heat. . .
Then came a bunch of political snob:
"Finish the Marxists and you'll get jobs". . .

“As soon as the elections are successfully over and
You’ve put us in a position of absolute power.”

So we fired the booths where votes were cast,
and with grenades chased hopeful voters home fast,
and stamped the ballots with our own hand,
for universal suffrage is the law of the land,
And so you came to power
And we are still beggars without work. (Dutt 252)

Moni’s painful reminiscence brings to light the dialectic of despair and emotional distress that permeated the lives of hapless youth of the city in 1970s.

Dutt leans on the shoulders of the marginalized commoners, empowering them to raise their voices against poor governance and social malaise. In most of Dutt’s famous political satires, a dauntless flesh-and-blood hero undergoes tremendous suffering and makes harrowing sacrifices to instill courage and perseverance in the hearts of his followers. Dutt’s proletarian hero is an ordinary man with an extraordinary zeal, who suffers and rises in revolt. Here, in this play, the rebel is Swapan, a Communist Party worker, who has devoted his life to public welfare. He is a staunch political activist, a revolutionary with an indomitable fighting spirit. Threats of violence fail to subdue the revolutionary torrent running through his veins. He marches as an unparalleled pillar of strength in front of the commoners like Kinkar, Dwijen, Shiv, Krishnachura, and others. He went to prison, but the vicious beating of the police could not crush his body, not his defiance and revolutionary spirit. He resumed his anti-establishment activities, supporting the armed insurgency against the State, upon his release from prison. He, along with Mustafa, another Communist Party worker, ravaged the warehouses of the black marketeers and exposed the dubious nature of the corrupt political leaders of the ruling party. They exposed how notorious criminals like Palit use the patronage system to exploit the commoners to fill his coffers. Swapan exposed the vicious nexus brewing between political leaders, law-enforcement, and criminals, which led to the collapse of Bengal’s economy in the 1970s. As a champion of the socially deprived proletariat, Swapan risked his life every day to fight for socialism in the face of state-sponsored repression. His blind brother was killed brutally by the police the other night. Even the great agony of losing his brother could not demoralize him. He continued his revolutionary activities clandestinely. However, his soaring revolutionary spirit and unremitting zeal somehow failed to persuade the commoners to participate in the resistance against tyranny, oppression, and exploitation. Civilians like Kinkar, Dwijen, Shiv, and Krishnachura were extremely unsettled when Swapan arrived at Ananda Cabin to stick posters on the wall. They refused to shelter him as they feared for their own lives. The entire city of Kolkata was gripped with political violence and police brutality. People were shivering in fear because of the trail of politically inclined mass murders. Massacres and rapes were taking place every single day. They did not want anything to do with Swapan, let alone taking part in the resistance movement. In contrast to Swapan’s belief that the

common people will naturally resist the growing state oppression, the commoners expressed their blatant apathy to the cause of the movement:

Dwijen: What do you mean? If they gang up on you, you're suggesting we should naturally resist?

Swapan: Yes. That's it.

Shiv: No, no, no! No resistance, natural or otherwise! Get yourselves out of here at once. We cannot resist. Heroics are not in our line.

Swapan: Hell, here we go around braving lynch-mobs for your sake—can't we expect a little sympathy?

Shiv: Disaster has overtaken us. These Reds cling like leeches to you.

Dwijen: Why don't you understand? Those guttersnipes are dogging your footsteps. Your very nearness is a menace to innocent bystanders. Flying bullets make no distinction between Communist and layman. (Dutt 263)

However, these people did not completely turn a blind eye to the unimaginable suffering of the people, and even proved instrumental in taking the resistance movement to its next level. In this regard, Dutt's intriguing characterization of Krishnachura, a genial old man deserves fervid appreciation. He is a light-hearted person, who does not directly participate in the Communist rebellion, but questions the unlawful activities occurring right under the nose of local administration, in a sarcastic humor. Krishnachura voices his protest against the oppressive nature of Congress rule through his dark humor and witty remarks. When Goswami tried to exuberantly portray the good side of the Congress government through his self-boasting impassioned speech, Krishnachura could not contain himself and blurts out:

Krishnachura: Mind you, I am not protesting. I am too loyal to do that. But a forest of raised hands naturally leads gullible people to the conclusion that there is no democracy in India, which, of course, is vile Chinese propaganda. On the other hand, medical science explicitly states that mandibles held aloft for any length of time obstruct the natural circulation of blood and begin such a symphony of buzzing and droning in the ears as prevent audition. (258)

When Shiv, another spectator tries to raise the serious issue of food shortage, Krishnachura adds:

Krishnachura: There! Are you satisfied? Hunger is a disease with him, sir. The other day, here at the tea-shop, he gorged himself with food and warned us all not to tell his wife, lest she refuse him supper at home.... Now this kind of all-consuming shameless hunger is old-fashioned. This man refuses to learn that eating is no longer encouraged in this country. He turns a blind eye to the advent of

socialism in India. He insists on rice, fish and mustard oil. In short, sir, he does not understand Indian socialism. (259)

Krishnachura's dark humor is a conscious technique used by Dutt, to sarcastically criticize the wrongdoings of the government. His shrewd comments glaringly portray the social sordidness of Kolkata in the 1970s. Throughout the play, his witty banter keeps the audience entertained and simultaneously exposes the hypocrisy of the political leaders. His sense of humor and the witty dialogues not only enrich his works, but also effectively communicate his political ideology. Sakti Biswas rightly argues in this context:

Humor is another asset of this play. In an atmosphere made deliberately light-hearted, the serious implications of various events strike the audience with greater force. New ideas have no impact on a tired mind. So, we find a plethora of humorous elements throughout the play. Dutt has written his play for a motley audience. His use of humor may appear over-cooked at times, but it never seems unnatural. (29)

The contours of humor in Krishnachura's narration of ghastly incidents happening in the city gradually disappears when Girin launches a violent attack on civilians with his goons to search for the whereabouts of Swapan. It is only Krishnachura who saves Swapan on two consecutive occasions from the eyes of Palit and his goons. At a certain point, he disguises as a palmist which acts as camouflage for Swapan to avoid the suspicious perusal of two policemen. On another juncture, he convinces Swapan to pretend to be the owner of a tea stall. In order to hide his real identity, Krishnachura offers many glasses of wine to Girin so that he cannot recognize the reality in his drunken eyes. Krishnachura has no ulterior motif behind all his efforts to protect Swapan. There is no implication throughout the play of his association or faith in Communist ideology. The guiding force for him is the humanistic trait in his nature that leads him towards the protection of a trouble-ridden man. He cannot eschew the responsibility of a human being. For all his protective and sympathizing nature, he is threatened by Girin. Even in this severe situation of life, he does not falter but withstands the violent force of society. The play ends with the ferocious assault on the goons of Palit by Swapan and his comrades, thus waging war against the oppressive and tyrannical leaders of Congress party. For Dutt, armed rebellion is the only means to resist the dominance and exploitation of the marginalized class in the hierarchy of society. Likewise, another renowned socio-political play, *The Great Rebellion*, captures the struggle between dominant and dominated classes, which ends with the rise of working class against the repressive political powers. The revolutionary zeal of the author inspires him to write such a play that can convey the message of rebellion to the common people against all atrocities committed by the power-seekers in the unequal power structure of society:

Revolutionary theatre is essentially people's theatre, which means that it must be played

before the masses. . . . A genuinely revolutionary play put on before an intellectual audience in the city is irrelevant because the intelligentsia simply won't change. Essentially, the revolution is for first for workers and peasants. Revolutionary theatre must preach revolution; it must not only expose the system but also call for the violent smashing of the state machine. (Dutt 16)

In conclusion, Dutt's *Nightmare City* serves as a thought-provoking examination of the complexities and challenges of resistance in the face of state repression and contentious politics. Through its portrayal of the experiences of civil dissidence, the play provides insights into the discursive nature of resistance, its impact on individuals and society, and how dissent can both challenge and reinforce the status quo. The play's themes of oppression, dissent, and resistance are as relevant today as they were when it was first performed, and its continued relevance highlights the ongoing significance of these issues in our world. In this light, *Nightmare City* can be seen as a powerful example of how art can serve as a catalyst for positive transformation in social, cultural, and political spheres, and how it can help to shape and inform our understanding of the world around us.

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