

Self Creation of Indian Tradition

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The text explicates the fundamental difference between Western notion of “history” designed to answer the question of “who, what, when and why” and a tradition, carried by eminent texts which are not written in the past and repeated today, but which provide a play space for a great variety of interpretations and creative transformations. Thus two eminent text of India, the *Ramajana* and *Mahabharata* will be used for a brief exposition of the way India “plays” its tradition through numerous story lines, their composition and recomposition in different places and situations. Both texts were made into television serials and provoked furious debates, such that the latter continues to play with the tradition and to transform the lines of discourse about the very tradition to which such lines belong.

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Introduction

We tend to think of a tradition in Western historical terms, presented in a sequence of texts and even explaining such texts in terms of “influences” by previous texts. Each text is given a name of the author, usually extolled to a figure of significance. Any stage can perform and reperform Shakespeare, can repeat Dante, bring back Sophocles, and all containing a “universal form” as a condition for indefinite repetition. Major figures are delimited in terms of categories – hero, evil, royal, noble, defender of the weak, revolutionary thinker. Our gods, their prophets, have the same message with anointed signs of eternity. Not so in India, since it does not belong to the Western concept of history but is a tapestry of shifting threads of a

tradition in the making. To grasp such a tradition, we must discard the colonial reading of Indian great figures in terms of recognizable figures with permanent characteristics. The task of this introductory text is to outline the way a civilization as a tradition lives.

Active transformations

Let us start with an example. In the grand tradition of India, of which we shall speak in various contexts, the “supreme” Brahman, discloses a cosmic – power of making of the world by singing and poetry. The emphasis on this cosmic experience that subtends latter ideologizations, shows that in the case of the basic term *Brahman* there is no postulation of anything substantive,

such as an absolute being, or an ultimate transcendent source. In this sense, we must slowly exclude – bracket – various misreadings or additions that do not belong to the founding context. Paul Thieme offers precise analyses of the term Brahman in the context of the making of the world by sayings and singing. First, many writers attribute power to Brahman. Such an attribution is misplaced, since in the context of sayings, Brahman is made, and is being made by a singer, a recitor; thus Brahman, as poetic speaking, is capable of actively strengthening even divinities. The making is through hymnic recitation or through sayings. Through these activities humans make Brahman. When such activities are attributed to divinities, the divinities are not Brahman but, in their musical activities, they too can make Brahman. Second, some interpreters have given Brahman a meaning such as a correct form of recitation. According to Thieme, no such form appears; what appears is “forming, shaping,” formulating, and in such ways that the very formulation establishes the content of Brahman. The reason why there is no pre-given form lies in the original context in which the formation is constantly associated with terms of “new formulation.” The importance of this point is that the very formulation is constitutive of vitality and strength, such that Brahman appears as protective of a people not as an entity, but as a content of the power of sayings and recitations. Third, the Brahmanic activity does not yet reveal an act and a purpose of the act.

The activity and the result are one. In the formulation of a hymn to Indra,

the very recitation creates Brahman that makes Indra grow stronger, that inspires, breathes into Indra the very ways of the poetic-musical creation of the worldly resonances. This is to say, even a divinity is vitalized by the recitation and its creation of Brahman. Indeed, Thieme points to various places where what would be called “hymn” as an active formulation, is designated by the term “Brahman”. In some cases, the formulation of Brahman by a singer compels the divinities to engage in its formulation too. This is simply an indication that the very recitation as Brahman is equivalent with the function of divinities; without such recitations the divinities would not be able to make any events. The formulations are closely associated with earthly means, such as *soma* or other modes of excitation. An extensive body of literature has been devoted to the means of such excitations in hymnic performances, including the Dionysian reveries. This surge of the cosmos, in “exciting aesthetics” of sayings, of building, of poesis and archi-texture, and the figures involved in them, whether divine or otherwise, do not detract from the roles they will play in another cosmic context. As mentioned above, the figures are not representations of “reality” but are, primarily, a way that a cosmos is manifested. Thus, art images, poetic sayings, literatures are neither of value nor valueless, but primarily comprise to trace the silent presence of a constantly emerging world with the very emergence of the recitors as an emergent Brahman. Subsequently it will be seen that in a transformed cosmic awareness, Brahman will play a very different role.

Correct practice

The so called religious traditions of India pay scant attention to doctrines and beliefs; their emphasis is on “*orthopraxy – correct practice*”. The focus is on performance, what person does rather than what he believes to be some scriptural “truth”. It can be said that even divinities are assistants in practice and thus subordinate to the actions of humans. In this sense, doctrines are not some primary texts to be followed but are added as secondary level interpretations of the meaning of actions. The use of terms, such as *Dharma* in any religious sense showed up only in the last few centuries. Indeed, the notion of Hinduism as religion was generated and imposed by English literature on India during colonial period, abstracting it from its multiple contexts of activity. It is well known that in India one can believe in contradictory theses without losing the primacy of activity, and the latter is done for its own sake. After all, believing in some doctrine does not mean anything, since one’s *Karma*, action, will become one’s true character. The emphasis on action opens up the ability to play and interact with all sorts of images, divinities, theories, symbolic designs – including the most profound *Dharma – law* without being swept up in any of them as the sole doctrine to follow. Hence no statement or narrative is entirely right or wrong, and incompatible explanations can coexist. What is most disconcerting is the elimination of the richness of multiple actions-interactions. This means that a particular position is meaningless, since its sense arises both from action and interaction with other positions. This can

be extended to make certain that even a position cannot be followed, since in its interaction with others it will change and cannot be repeated. This must be emphasized: Indian individuality is not some separate atom, but precisely this unique intersection and recreation of a variety of trends.

Here we encounter the basic notion of *katham / katha*, an interweaving of threads of stories into knots from which other threads extend without the question of time – they are simply unraveling the knot of unspecified threads which intertwine and recreate the “telling” with unsuspected novelties of local myths, passion plays, and transformed figures. This intertwining and untwining, converging and diverging of *katham* prevents any essentializing and causal predestination as if there were a sequence of predetermined events. Thus, we have a diversity of tales and yet all are understood as if they were an epic. One usually overlooked feature which allows the intertwining-untwining is the absence of causal question: who did something, when and why. More fundamental question appears throughout Ramayana and Mahabharata: **How** had the great Indra been at fault...? **How** did Kasyapa, who was a Brahmin beget a son... **How** he became invincible. **How** is it that Draupadi did not burn those scoundrels with her evil eye? Here the story does not include explanations but unravels the threads in recounting. It can be said that *katha – story*, is “*history*”, as a tradition of *irihasa*. *Iti* (thus), *ha* (indeed), *asa* (it was) which, on the basis of **how** is not telling a “history” but more like “once upon a time”. The root *ka* of *katha* into which *itihasa* overflows, suggest “water” such that the

story is fluidous, overflowing with novelties which appear as “obvious surprises”.

Self initiation

In the epic text *Mahabharata*, playful divinity Krishna is an example of such an orthopraxy who weaves *Dharma* (law) against *Adharma* (anti-law) during a war between the bad Kauravas and the good Pandavas, depicted in the epic, to bring about the victory of the Pandavas, the adherents to *Dharma*, but also its violators. Indeed, Krishna is a weaving paradox whose activities do not aim at achieving an absolute victory of doctrinal *Dharma* only its imbalance with and against *Adharma* – a precarious play on the brink of unsuspected novelties. The same can be said of the multiple faiths, sects, traditions that play with each other, intersect and transform one another, comprising a tapestry whose treads do not form geometric patterns – not unlike the cosmic sculptures of Khajuraho, replete with erotic interactions of most diverse creatures, including humans. Different strands are so fused that it is unclear which one borrowed what from others and when. Some local story or legend may become renown in a region, then become incorporated into Indian tradition by associating it with some major deity of that tradition, and disseminated throughout the subcontinent, endearingly referred to as Mother India. At the same time, the rituals associated with the “main” deity become attributed to a local divinity. With this understanding, it is worth mentioning that neither linear continuum nor circular “eternal return of the same” is valid – although any one may become an aspect that

is interwoven as a partial metaphor in the tradition. Strictly speaking, India does not have a directional history, but many stories which, in their telling will become attached to some event and given significance across centuries, only to be “forgotten”. One could call this multiplicity a creative encounter that is at the base of Indian tolerance, use of ambiguities and contradictions without, in a most fascinating way, ceasing to be India. It is capable of capturing and reinterpreting the old in an effort to come to terms with the new and to reinterpret it without rejecting “the other”. We know that in more recent times “the other” was colonialism, and we know the many ways that Indian tradition has woven its novelties into its own fabric, leading to self-interpretation that currently is an intricate part of that tradition, and yet as only one part, which has played a major role to create a tension within India. The split into two separate “nationalities” is one indication of this tension that haunts the border of two “religions”: Hinduism and Islam.

Let us point to the cosmic dimensions in one of India’s eminent texts, *Mahabharata* wherein the principle of aesthetic passion is equivalent to self creation, The very beginning of the text states this creativity plainly. King Draupad is expecting a son but to everyone’s surprise a fully grown maiden appears. Born of her own fire – self created from the cosmic *agni*. *She also is seen as* creative energies – *shakti*, as the cosmic play *lila*, as the cosmic passion *kama*. It is also necessary to explicate the understanding that the self creating passion is equally a part of all major eminent texts and their continuous “effective consciousness”. To these ends, the other eminent text

of India, the Ramayana, will be presented as an example of the way that such texts are never taken in some literal sense, but have a dialogical life with the public in any given context and at times a virulent life where suppression of “false” or “ugly” or “evil” texts is demanded. For example, when a question of defining a cultural identity arises, aesthetic texts take preeminence in defining and articulating what sort of cosmos a people have. Indeed, there is overabundant evidence that such aesthetic texts are defining entire civilizations and their clashes, such that the members of civilizations want to promote and impose their texts as the sole cultural means to delimit what is art and what is not, what is permitted and what is prohibited. After all, the fundamentalists in the United States want the latter to be a “Christian Nation”, while Islam is pushing for “Islamic Republic” and above all, for universal Caliphate, and the pope is making universal proclamations that the current travesty around the globe is Western “secularism”, meaning the civilization established by classical Greek literature. The same invocations are presented by a strange concoction, known as Hindu fundamentalism – totally alien to India, as will be seen in the depicting of Ramayana in contemporary context.

Weaving of a text

The Ramayana as *adikavya*, or the first poem, of traditional description is at least 2500 years old. The story appears in over 22 languages, including Tibetan, Laotian, Javanese, Chinese, Malaysian and Sinhalese, enjoying a popularity stretching over south

and south-east Asia. Scholarly attempts to trace the first version, or the original text, of the oral composition has resulted in contradictory findings. The translators of the English critical edition of the Ramayana, in their introduction, state that the southern recension, originating in south India, is the most pure, that is free of emendations, corruptions and interpolations; in contrast to which the northern recension is more populist and ‘vulgar.’ However, this does not point to the location of origin of the story; which historical research has inconclusively specified as the Koshala-Magadha region of central India before the rise of Buddhism and the Magadhan empire in 600 BC (and not south India, where the ‘purest’ text comes from). Thus, it is difficult to locate the Ramayana in terms of an ethnic or even national group, given its lack of specific origin within India and its popularity throughout southeast Asia. Rather, as postcolonial modern nationalisms emerge in the area, Ramayana takes on the color of a national epic; in the language of the dominant elite, it becomes part of national heritage, national tradition. This is intrinsic to the construction of nationalism itself, which creates for itself a sense of an enduring deep past, of originating in time immemorial and surviving as a tradition through centuries.

The poem is performed as ritualistic recitation, formal, community storytelling by professionals, as varying forms of dances, dramatic arts, shadow play, puppet play, festivals (*Ramanujan*). The spoken or performed text has its life in its enactment, and not as a ‘book’. In this sense the “text” is equivalent to an aesthetic cosmos,

articulated in numerous ways and media. Printing in India is only around 150 years old; and much of oral tradition is preserved through mnemonic devices composed from the Vedic period. The Ramayana did exist as copy, as manuscript which was copied from region to region, but the written text itself not only included interpolations now described as inauthentic, but also was continually overtaken by new versions and variations. Stories linked to the Ramayana, proliferate, repeat, and many versions counter others; each performance is, in literal terms, a new version since it cannot exactly reproduce an earlier one. Thus, the Ramayana is transformed every time in performance and the text is available only in its transformation. As a continually performed text, the Ramayana is not an 'epic world' distanced from contemporary life; its power in contemporary politics is very evident in the way the Ramayana has been used by the neo-Hindu nationalists.

Rama, the divine hero of the epic, and Ravana, the demon whom Rama kills are both equally revered; in fact, in southern India, Ravana emerges as chthonic deity signifying the dark, vital power which is absolutely necessary to maintain the polar rhythms of light and darkness. Thus the text as implicated in performance contains in itself self-demolishing elements which point to its unusual resilience. Many variations are counter stories, counter versions, thus in opposition to the neo-Hindu movement which made Rama into a propaganda figure; tribal members in Maharashtra devised a new version in which a lower caste member, who is killed by Rama becomes the hero. In the versions of Ramayana sung

as songs by women in Andhra Pradesh, the songs all center not around the Rama/Ravana battle but around Sita, her meeting with Rama, her relationship with Ravana. One factor common to most performance is its fragmentary nature. Most of the time only a part of the story is performed. Thus the 'whole' text exists on the plane of suggestion, allusion, always evocable context which the presentation of any part may elaborate. Thus songs, classical dance, miniature painting, sculpture, temple art, all present scenes from the Ramayana and not the whole text. The first film made on the Ramayana was Lankadahan, the burning of Lanka, in 1917, which depicts the monkey Hanuman, the powerful helper of Rama, burning down the city of Lanka over which Ravana rules. Complete readings of Ramayana do take place, for instance, the professional storyteller in the famous Hanuman temple, Sankat Mochan, in Benares, takes over 700 hours in two years to complete a single version. In the case of the festival of Ramlila, the whole city of Benares is turned into a stage; each locality simultaneously presenting different sections of the Ramayana. Thus as Ravana is abducting Sita on one location, Rama is planning battle to win Sita back in another, Hanuman crosses the sea to reach Lanka, Ravana's kingdom, in a third and so on. These presentations rob the story utterly of its linear narrative value. Understood metaphorically, this is the way every presentation is, since the foreknowledge by the audience deprives the performance of its linear sequence of struggle, climax and resolution so integral to conceptualizing the narrative. Everything happens all at once; it is impossible

now for Ravana to carry Sita away without evoking his eventual defeat by Rama; it is impossible for Hanuman to make a quiet entry into the story as mere helper without the anticipation that he would jump over the ocean and find Sita before anyone else.

Televised story

This foreknowledge accompanied the television version too. Telecast from January 1987 to summer 1988, the epic which was initially scheduled to run 56 episodes was later increased to 72 by popular demand. It ran through 9.30 to 11 am on Sundays. Although the initial response was lukewarm, at the end of six months it overtook television as an event, so that the television stood in the shadow of Ramayana. Television in India was from its introduction in the 60s an educational medium confined to urban centers. It took more than a decade for popular entertainment to form a significant part of television programming. The Ramayana reshaped the nature of television, even in the practical sense of earning for national TV one-eighth of its income, and thus encouraging it to turn more to sponsored programs and to allow commercials (which were initially not carried by Indian TV). The goal of TV was also functioning as developmental medium (even soap operas were scripted on the logic of edutainment, mixing developmental messages with stories, for example, *Buniyaad* was changed radically with the telecast of the Ramayana and subsequently, *Mahabharata* and other popular serials). Television, however, was primarily an urban-based medium, and it spread around the cities, since the network

did not extend to rural areas. Conservative estimates of viewers of the Ramayana range from 40 to 60 million (India's population is over a billion now); but Lutgendorf estimates that given the pattern of community viewing the audience for popular episodes could easily cross 100 million, which is only one-tenth of the population but which covered almost 90 percent of television viewers. (Superbowl, he points out, is watched only by 40 % of Americans). The audience then was primarily from small towns and cities; including some nearby villages and rural areas.

The television version relied heavily on the 16th century retelling of Tulsidas, the Vaishnavite saint who rewrote the Sanskrit Ramayana into Hindi, heavily infused with devotionism. The credits, however, cite all the major Ramayanas in several languages, such as the Tamil *Kampa Ramayana*, Malayalam *Adhyatma Ramayana*, the 'original' Valmiki Ramayana and so on. The major change made by Tulsidas in his retelling is to conclude the story with Rama's victory over Ravana, and his triumphant return to the city of Ayodhya with Sita who he has now won back with the help of Hanuman. In the Valmiki version, which is by far more prevalent, Sita becomes pregnant soon after her return to the city. Rama is tortured by suspicion that the child could be Ravana's since she spent eleven months in Lanka. Rumors in the city lead him to doubt her; and he sends her away to the forest, where she gives birth to two children under Valmiki (the poet who is also an actor in the tale). The children later sing the Ramayana to Rama, who recognizes them and wishes to bring Sita back but the anguished Sita

returns to the earth, her mother, leaving Rama to govern in unimpeded perfection for the next ten thousand years.

The television text then took the liberty of ending the narrative at an unambiguous point, the 'proper' narrative climax with restored order after disruption. But as the telecast drew to a close, the garbage cleaners and sanitation workers, who belonged mythically to the same lower caste as the poet Valmiki, demanded that the Uttarakanda, as the last part of the Ramayana is called, to be "shown and explained" on television. Since the government did not respond by allowing an extension, the sanitation workers in parts of four states, Haryana, Punjab, Madhya Pradesh, went on strike. In a week, garbage had piled up on the streets; there was even threat of a cholera epidemic. The leader of the trade union filed a case against the producer-director, Ramanand Sagar, the central government and the national television network, Doordarshan, demanding that the serial be continued and the judge ordered the continuation of the serial to cover the omission. Thus, the serial ended in an inconclusive controversy, announcing that the latter half of the Ramayana would be soon telecast (and it was, as a separate serial, about six months later).

While the omission invited a dramatic reaction, the inclusion or interpolations which Sagar introduced, such as detailed episodes on the education of Rama, Lakshmana and their brothers as royal children did not invite any criticism. Interpolation or omission alone was not the ground of the objection; since every performance is a creative reworking of the text. The

problem was not that of high genre and low genre, but that of omitting portions which were 'low', of the text being presented in an unambiguous devotional mode. In oral rendering, the storyteller interactively works in the local context of the telling, spices the story with familiar, intimate references which relate to the immediate life of the listeners. In presenting the epic on national television there were some limits to the context it could evoke. On national television, the epic had to conform to a national context, thus depicting the dominant north Indian devotional cultures which formed the ground for nationalism in India. This is not to state that the 'local' Ramayana cannot contain ideological references, but the performative context had to shift to a national context, even though the epic could not be presented leaving out the sullied parts, as the sanitation workers' strike shows. The national performance then invited an intersection of contexts; it did not remain national.

The national context, however, was not seen as alienating by the audience. Even more dramatic than the telecast was the reception of the serial. The television set was decorated and garlanded on Sunday mornings, at homes and in organized public viewing in street corners, as in Benares. The time for weddings, appointments, work, food, baths, were all changed around the auspicious time which the telecast took place. Preparations were made for the appearance of the deities as visitors to the home. The epic itself was rendered in extremely low-key manner, the spectacular scenes lacked grandeur, they seemed to cost only slightly more than the cheap makeshift

ones used for village performance. Television (as has been theorized), which would seem to have the effect of cutting down the epic manner to the soap opera level, of demystifying the aura of divinities by lending them tangible bodies, of undercutting the rich resonance of oral imagery with its small, flat visuals, of editing and compressing the narrative to suit the crisper style of modern narrative flow, did not quite have this effect. The question here is: did anyone 'see' the television Ramayana?

It seems useful here to contrast the television effect to the famous yearly Ramlila performance in the holy city of Benares. Even though almost 5000 people are present for a single scene no microphone is used. Given the presence of child actors as Rama, Sita and Lakshmana (it takes a really seasoned actor for Hanuman or Ravana; while Rama has to be played by a boy who is virtually untouched and sexually innocent), with undeveloped voices, much of the audience can barely hear what is being said on stage, which is accompanied by ritual recitation of the Ramayana by pandits. The distance from the stage itself makes it difficult to see from the crowd; so that many devotees can be seen 'watching' the Ramayana with eyes closed. (Gargi). The epic as event supersedes any actual sense perception of the epic, and this sense perception itself, even in the case of television is synesthetic, given the overlapping of aural and visual fields.

In the arrival of Rama or Hanuman on Sunday morning, there was no lack of recognition that it was a television arrival, neither was television an obstruction to their arrival. The poverty of spectacles or

the unnatural immobility of Hanuman's tail, the resemblance of Rama's ambiguous smile to that of the prime minister's when confronted with national problems, was not seen by the majority of the audience to be an impediment to the event which was happening, the presentation of the Ramayana. The Ramayana was not spectacle, composed of epic events and an onlooker audience but a participative ritual. Visually, the director borrowed from mythological Hindi cinema, costumes and court scenes were all replicated in a visual idiom familiar to the audience. The clothing itself was highly conservative, borrowing from Indian architecture only the ornamental styles without its erotic abandon. The movements were highly stylized, and not naturalistic, as even the street or temple performances of Ramayana are. The television Ramayana hardly introduced any new variation in these respects, it was a blend of the oral storytelling, of ritual recital, of drama, dance, and 'spectacle' which is the normal composition of any Hindi film, for instance. Thus, it did not fit into an 'epic' genre and it allows immense room for playful re-creation and 'low' caste texture (characters who are permitted to be looser, such as Kaikeyi the wicked queen, the hunchback Manthara, and the demons in Lanka). The 'blend' is a central concept for a large-scale narrative, to make the right masala (spicy blend) is a challenge to most filmmakers.

The compression or elaboration of the epic is a difficult issue; since all renderings are as long or short as they can be made to be in performative conditions. The television version was an elaborate compres-

sion, since it elaborated and interpolated episodes such as Rama's childhood, yet it compressed and left out the last book of the Ramayana. Any part of the epic presentation has as its context the whole in a tradition where no one is ignorant of the story as such and very, very few would know the 25,000 stanzas of the Valmiki Ramayana (this is the most popular version, which is read at homes). It is in principle possible to render Shakespeare on television with minimal distortion since the play is written for theater, one can remain completely faithful to the text. With the Ramayana, the first question would be, which one? Even with critical editions being heavily supplemented with local variations, it is impossible to be textually faithful.

On the other hand, this leaves room for creative elaboration, retelling, and of contextualizing the narrative as required by the performative mode. What would be limits of translation, or rather, what could be constituted as problems in translating the Ramayana? In this context, the English translators of the critical edition, Goldman, has made interesting comments on the differences between Homer and Valmiki. Homer, according to Goldman, remains within the realm of sense perception, or rather, he evokes a powerful effect through a detached, economic yet figurative style. In contrast, Valmiki's text, and to a great extent this is a peculiarity of much of expressivity in Indian tradition, is characterized not by economy or by emphasis on development of the narrative to its resolution. The audience interest too is not in what is going to happen next (since they already know, even Hindi film is highly

predictable) but on how it is going to happen. A known story thus leaves room for maximum attention to the sensuousness of the narrative, since the storyline or plot is already known, what is of interest is the way it is explicated, elaborated, dwelled upon. This is apparent even in the ancient text which is overladen with dense figurative modes of expression, of innumerable modifiers, developing shades and textures in each and every event so as to provide a wealth of interpretive room. The descriptions, metaphors used are not physical, but highly fanciful, not sense perception bound but imagination bound. (Even today Indian cinema has the highest content of fantasy in comparison to any national cinema). Thus where Homer would lead one to imagine the weapon's sharpness since it pierced through the skull, pinning... to the ground, for Valmiki, the arrow itself is a sensual object, decorated with gold and diamonds, like a smokeless fire, like the weapon of Indra, and the opponent in battle would not simply fall to the ground but in the fall would bring down towers and ramparts.

In conclusion

The television Ramayana was particularly successful not in spectacle, or in the wealth of metaphoric connections oral imagery could make possible, but in the lyrical evocation of emotion. Indian aesthetic theory places central emphasis on the awareness of affect and the creation of modes of affect through balanced intermingling of evocative contextual factors. The logic of transition in the narrative is one of maintaining the flow of affect – thus situations

which have to be dwelt on, such as Rama leaving for the forest, were elaborated, the camera repeatedly dwelling on the details which showed Rama's immobility against the tearfulness of the people and the king. Songs and lyrics were used throughout the serial to create and intensify affect; they provided metaphoric elaborations for the lingering, slow-paced, almost static visual text. The movement was not from action to action, but mapped through affective transition, which may or may not be essential to action. Thus, what many English critics saw as unnecessary additions and slowness was simply the storyteller's unedited flow of drawing participation from a generous audience.