

Politics as Aesthetics¹: Analysing *performatives* in the context of JNU protest

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*This paper is an academic analysis of my personal experience of participation in the JNU protest. It comprises my attempts at reflecting on questions such as what is art and artistic? And how can art lead to change?

Contextualizing the thematic

In the beginning of the year 2016, Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi saw a massive² student protest against charges of sedition that were levied on a few students after their participation in a university event titled *Country without a Post-Office*. This event was organised by some students to commemorate what they called an *untried* hanging of two Kashmiri separatist leaders who, under the Indian law, were held guilty of orchestrating terrorist attacks on the Indian Parliament in the year 2001. Soon the event attracted large-scale public attention as video clippings of some participants shouting what the State perceived as “anti-national” slogans during the event went viral on social media websites. Following this, the Delhi police falsely framed and arrested three students from JNU which is what provoked the students and teachers to launch this protest and to move the court to challenge the conduct of the ruling government in the matter.

Within days, the protest acquired an international appeal and gathered support of academia, artists, and social activists from various parts of the world. The reason for such an appeal was that this protest, beyond its originating motive of getting the young students released, had resulted in propelling a worldwide

discourse on the dangers of state nationalism. In that, it had succeeded in highlighting what must be stated as the central premise of a well-functioning democracy, which is, the *right to dissent*.

Dialogues on the notion of dissent occupy an inherent position within the realm of critical art. Most scholars who have studied the relationship between political protests and critical art in various cultural contexts³ would agree when I argue that for any work of art to be critical is to express and expose what society—under its own obligatory paradigms of morality, order, and perception—continues to repress. In effect what that would mean for that work of art is to position itself as a manifestation of its maker's right to dissent. Political protests, in that sense, qualify for fields of art and performance that bring forth creative ways in which protestors express their shared resistance, but at the same time, are able to highlight areas of artistic responsibility⁴. In other words, political protests are in many ways reflective of how political/ethical intelligence and aesthetic sensibility are intertwined, to an extent that socio-political orders themselves can be read as possible arrangements of aesthetics; alternatively, it is the aesthetics of space, time, and people in a society that determines its political upbringing.

From the various performative situations that emerged in the JNU protest, this essay considers three *performatives* for the ways in which they potentially projected the role that politics plays in structuring aesthetics. The three performatives are: the protestors' act of sloganeering, performance of WALK by Maya Krishna Rao, the theatre and dance artist, and an improvised solo dance performed by a student, Anisha Tavag.

In the context of this essay, a *performative* embodies language, gesture, or any form of symbolic social sign. The term has been most notably employed by speech-act theorists like J.L Austin, who proposed, and I quote from Judith Butler's *Excitable Speech* here, that, "to know what makes the force of an utterance effective, what establishes its performative character, one must first locate the utterance within a 'total speech situation'. Such utterances do what they say on the occasion of the saying; they are not only conventional, but in Austin's words, 'ritual or ceremonial'. The 'moment' in ritual is a condensed historicity: it exceeds itself in past and future

directions, an effect of prior and future invocations that constitute and escape the instance of utterance” (Butler 1997, 3). Going by Butler’s logic, I suggest that a protest may be described as a form of “condensed historicity” which, within the larger context of a society’s past, present, and future circumstances, may be seen as an *evocation* or *disruption* in time and space.

That said, the idea behind employing the term *performatives* here—instead of performances or events—is to think of them as *micro-eruptions* within the aesthetic fabric of the protest, which I see as a *macro-eruption* in time. It is to bring to the reader’s attention that these were not the performances produced/devised like works of art for a gallery or proscenium setting and an invited audience. In other words, they never had a pre-determined aesthetic value set by conditions of a market-oriented *production* and therefore are not to be seen as *consumable* objects. These performatives were the *actions* that were taken and “utterances” that just *happened* as a result of their context.

My method of analysing these performatives is to first locate within their mechanics a subversion of the centre-margin binary (Gitlin and Peck 2005, 147-174), and in that, argue for the *ephemerality* embedded within them—in terms of their *time*, *space*, and *participating bodies*. That is to say, what I invite the reader to observe in these performatives is the un-choreographed, the un-sung, and the un-ordered that reflects their potential to bring out the difference between that which deliberately places itself at the *centre* as against that which has as its starting point the disruption of the fascist formations that demand centrality.

The Performative ways of protest

Amidst the varied performative ways in which the protest realised itself, the fulcrum of the protest was the students’ act of sloganeering. As scenic as it was for me, the massive conglomeration that the JNU protestors formed together displayed a tableaux in which slogan-raising acquired the ability to constantly re-affirm the protest’s purposes. This tableaux had no protagonist, no one hero, but many unsung ones emerging from time to time. A typical slogan-raising moment in the protest

would unfold like this: a lecture going on at the ad-block (an area in the University, right outside the administrative building, where most activities of the protest took place). The person speaking says something that exhilarates the gathering of listeners. Someone in the gathering chooses to mark that moment of exhilaration by shouting, “Le ke rahenge Azadi!” (“We are determined to win freedom!”). And so, one sees the slogan spiralling in the space as more voices, located at different stations, get absorbed into the spiral, until the slogan amplifies and consumes the whole space, much like a tidal wave.

While their space, time, source, performers, and text would always differ, the “ceremonial” occurrence of the slogans could clearly inspire a very significant aesthetic in the protest performance. That was the aesthetic of *togetherness* (Bourriaud 2002), wherein, each time this chorus emerged, it could evoke a renewed sense of unity based on the protestors’ collective advocacy not for a false sense of oneness but for the right to disagree and dissent. And, it was this ceremonial occurrence—its emergence anywhere and everywhere—that would on the one hand dissolve the possibility of a clear centre, and at the same time, keep the euphoria of the space alive⁵.



JNU Protest March at Jantar Manter, New Delhi. Photo credit: Kunhi Kasargod, February 18, 2016.

The precarity of space, time, and text that characterised the sloganeering, also characterised Maya Rao's *WALK*. Maya Krishna Rao⁶ can be regarded as one of the most pro-active theatre and dance practitioners of her generation, who has been constantly reacting to the political and cultural crisis in the contemporary Indian context with her inter-disciplinary artistic inquiries. *WALK* was first performed by her to express her anguish against the Delhi *Nirbhaya* Rape Case of 2012, and acquired another dimension at the moment of the Supreme Court's re-validation of Section 377 of the Indian Constitution that *criminalises* homosexuality⁷, in 2013. Maya's *WALK* in JNU had been an impromptu performance. It was on 15 February 2016, three days after the arrest of the president of the JNU student union; Maya had only come to deliver a lecture in JNU, after which the students requested her to perform, and she readily agreed.

In my opinion, this instance exemplifies mutual *spontaneity*, which Maya and the protest enabled for each other in the way that they both framed each other's

context. It may be articulated as an *affective* untying of the resistive tendencies that both the protestors (given the long history of student politics in JNU) and Maya had been harbouring much before the actual occurrence of both *WALK* and the protest. The students, as if knew, that it was *WALK* which they needed to witness as an external reiteration of their politics, and to mark the arrival and dissemination of their protest. Given its impromptu nature, *WALK* was a performance with no proscenium time limits, or a choreographed beginning or an end. And, with respect to the issues that it was addressing, it would stretch beyond its own theatrical character, having begun much in the past and likely to continue long into the future. It may be argued here that a performance such as *WALK* or the protest as a performance itself, are performances whose purpose is to mirror the longevity and deep-rootedness of the failures of social systems that surround them, and therefore the *life* of such performances cannot be quantified in time, space, and identities.

WALK was performed on the stairs of the central administration building of JNU—a site popularly addressed as *Freedom Square* on campus, and where most activities of the protest took place. What these stairs lent to the space and character of *WALK* was a sense of *liminality*. Due to an in-between situation of the stairs, the centre-margin binary could find a magnificent visual rupture in *WALK*. Just as the stairs, *WALK* functioned with a clear intent of drawing a *connection* across several other forms and acts of human rights violation that students in JNU had been resisting for years. The text that Maya *improvised*, in three different languages (Hindi, English, and Malayalam) could reflect a personal, everyday engagement of Maya with the issues that it pointed at, and underlined the *multi-folded-ness* of the protest. For example, part of the text when Maya recited, “Consent...the law taught us...Consent...it’s a word we know...Consent...Consent...Consent...Consent...to eat, to pray, to walk, to think...” suggested concern for the general state of repression in the country rather than for one particular incident which had sparked off the protest. The text made references to issues of gender inequality, communal violence, and class atrocities, and by way of voicing resistance for all kinds of social injustices, could potentially undo possibilities of a lopsided representational politics. Each issue that Maya hinted at may be thought of as a *fold* that, in Gilles Deleuze’s words, would always “refer to the other folds” (Briginshaw 2001, 201), and like the

folds of a clothing, each had its own “autonomy and fullness” (Briginshaw 2001, 207). And we know, the *folds* did reveal themselves further, when, later we saw various civil rights movements such as those addressing the challenges of migrant labourers, farmers, tribals, and dalits, from across the country joining hands with the JNU protest⁸.



Maya Krishna Rao performing *WALK* at Freedom Square, JNU. Photo credit: Saumya Mani Tripathi

What was different and important about *WALK* vis-a-vis sloganeering is that in case of the former it was one body (Maya herself) that could embody many bodies which were standing shoulder-to-shoulder in their collective condemnation of the ruling establishment. This female body, who walked playfully while reciting a poetic monologue, concretised into its own tactile form the intangible fears, anger, and wilfulness of everyone else surrounding her in that moment. She walked as if to a point of no-destination, yet with much determination. Sometimes by sitting down on the stairs to jibe at the state of current government policies, other times by lying down on a male viewer’s lap to project the freedom that she had always enjoyed as a woman on the JNU campus, Maya constantly derived the sense of her own

presence from the presence of the bodies who were encountering her in the moment of her performance.

WALK was soon walked by a massive number of protestors three days after Maya's performance on the event of the *JNU Solidarity March* held on 18 February 2016, at Jantar Mantar, New Delhi. This time another gesture conjoined the gesture of the walk—the gesture of raising fists in the air. This gesture has historically formed the most recognisable image of almost all people's protests that the world has seen. As Judith Butler would have us observe, slogan and fist raising are very particular kinds of gestures that inherently demand *support*. They always comprise claims on space with one's body that no one would mobilise alone, and I use Butler's words here to argue: "without moving and assembling together with the others" (Butler, 2011)⁹. I may add here that such is the thrust already embedded in the physicality of this gesture that it cannot be just simply performed, it has to be *commanded*. And, in my opinion, it is something that, only a deep empathetic engagement with the protest could make possible. It was only after physically internalising the protest's agitation that one would acquire both the agency and ability to roar out a slogan and raise a fist. The performative which then emerged from the union of the text of the slogans, such as *Azadi* (freedom) and *Halla-Bol* (let us conquer) and the fist-raising gesture of slogan-raising bodies, was a form of a *supported action* that could immediately stimulate for those bodies a sense of belonging in the collective despite their internal differences.

Another performative that emerged as a strong embodiment of the protest, was an improvised solo danced by a student, Anisha Tavag. Anisha's formless dancing amidst a massive gathering of the protestors, was quite a courageous initiative that an individual could have taken during the protest. A young student of the Masters programme at the School of Arts and Aesthetics in JNU, Anisha did not belong to any political party on campus, yet she had been a regular participant in the protest activities like many others. On that particular day during the protest, Anisha proposed to share an *improvised* dance that turned out to be a mixture of various dance forms that she had been learning as a dancer. Unlike *WALK* or sloganeering, this dance had no text, yet Anisha's silent dancing body within the very intimate setting of the protest was laden with meanings. I would say, it was the dense

textuality of the space—the administration building which by now had become, in Hannah Arendt’s words “space of appearance” (Butler, 2011) for all political actions of the protest—that could lend meaningfulness to such an abstract eruption as Anisha’s freely dancing body. Without any words, Anisha’s body strongly expressed *Halla Bol*, and could communicate a very strong claim of the *personal* within the very public-ness of the protest.



Anisha Tavag (corrected everywhere) performing at Freedom Square. Photo credit: Meghna Bhardwaj

In an interview that Anisha gave to a news channel after her performance, she shared, “This protest has affected me bodily. I cannot sleep at night. This was a way for me to defend my own space. This was a way to show that we are not manipulated by some one’s political agenda. This is *our* fight for our *rights*.”¹⁰ Dance as a way to “defend” is important for how it not only contributes to the emotionality of a struggle, but also reinforces how a non-verbal medium of expression strongly

reclaims the body which—as Michael Foucault has famously brought to light in his work *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975)—for all systems of governance is always the most dangerous site that must be controlled and censored in order for the system to sustain its power. In this case, Anisha’s female dancing body, through its silent physical action, rebuked the non-action and apathy on the part of the state, and, owing to her very provocative *hip-hop* quality of movements, displayed a potential to provoke for the state a fear of loss of that *dignity* which a female body, with a sense of self-censorship, is forced to bear for its society. To my mind, Anisha’s and Maya’s performances truly exemplified the transformative potential of dance and movement, in the ways that they surrendered to the process of their own *becoming* as the performer herself would admit to not-knowing the performance beforehand, and in that, transgressed the limits of identities and the prescribed orders of gaze with which to look at the body as a social order itself.

I posit that while the bodies raising slogans, or walking and dancing were overtly performing, the radicality that had charged the protest spaces overall made the mere presence of any protestor’s body extremely meaningful and performative. These bodies, experiencing ambiguous emotions, were excited, anxious, alert, tired, and longing with hope at the same time; and therefore they were constantly navigating between a sense of loss and gain of their own equilibrium. There was a lot that mere standing and sitting around the protest would mean pertaining to the untold personal stories of each protestor who was holding the protest together. With their constant *being there*, the protestors were inviting themselves to be *seen*, as if, by an invisible audience, as performers collectively building a political discourse in the moment of their performance.

The strength that one saw in each protesting body going through its various physical and emotional phases, conveyed for the onlooker the transformative character of their performance. Bodies, in that sense, were what carried the spontaneity and ephemerality of the protest—for it is the body that cannot be bereft of its own embedded truths, which then get spelled out by virtue of its very presence and the tendency to shift incessantly through time and space. No other words, than Terry Eagleton’s, in his argument, “Aesthetics is born as a discourse of the body” (Meyer 2010, 741) effectively assert the performative significance that a mass of

determined bodies and corporeal actions in the situation of JNU political protest must have held for its history.

Politics and Aesthetics

The ways in which the above discussed performatives displayed an interplay of words and movement, in my opinion, tied the act of the protest together, and contributed to its readability and impact. To be noted here is that it was because of the clarity and integrity of its politics—the politics of/for social justice—that the JNU protest could exhibit an aesthetic unity of body, thought, and space. And, it is because of this unity that in its process of creating and performing it could actually embody and achieve what art must, i.e., a dismantling of the centre-margin binary. Anisha's dance brought out the embedded aspiration of the protest, which was freedom and empowerment of each of its actors at an individual level and not just collectively; in that an actual conversion of private introspection to publicly visible action. So did Maya's *WALK*, which also at the same time graciously underlined the element of diversity playing through those actors; while the sloganeering brought the actors together as they critiqued the very idea of *unity*, the state's ignorance of the social complexities that such an idea leaves unaccounted. All three reflected *claiming* and *doing* at the same time, and carried in them mixed emotions, of thrill, pride, anger, defeat, and victory. Each contributed to a disabling of centre and margin in their own ways; sloganeering by finding its "ritualistic" presence anywhere and everywhere, Maya's *WALK* by telling us of the multi-folds in the protest with walking but never reaching, and Anisha's dance by suggesting that there was no single hero, but there must have been, just like herself, many unsung heroes, that such a protest must have conceived.

The disabling of the centre-margin binary is significant to me in the way that Andrew Gitlin and Marcia Peck regard it as characteristic to a kind of creativity that challenges the expressions borne out of a populist culture by not only simply opposing but effectively confronting common-sense (Gitlin and Peck 2005, 148). In

the light of this argument, I may suggest that the performativity of the JNU protest was special in the way that it was able to reflect a fine line of distinction between non-populist and anti-populist modes of expressions¹¹. In other words, what it importantly exhibited was an ability to question simplistic and normative thought, while exemplifying how complex and self-reflexive thinking could be communicated *simplistically*. For example, Anisha's dance that comprised popular dance steps to popular music such as Michael Jackson's controversial song "They don't really care about us.", or A.R Rahman's composition "Khalbali" from a Bollywood film that went on to gain an iconic status as a film for the country's *youth*, expressed a potential to emerge as a strong stance against elite liberal politics that often rejects mainstream public culture without a reasonable argument, only to construct a false sense of superior knowledge. Maya's *WALK* could effectively deconstruct and demystify jargon-laden¹² criticisms that often emerge in the armchair conferences of the academia or in the discussions of the bureaucrats and art commissions, into a simplified calling for the wider public to come together to discuss matters of their own citizenship and welfare. *WALK* was about *communicating* and being *communicative*, and that is how it could perform a strong wedlock of body and thought generating a wider appeal.

Slogan raising on the streets and in other public spaces has always been a mark of the masses. However, what has been characteristic of JNU's tradition of slogan-raising and political activism is its wariness of misleading activisms that thrive on the "big ideas" of "thought leaders"¹³, and its thorough engagement in cultivating an activism whose motive is to challenge both the *majority* and the *niche*. As an effect of that, the JNU protest exhibited a sense of consciousness about the need to convert conceptual intellectualism into organised action. And, I may argue here that it is exactly this clarity which also directly speaks to the world of contemporary arts wherein given the over-takings of the neo-liberal funding structures constantly appropriating the issues of liberal politics, it is urgent that a truly *democratic* conceptualisation of the *artistic/political/radical*, and in that, a fair distribution of resources within the arts are brought into effect.

Conclusion

Referring to German choreographer Susanna Linke's famous words, "When I dance, I want to be invisible", I argue that the three performers studied here—Maya, Anisha, and the sloganeers—pulled off their performances in a way that could enable them to go beyond themselves. What is valuable with respect to each of the performatives is their everydayness (Highmore, 2002) - that is, their ordinary, non-virtuosic nature in terms of space, time, and the content of the act. And, yet their eruptive potential and the belief of each performer that they can truly fight the superstructure. It is perhaps in such ordinary acts of our everyday lives that the revolutions for change must lie. As critical thinkers like Alain Badiou would argue, these revolutions, unlike the revolutions of the twentieth century, may not last for long or lead to paradigmatic transformations (Badiou, 2005). Yet, by emerging and subsiding every day, they exert a force with which they may bring us closer to a realisation of the revolutionary strength embedded in the *personal*. They may make us aware that the public realm is not what is *out-there*, but rather it is woven right into the fabric of our immediate surrounding. The state and the market are leviathan forces existing inside us. The act of raising voice against the assaults of both or either would mean refraining from forms of hyper-individualism and the survival-of-the fittest ethic (Giroux, 2014), and knowing that our deepest feelings only resonate the social costs of the larger public policies and political projects.

What the JNU protest spelled out for me was an understanding of time and space not as cohesive but fragmented dimensions, which can then be interpreted as a strong criticism against the problematic notions of a *core* or essence based on which problematic claims of inclusionary and exclusionary politics are laid. Just as the JNU protest did, art too must counter the core. At the same time, both art and a political protest must check themselves against becoming the kind of social contracts that can often re-produce modes of alienation since the pre-condition in the emergence of any social contract, more often than not, is to conceive and perceive the *other*. Just as a protest demonstrates a sharing of aesthetics, art must also never give into its narcissistic tendencies and instead reinforce its accessibility and readability widely.

Being a student of art, dance, and performance, I viewed the JNU protest as a rich laboratory where I could witness *sensibles* (Meyer 2010, 755) that is, what affects and what does not, being questioned. It indeed appeared to me as a heroic endeavour claiming to change the world. But what made such a claim less of a fantastical idea, and more of a hopeful imagination of the protestors was the amount of intellectual work that was put in to constantly debate and question their own idealism. I believe it is exactly this amount of intellectual investment that is demanded of an artist if he/she intends to challenge the state and the market, because at the end of the day, both protest and art-making are forms of activism, wherein the work for an individual is to search, and *research*, in order to get to the root of anything and everything that troubles and keeps one awake at night!

NOTES

¹ Ranciere, Jacques. 2009. "Contemporary Art and the Politics of Aesthetics". In Beth Hinderliter and others (Eds.), *Communities of Sense: Rethinking Aesthetics and Politics* (pp. 31-50). Durham, NC: Duke University Press. The argument also appears in Birgit Meyer's essay, *Aesthetics of Persuasion: Global Christianity and Pentecostalism's Sensational Forms*, wherein she, on the basis of her reading of Ranciere, writes, 'Since humans are sentient beings, aesthetics is political, and thus constitutes (and she quotes Ranciere) "specific orders of visibility and sense through which the political division into assigned roles and defined parts, manifests itself"' (2010, 755). I utilise this to find the title of my paper, wherein I suggest how I have tried to understand aesthetics through the JNU political protest.

² "JNU Sedition Row", Wikipedia, last modified 1 September 2018, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/JNU_sedition_row

³ As example, see Farge, William. 2006. "The Politics of Culture and the Art of Dissent in Early Modern Japan". In *Art, Power, and Social Change*, Vol. 33, No. 2, *Social Justice/Global options* (pp. 63-76). Frascina, Francis. 1999. *Art, Politics, and Dissent: Aspects of the Art Left in Sixties America*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

⁴ In addition to this argument, I would like to say that what complicates the matter of exercising creative freedom for any art or artist is a responsibility of attending to matters of social inequalities, and carefully tackling impulses that may have the tendency to abide by existing hierarchies, or worse, create new ones. I propose that it is only on the basis of such responsibility that one can differentiate between authentic and inauthentic performances, if at all!

⁵ Bhardwaj, Meghna. "Let us change the world! Slogan-raising bodies in the JNU student protest". In *Ligament* (online) Vol. 2, Issue. 2, (2016 [cited on 2 September 2018]). Available from <http://ligament.in/let-us-change-the-world.html>

⁶ Maya Krishna Rao (born 1953) is an Indian theatre and performance artist. A *Sangeet Natak Akademi* Awardee (Govt. of India) for acting, Maya has had formal training in *Kathakali* and has performed extensively in street and physical theatre. Currently a faculty at Department of Education, Shiv Nadar University, India, Maya has created several politically radical performance works such as *Ravanama* (2011), *A Deep Fried Jam...A Deeper Fried Jam* (2002), *Khol Do* (1993), to name a few.

⁷ It may be noted here that in a very recent judgement dated 6 September 2018, Indian Supreme Court has decriminalised homosexual sex in India.

⁸ See: Valay Singh, "How student activism is taking India by storm, with issues ranging from caste discrimination to high fees". In *The Economic Times* [online] (21 February 2016 [cited 2 September, 2018]); available from <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/how-student-activism-is-taking-india-by-storm-with-issues-ranging-from-caste-discrimination-to-high-fees/articleshow/51071071.cms>

And, Thozhilalar Koodam, "The student movement and working class struggle: Is an alliance possible?" In *Thozhilalar Koodam: A blog on labour issues in Tamil Nadu* [online] (23 May, 2016 [cited 2 September 2018]); available from <http://tnlabour.in/automobile-industry/3688>

⁹ Lecture held in Venice in 2011 in the framework of the series *The State of Things*, organised by the office for Contemporary Art Norway (OCA). Published under the title "Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street" in *#Occupy Los Angeles Reader*, Vol. 1-3, 2011.

¹⁰ NDTV. "Unique Way of Protest at JNU". [Online] (17 February 2016 [cited July 5, 2017]); available from <http://www.ndtv.com/video/news/news/an-unique-way-of-protest-at-jnu-404165>

¹¹ In the way the protest debated "dissent" and emphasised varied interests and opinions of "the people", it managed to rupture the thought in which non-populism and anti-populism are not differentiated. See Cas Mudde, "Populism isn't dead. Here are five things you need to know about it", in *The Guardian* [Online] (7 July 2017 [cited 9 July 2017]); available from <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/jul/07/populism-dead-european-victories-centrists>

¹² hooks, bell. "Feminism is for Everybody: bell hooks for International Woman's Day". in *The Pluto Press Blog—Independent, radical publishing* [Online] (8 March 2017 [cited on 9 July 2017]); available from <https://www.plutobooks.com/blog/feminism-is-for-everybody-bell-hooks/>

¹³ Sessions, David. "The Rise of the Thought Leader". In *New Republic Magazine* [Online] (28 June 2017 [cited on 9 July 2017]); available from <https://newrepublic.com/article/143004/rise-thought-leader-how-superrich-funded-new-class-intellectual>

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