

TEMPLES, FAIRS AND FESTIVALS OF TRIPURA

Dr. Gautam Kumar Bera*

More than six decades ago the erstwhile princely state of Tripura was annexed to Indian Union. It was principally a tribal state under the patronage of the kings who too had a tribal ethnicity. Large scale sanskritization has transformed the history of Tripura to a great extent over the ages (Chatterjee, 1950; Bera, 2012). All the districts of this state can boast of the presence of a number of temples where important fairs and festivals are also held at different times commemorating meaningful events. In the capital town of Agartala one can find temples devoted to various Gods and Goddesses most of which were constructed during the reign of erstwhile kings at their initiatives (Hunter, 1876). Though constructed by the feudal lords, yet these were open to both sovereigns as well as subalterns. The present day capital town of Agartala carries the glories of a number of famous temples occupying a varied space built over a longitudinal period of time where particular kings can be credited with the initiation of such ideas. Every king had his own choice for a particular God or Goddess who were honoured with a specific space for the posterity of the kingdom. However, all of these have put an indelible mark in the minds of men to come in future.

At Agartala one comes across Durga Bari, Kali Bari, Jagannath Bari, Mangal Chandi Mandir, Siva bari, and many others like Siva Kali Mandir (at Ker Choumuhani) that have come up of late in the last few decades. Since the tutelary deity of Tripureswari has been discussed elsewhere, it needs no mention here again. Not far from the capital town where Ujjayanta Palace or the Natun Haveli is located, the Puran Haveli stands at the older capital named Khayerpur where the famous Choudo Devta temple is located. The Choudo Devta or fourteen Gods are considered to be the Kul Devta (lineage God) of the erstwhile kings. An annual fair called Kharchi is also organized there, which has been described in the preceding chapter along with the temple organization. At the Choudo Devta temple the epithet reads that 'according to Rajmala at the end of the era of Dwapar the Subrai king Trilochan started the worship of Choudo Devta. In 1760 A. D. when the capital was shifted from Udaipur to Khayerpur Maharaja Krishna Manikya established the temple of Choudo Devta'. These fourteen Gods are ascribed to be the Kul Devta (lineage God) of the kings of Tripura who are also worshipped by all across religious and ethnic entities. The Kul Purohit (priest of the lineage) called Chantai accompanied by Naran, Burrifung and Galim, all associates of the priest, perform the annual worship of the deities called Kharchi, which prolongs for seven days from the Sukla Astami Tithi (eighth day of lunar

month) of Ashad (June-July). One idol is made of silver and the rest are of astadhatu (an alloy of eight metals). With the syncretic formation of both tribal and Hindu beliefs and rituals that form a melting pot across caste and creed, all worship the Gods and Goddesses during the congregation of Kharchi. One may presume here a sense of sub-nationalism since the people still consider this festival as the national festival of Tripura. This has been attested in the epithet too (Bera, 2008a, 2008b, 2010).

Approximately thirty kms. south of the capital town lies a small village Kasba, which cuts across two countries, Indian part of West Tripura district and Bangladesh part of Comilla district at a fringe area. Lying along the barbed fencing of the Indo-Bangladesh international border, the temple stands on a hillock in front of a lotus pond called Kamala Sagar. The temple named Kasba Kalibari or Kamalasar Matabari or Kamala Sundari Mandir is devoted to the Goddess Kalika who is also called Kasbeswari. The legend has that Maharaja Kalyan Manikya (1626-27 A. D.) thought of erecting a temple of Kalika. But his dream was not fulfilled and Maharaja Chhatra Mainkya (Nakshtra Ray) built the temple at this place. However, the plausible legendary belief is that in 1687 A. D. Maharaja Narendra Manikya brought the idol of the Goddess from Hubigunge located in Srihatta (Sylhet) district of present day Bangladesh (Chaudhuri, 1910-11). The king had a dream revelation to bring the idol and install at the present site, then called Kaylargarh. The idol, facing west, stands over Siva lying in Sabasana (posture of dead). Hence, the Goddess is worshipped here as Dakshina Kali. The pond lying west of the temple is full of kamal (lotus), but the nomenclature Kamalasar (pond of lotus) does not stand for that. It was named after Maharani Kamala Devi, wife of Maharaja Narendra Manikya. On the day of every new moon, a he-goat is sacrificed at the precinct at the initiative of the district administration, upholding the feudal hegemony, a legacy of the past. An annual congregation of people belonging to all caste, creed and sect is held on the day of new moon during the month of Bhadra (August-September), which is called Bhadra Amabasya Mela. Since it is held on this day it is also referred to as Kousi Amabasya. The precinct is specially guarded to avoid a flow of rush of devotees. Huge numbers of he-goats are sacrificed in honour of the deity after fulfillment of wish, which is done by a man belonging to the Napit (barber) caste. Shops and establishments remain open throughout the clock where vendors from different localities sell their products. Since located at the international boundary a number of curious faces from across the border also peep from a distance to have a glimpse of the day's affair. This temple too portrays a syncretic manifestation by way of attendance of devotees cutting across religious and ethnic boundaries. On the hillock, in front of the camp of the Border Security Force that keep a close vigil of the security of the nation, a number of temporary shops offer lucrative manihari (imitation ornaments) items attracting specially the womenfolk. A temporary stage is built to arrange for an open competition of kirtan (devotional song) that is attended to by a number of professional groups of singers. Of late, the trend seems to be more inclined towards mundane matters rather than religious affairs. A large number of tribals, Hindu castes and people of Muslim community living even across the international boundary participate in the performance of the temple on all occasions and to fulfill their cherished desire.

Udaipur, also called Rangamati, had been referred to earlier as the oldest capital of Tripura Rajya till 1760 A. D., which hosted the Manikya dynasty across several generations. Hence, many temples had been built at regular intervals in the past as per the demanding need of particular kings. Probably there is no other town that can boast of having such a huge assemblage of temples around its territorial limits. Hence, it is also referred to as the 'temple town' of the state. As is evident from records Udaipur came into existence about nine hundred and eleven years before the construction of Tripureswari temple. As per Rajmala, in 1464 A. D. Maharaja Ratna Manikya renamed Rangamati to Ratanpur after his name. In 1567 A. D. Suba Gopi Prasad endorsing the name Udai Manikya ascended the throne and changed the name Ratanpur to Udaipur after his name. The recorded history of Udaipur spans over four hundred and thirty four years, before which Ratanpur had a history of one hundred and four years. Even before that Rangamati bore a very old history. During the reign of Ratna Manikya I many Bengali Brahmans were invited to this soil probably with the intention of settling them in this land as priests in different temples. It is believed that with the establishment of the tutelary deity Tripureswari in 1501 A. D., the urge to form newer sacred centres emerged in the minds of his successors as a result of which several temples were constructed in the vicinity of the town. Today one may experience the existence of such temples in huge numbers in a varied space of the town, but a considerable number of these are in a deserted and dilapidated condition probably due to the uncared attribute to renovate the centres. This may have been coupled with the fact that as a small tree can not grow beneath a bigger tree, smaller temples too could not gain momentum and attraction of people due to the existence of the largest temple of the area, the Tripureswari temple, standing over a hillock as the guardian spirit, protecting the sovereigns and subalterns at a time.

Attesting a legend of Tripuresh Bhairav, the temple called Mahadev Bari was constructed by Maharaja Dhanya Manikya where the phallic emblem of Siva is installed. Facing the west the temple has naat mandir (open prayer hall) in front of it, which was built a century ago. Being surrounded by walls on all sides the arena also encompasses two more temples both of which are devoid of any idol. There is a pair of rock cut lion at the entrance of the main temple. The deciphered stone inscriptions suggest that the bigger temple inside the premises is Gopinath temple, which faces the south. Maharaja Kalyan Manikya in 1650 A. D. (5th Ashada, Tuesday, 1572 Saka era) built it dedicating it to lord Gopinath or Krishna. However, there is a hearsay that it had been the temple of Choturdash Devta the idols of which were shifted at a later stage of historical time. It is built in a chaar chaala pattern and the core chambers resemble a stupa. There is an amalaka resembling a small pitcher. It also features a tetrad slanting roof and a bow-shaped vault arched above the gateway. The pattern carved above the vault resembles a blooming lotus, bearing a flagstaff at the top. The local people refer to the other temple within the arena as Lakshmi Narayan temple. But historical anecdotes attest that it was actually a Vishnu temple constructed by Ramdev son of Maharaja Govinda Manikya in 1673 A. D. This part has also been attested by stone inscriptions, which suggest that the temple dates back to 1595 Saka era (1673 A. D.). Though some scholars mention it as the temple of Brindavan Chandra built by Mukunda Manikya, yet this does not seem to be

authentic since the reign of Mukunda Manikya was during the period 1729-1738 A. D.

Adjacent to the Mahadev Bari there are two temples called Dutyar Bari. It seems to be a corrupt derivative of Dwaita meaning dual, Daitya meaning demon, and Dwitiya meaning feminine form of second. Etymologically the last term seems to be associated with the nomenclature, which is based on a legend. There were two girls in the same name in the king's family. One was the daughter of Jagannath Dev, younger brother of Maharaja Govinda Manikya. The other was the daughter of Balibhim Narayan, maternal uncle of Ratna Manikya II. Scholars opine that probably the temple was built in 1621 Saka era (1692 A. D.) during the reign of Ratna Manikya.

On the way from Mahadev Bari to Badar Mokam, there lie three temples called Gunabati Mandir Gucchha (group of Gunabati temples) built in honour of Maharani Gunabati wife of Maharaja Govinda Manikya in 1668 A. D. The core chambers of the temples possess pitcher shaped buttresses. The crown over the stupa on the vestibule is beautifully crafted like lotus. All these temples are covered with chaar chaala.

Further on the way to Badar Mokam there is another cluster of temples comprising three temples. One of these has double storied Jhulan temple. The interior wall carries inscriptions of Ananta Nag, the serpent and Vishnu. It is also called Lukpalanir Dalan (the hide and seek building). Legend has that in Baisakh (April-May) of 1590 Saka era (1668 A. D.) Maharani Gunabati Devi, the queen of Maharaja Govinda Manikya devoted this temple in the name of Vishnu.

The lifeline of Udaipur town, the Gomati, one of the principal rivers of Tripura, flanks the dilapidated remains of the erstwhile kings that testified a dynasty once upon a time. One finds there the Bhubaneswari temple, attributed to the Sakti cult. In the past it had attracted the scholarly world on many counts. One such was the Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore's emotional bondage with this temple. The backdrop of the famous novel Rajarshi and the celebrated lyric drama Bisarjan were conceived of by the poet testifying Bhubaneswari temple's anecdotes. The roof of the temple features a chaar chaala pattern with stupa like crowns on the vestibule and the core chambers. The stupa on core chamber is embellished with floral designs. History testifies that Maharaja Govinda Manikya ascended the throne in 1660 A. D. but was dethroned by his stepbrother Nakshatra Ray or Chhatra Manikya the following year. The Maharaja regained the throne in 1667 A. D. and ruled for the next nine years when he built the temple. Renowned as a scholar the Maharaja got Brihad Naarad Puran translated into Bengali during his reign. He also constructed the Gangaail dyke built as a welfare measure for his subjects along the river Gomati to prevent floods.

On the full moon day of Maagha, popularly called Maaghi Purnima in 1599 Saka era (1677 A. D.), Ramdev Manikya built the temple of Vishnu with the desire of his illustrious father Govinda Manikya's ascent to the heaven. It lies on the southern side of the old palace. The temple town of Udaipur also accommodates a terracotta temple on the south bank of the river Gomati at the northeastern side of Jagannath Dighi. This is probably the only temple in the town that has terracotta figures especially of six-armed Devi mounted on lion. It is built in chaar chaala pattern with a stupa hemisphere on top. People call it Gundicha Bari and also

Hari temple. There is a confusing statement regarding its origin. Some are of the opinion that it was built by Daitya Narayan (1532-1542 A. D.), the army general of Bijoy Manikya, while others believe that Maharaja Govinda Manikya (1660-61; 1667-1676 A. D.) built it. The temple bears the terracotta tradition of eastern India, though it is on the way of wane.

At the southwest corner of Puran Dighi or Jagannath Dighi there lies a stone built temple called Jagannath Bari or Jagannather Dol. Dedicated to lord Vishnu this temple was constructed on the full moon day of the month of Kartik (October-November) in 1583 Saka era (1661 A. D.) by Maharaja Govinda Manikya and his youngest brother Jagannath Dev with the desire that their mother Saharwati could ascend to the heaven. The Rajmala has, however, mentioned that Daitya Narayan, the army general of Bijoy Manikya (1532-1563 A. D.) had brought the idols of lord Jagannath, Balabhadra and Subhadra from Utkal to install at the temple. This has an implication that before the reign of Govinda Manikya, a temple devoted to the three cognate Gods and Goddess was present there. Since 1904 A. D. there is a congregation of people at this site on the day to celebrate Ratha Yatra festival. Probably the tradition of rath was brought into this land from Orissa, during the reign of Maharaja Bijoy Manikya or may be during a period around that time. The festival encompassing rath circumambulation evolved in the context of the social, cultural, feudal and the political aspects of Tripura. There was a legacy of tribal autonomy, reciprocity and paganism. These were counterpoised to the hierarchical social organization of caste, the tendency of centralization of social and political authority at the level of the Raja as the head of the State and the highly systematized canonical Brahminical hegemony. Today it is the festival of common people, which is celebrated as an expression of reciprocal relationship among different social groups.

A temple named Hari Mandir is situated at the eastern bank of Jagannath Dighi. The temple consists of two chaalas with the opening of door facing the west that leads to the courtyard and vestibules, which in turn leads to internal chamber and core chamber. The core chamber is tetragonal in shape. Two buttresses decorated with pitchers at the top are present in front of the vestibule. The walls are ribbed. The northern and southern walls of the vestibule feature multifaceted parapets and the smooth surface between the parapets along with the highest rib is ornamented with triangular lines. The apical part of the vestibule and the core chamber depict a stupa. Since it is considered as the Hari Mandir people congregate here to celebrate Dol Yatra.

At the heart of Udaipur town, on the eastern part of Chakbazar, a twin temple arena is situated. Known as the Nager Dol these two temples are believed to be hermitages. Opening southwards, these were built to be around some time in the seventeenth century and were devoted to lord Vishnu. The core chambers are tetragonal in shape and are chaar chaala in design.

Empirically observed Udaipur accommodates temples that are situated by the side of a dighi or lake or any other water source like river (Gomati in this case). Most of the temples have been built on elevated paved terraces. There has been a tremendous impact of chaar chaala style, which is unique to Bengal School of thought of architecture as noticed during the medieval period. But the conspicuous emergence of stupa like structure can only be attributed to the indigenous style of architecture seen in Tripura. It can also be

testified that the temples of Udaipur show allegiance to the Vaisnav thought probably with the exceptions like Mahadev Bari, Bhubaneswari temple and obviously Tripureswari, the temple of the tutelary deity.

Apart from these important temples described above and also in two preceding chapters depicting the tutelary deity of Tripureswari and the lineage cult of Choudho Devta, the state bears testimony to the fact that it is also the land of fairs and festivals, all of which have carved out a special position in the religious map of Tripura along with the lines of sacred-secular continuum. The places where these fairs and festivals are organized not only bear archaeological and cultural significance, but also these stand as a relic of the past where ancestors of this land have put their creative talents with meticulous efforts making the sites as important tourist spots. Despite serious efforts, all could not be brought into light here. Therefore, a modest approach has been attempted to bring in to relief only a few major fairs and festivals. Moreover, some fairs and festivals have also been included in discussions dealing with Gods, Goddesses and temples.

About eleven kms. east of Kailasahar, the headquarters of North Tripura district lies Unakoti Tirtha or Raghunandan Parvat where one finds anthropomorphic carvings on the walls of the hills. The images are numerous, said to be one less than a crore, which portray images of various Gods and Goddesses, belonging to Hindu pantheon. It is believed that these are not man made but are God's gifted treasure where religiosity is embedded in the minds of men. One legend attributes that Kapil Muni during his sojourn stayed here and built the shrine. The other legend, which speaks of these esoteric forms narrates that Unakoti was the meeting place of Gods and Goddesses where they assembled with the intention of creating another Vrindavan located near Mathura in northwest India. One crore Gods and Goddesses thought of assembling there on the Sukla Astami (eighth day of lunar fortnight of Chaitra (March-April) to make the place the second Brindavan. Since they cannot come down from heaven in the daytime when human beings are awake, they decided to gather at night. The Supreme God warned them that after meeting together they should leave the place before dawn or before the first crow has cawed, whichever is earlier, or else all will turn to stones. Unfortunately on the proposed night all but one appeared and assembled. All of them waited for the last God to arrive but a crow cawed at that time which turned all the rest Gods and Goddesses into stone images, as one sees all of them on the walls of the hills at Unakoti. The legends only attributes to beliefs. However, many scholars feel that the stone carvings are the arduous works of Nath Jogi community belonging to Saiva sect.

Etymologically Unakoti stands for una meaning one less and koti meaning crore in Bengali, hence attesting the myth of the place. Since unknown past the place is visited by anthropologists, archaeologists, geologists, art lovers and for that matter all others including devotees to pay homage to the Gods and Goddesses and also to understand the myth behind such creations. In course of time the place got linked up with a congregation of people called Unakoti mela, also known as Astami mela or Baruni mela as it is held on the Sukla Astami (eighth day of lunar fortnight) of Chaitra (March-April). The fair is held for only two days. Beginning in the night on the first day at the top of the hills it shifts to the plains about four

kms. west of the hills on the next day, which continues till dusk. As evident from hearsay and also from empirical observations except the Kuki and Lushai tribal people, all congregate at the place irrespective of their ethnic origin. Since the Lushai and the Kuki subscribe to Christianity, they find it inconvenient in accordance with their religious proscriptions to attend the site.

The main attraction of the fair is Baruni or Astami snan (sacred bath), taken in the kunda (pit considered sacred) formed by the assemblage of spring water. It is believed that a sacred bath in the kunda can lead to attain punya (virtue). In addition, it is also believed that a bath can cure a person from all diseases. At the hill top along the lines of stone engravings of deities like Lakshmi, Mahadev, and Vishnu and so on there is a temple devoted to Vishnu, which is specially attended by the Vaisnavas. A priest belonging to the Tripuri community officiates in the performances of ritual there.

However, reference to Unakoti, also spelt as Unakuti, as a place of lord Siva makes a dent in peoples' mind, both tribal and non-tribal. There is an evidence of Austric substratum in this region as is evident from language, culture and custom. The earliest reference to this Siva tirtha is found in the works of A. K. Chaudhuri (c.f. Srihatter Itivritta, 1910-11). Soon after that in 1914 Captain Williams, the then Political Agent of Tripura Rajya made a reference to this subject. The Archaeological Survey of India took this report into cognizance of in 1920 and a couple of years later an authoritative account of Unakoti was published in 1921-22.

The main deity of the shrine is known as Unkotiswara Kala Bhairav, which is a colossal Siva head of about thirty feet in height with the third eye carved vertically on the forehead, the other two eyes indicated by incised double lines without any marks of pupil. The nose descends in a straight line, the mouth is slit with strokes of teeth. The incised moustache takes an upward turn culminating in a loop. There is a headgear depicting almost a tribal basketry with ears being ornamented. The idol of primordial nature can be attributed by the traits of arbitrary treatment of human body, character, intellectual realism, primacy of surface, repetitiveness, geometric spirit, symmetry, lack of observation and geometric evolution, and anonymity. It can be subsumed here that there is strong influence of Austric substratum with the attribute of after life realism and belief in soul, which is a common phenomenon in this part of the country.

The lifeline of South Tripura district, the river Gomati, originates from Damburu Falls. Since the people of the state in general and the tribal population in particular consider this river to be very sacred they call this place Tirthamukh (mouth of the pilgrimage). Located in the lush green meadows at the confluence of Raima and Sarma, the two lovers, the place has a legend of historical time. The then king considered this affair of love as incestuous and announced capital punishment for the lovers. After execution, their blood turned in to two rivers and the place became a holy spot. The Rajmala, however, mentions that Gomati has several springs at the place of its origin, which in formation look like Siva's damburu (Sen, 1337 Tripurabda; Singha, 1896). Etymologically this seems to be a correct appellation. Hence, the devotees made the nomenclature Damburu Falls. Though a conjecture, yet it can be inferred

that Tirthamukh came to be known as a holy place much before the origin of the Sakta cult. The springs originating at the source of the Gomati have specific names like Ranikunda, Kachhuakunda and Kaqmalakunda, which form a large pool at the meeting place. The stream that flows out of the pool make its way through a narrow passage formed by rocky walls on two sides. The Damburu Falls descends from the hilltop of Devtamura (head of the God) through a series of terraces. Situated at a distance of thirty-five kms. from the sub-divisional town of Amarapur the fair is held at the third highest terrace of the hill. The fair begins on the day of Poush Sankranti (Makar Sankranti) during mid January and continues for three days. Though no idol could be seen at this site still the tribal people especially the Tripuri, numerically the largest tribal group of the state, attend the fair and take a holy bath in the sacred river Gomati. An aukchai (tribal priest) officiates in the ritual of worshipping the river Gomati. A large number of he-goats are sacrificed over these three days.

The Banabihar mela also called Panchnailyar mela is celebrated at a place called Panchnailya situated thirty-five kms. off Sonamura. The fair is held on the full moon night of the moon lit fortnight (Sukla paksha) of Maagha (January-February) called popularly Maaghi Purnima. It ends the next day before dusk. The sacredness can be attributed to a hearsay that has become a local legend now. About a century back a man belonging to Tripuri community while walking along the waterfall of this area by sheer inquisitiveness filled up one of the outlets of the stream with heaps of mud. Soon after that he felt a pain in his eyes and got blind. Since then this place had been revered by all considering the sacredness of the site bearing supernatural attributes. On the day of the fair local kirtan (devotional song) singers assemble there and sing bhajan and kirtan attributed to Gauranga Mahaprabhu. Lessons from sacred texts and the epics Ramayana and Mahabharata are read out, which attracts a huge gathering of people belonging to neighbouring villages.

In addition to the fairs and festivals of religious importance there are other festivals too that have an economic bearing. In connection with jhum cultivation, the traditional economic pursuit with primordial technique, a number of tribal groups especially the Tripuri, Rieng, Jamatia and so on also celebrate some festivals that come up soon after major harvesting particularly during mid winter, or even before and after that, since in jhum way of agrarian practice there is serial mode of harvesting of various crops that have been sown in an assorted manner. The Tripuri celebrate Bahangni Mutairenai in Poush-Magha (January-February), the Rieng celebrate Bisucani in Chaitra (March-April), the Jamatia and Noatia celebrate Mamita during Aswin-Kartik (October-November) and so on. One may find an economic overtone in all of these since the people remain in festive mood because of rich harvest. The first grains are also worshipped and maisoi [payesh / paramanna / jhum rice (mai) boiled in milk with sugar] is offered as a special dish. It is evident from the above note that the festivals not only bear a religious significance, but also it has an economic bearing matching with the way of life of the tribal people.

More than half a century ago, a fair started in the village Thakurmura lying under Sonamura sub-division, which has a syncretic element embedded in it. It is locally known as Thakurmura or Pir Dargar mela in commemoration of a Muslim Pir (saint). The fair is held

before a tomb of a Pir who died on his way in quest of knowledge. The local legend says that a Bengali gentleman named Purna Chandra Das once had a dream revelation for organizing an annual fair commencing on the first day of Maagha (January) for three days. Since then the fair is arranged annually. People attending the fair light candles and burn incense over the tomb. It had been observed that though it started in a small place with a handful of people around, it got universalized in terms of its attendance across the religious boundaries. There seems to be a tendency of carrying forward and upward traits of local elements to the greater religious canopy. However, one cannot deny that there is tremendous amount of syncretic thoughts and beliefs embedded in it.

From the above note it is apparent that there was a tendency or effort to reconcile and unite various systems of philosophy or religious opinion on the basis of tenets common to all and against a common opponent. This fusion of two or more inflectional forms, which were originally different as of two cases of religion, has taken a root under the canopy of syncretism. The form of syncretism as is seen in different parts of Tripura is an attempt for blending, harmonizing or massing of different or antagonistic elements, which were clearly understandable in terms of the peopling of this land, habitational pattern, composition of folk songs, belief in saints (particularly Muslim saints), myths and legends that are current among people professing different religions, practising varied occupational pursuits and from the pattern of immigration to this soil. An important point, which is mooted here, is that the cults in Tripura have assumed a new dimension with a new social meaning in the changed socio-political environment. Hence, the cults have been understood here as an integral part of the whole process of social evolution rather than as self-congruent, self-contained domains that generate non-assimilative meaning. It is the phase of a cultural understanding in this part of poly ethnic mosaic where one finds an essence of assimilation, secularization, syncretism and universalization of culture while delineating the cults as a cultural process (Bera, 2012).

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