

The architects of *Current Science*

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The life of a journal is probably very much like that of a human being – full of ups and downs. And often enough, it is the Editors who try to keep the journal in the ‘up’ mode all the time. So, the story of a journal is also the story of its Editors. This article traces the journey of Current Science through a hundred volumes, and the Editors who steered it to this landmark.

Science journalism in India¹ began with the publications of the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1784, and the *Journal of the Bombay Natural History Society* which started in 1886. Forty-six years later, *Current Science* was born. ‘An event of major importance to the development of science in India during the past year was the decision made by a group of scientists during the last session of the Indian Science Congress at Bangalore to publish a scientific journal on the lines of the well-known English weekly journal, *Nature*. A committee was appointed and eventually the publication has been commenced of a monthly journal entitled *Current Science*; the first issue appeared in July, 1932’, said L. L. Fermor² in his Presidential address to the Indian Science Congress (ISC) in 1933.

The idea of commencing *Current Science* was conceived in 1931 by a few scientists, mainly from the Indian Institute of Science (IISc) and Central College, Bangalore. They discussed this idea with C. V. Raman who happened to be visiting the city at that time, and then, in order to find out what the larger scientific community in India thought about launching an ‘Indian science news journal’, M. O. Forster, who was then the Director of IISc, issued a questionnaire in August that year. The questionnaire (no copy of which has been traceable so far, despite the attempts of many who are interested in the history of science in India) apparently got an ‘overwhelming response’. Subsequently, the first working committee of the journal was appointed during the ISC in Bangalore that Fermor referred to^{3,4}. Since then, *Current Science* has had nine Editors, who have steered it through a hundred volumes. The story of *Current Science* is, in many ways, the story of these Editors (Figures 1 and 2).

When it began, *Current Science* had the patronage of the legends of Indian science – Raman, Birbal Sahni, S. S. Bhatnagar, J. C. Ghosh and many others,

and eminent scientists such as C. R. Narayan Rao, M. Sreenivasaya and B. Venkatesachar were involved with its production. (A detailed list of those who had promised assistance, the names of people on the Editorial Board, and the sections that were planned for the new journal may be found in a Notice pub-

lished in the first issue⁵.) Many of the scientists who were involved with *Current Science* in the beginning were also associated with some of the pioneering institutions devoted to the propagation of science in India at that time, such as IISc, the Indian Association for the Cultivation of Science (IACS) in Cal-



Figure 1. The past Editors of *Current Science*. (C. R. Narayan Rao, M. Sreenivasaya, G. N. Ramachandran, A. Jayaraman, A. S. Ganesan, M. Sirsi, M. R. A. Rao and S. Ramaseshan (<http://www.iisc.ernet.in/images/SRamSn.gif>))

HISTORICAL NOTES

cutta and the South India Science Association at Bangalore.

The founders of *Current Science* modelled the journal on the lines of *Nature*. The sections in the first few volumes of the journal were: an Editorial, followed by Letters to the Editor (in which recent scientific findings were reported), Research Notes (similar to the Research News section in *Current Science* today), Industrial Outlook, Science News, Reviews, followed by a few General Articles and Announcements. This pattern was remarkably similar to that of *Nature* in the 1930s. The layout of the journal also closely resembled that of *Nature* – the first pages of the two journals look almost identical (Figure 3).

The July 1932 issue of *Current Science* was a slim volume of 22 pages, and

began with an unsigned Editorial, 'Retrenchment and Education'. This, and most of the other Editorials that appeared in every issue in the first decade, were probably written by Narayan Rao, the journal's Editor from 1932 to 1942. The Editorials discussed a wide variety of topics, ranging from education to politics, economics and scientific research. His Editorial, 'An Indian Academy of Science'⁶ might have been the starting point for the establishment of the Academies of Sciences in India. (Subsequently, Narayan Rao served as the first Secretary of the Indian Academy of Sciences (IASc), Bangalore, that was founded in 1934; Raman was its first President.) R. A. Gregory, the then Editor of *Nature*, was also a strong supporter of the movement to set up an Academy of Science in India⁷⁻⁹. Narayan Rao and Gregory corresponded frequently, and it is evident from the tone of many letters and numerous New Year greetings that their relationship was not merely professional.

Narayan Rao (15 August 1882–2 January 1960) was a pioneer in the field of zoology, and was known for his work on amphibian taxonomy and developmental biology. He was the President of the Zoology section of the 1939 ISC at Lahore, where he spoke about 'Batrachians and their environment'¹⁰. In a significant reminder that his contributions to amphibian biology are relevant to this day, a new genus of frog, *Raorchestes*, named in the honour of Narayan Rao, was recently reported in *Current Sci-*

*ence*¹¹. A professor of both zoology and English¹², Narayan Rao was responsible for the establishment of the Department of Zoology in Central College, Bangalore, of which he was the Head till 1937. He also served as the Principal of Central College for a year, before retiring in 1938. B. R. Seshachar, who was his student, wrote in 1960: 'It was under his inspiring influence that some of us came to recognize scientific research as an integral part of University teaching. If today, the Department of Zoology, Central College, has come to obtain the recognition as a centre of research in the country, it is entirely due to his initiative and inspired guidance'¹³.

It was during difficult times that Narayan Rao became the Editor of *Current Science* – communication was cumbersome and time-consuming; in a letter to Narayan Rao, Gregory mentions that it took as long as four months for a letter from India to reach England (a situation that is hard to imagine today, when communication between continents takes just a few seconds). Besides, the Second World War (1939–45) had severely crippled publishing, as printing material became scarce and the cost of printing increased manifold. It is possible that the Rockefeller Foundation, which economically supported scientific journals in that hour of need, also contributed to the sustenance of *Current Science*¹. As the journal's first Editor, however, Narayan Rao evidently put in a tremendous amount of thought and effort, and made many sacrifices to ensure that the fledgling journal

Presidents	
B. Venkatesachar	1932–42
J. C. Ghosh	1942–47
C. V. Raman	1947–70
S. Bhagavantam	1970–76
S. Ramaseshan	1977–82
C. N. R. Rao	1983–88
Anna Mani	1989–94
M. S. Valiathan	1994–2000
M. S. Swaminathan	2001–06
R. Narasimha	2007–
Secretaries	
K. S. Varadachari	1932–36
B. N. Sastry	1936–42
M. A. Govinda Rao	1942–47
M. R. A. Rao	1947–49
M. Sreenivasaya	1949–52
A. V. Telang	1952–60
K. Ramaiah	1960–62
B. S. Ramakrishna	1962–66
J. V. Bhat	1966–74
M. R. A. Rao	1974–79
M. Sirsi	1980–82
M. Shadaksharaswamy	1980–88
N. G. Puttaswamy	1989–94
N. V. Madhusudhana	1995–
Editors	
C. R. Narayan Rao	1932–42
M. Sreenivasaya	1942–50
G. N. Ramachandran	1950–57
H. Ramachandran	1947–57
(Assistant Editor)	
A. Jayaraman	1957–58
A. S. Ganesan	1958–73
M. Sirsi	1973–74
M. R. A. Rao	1974–88
S. Ramaseshan	1989–94
S. Ramaseshan/P. Balaram	1995–96
P. Balaram/S. Ramaseshan	1996–2003
P. Balaram	2004–

Figure 2. Presidents, Secretaries and Editors of *Current Science* over the years.



Figure 3. The first pages of *Nature* and *Current Science* in 1932.

did not die for want of financial support or good writing. An article written in January 1942, to bid him farewell upon his retirement from the board of Editors of *Current Science*, says, ‘... the greatest and the most enduring contribution which Prof. Narayan Rao has made to the advancement of *Current Science* is the organization of a band of young and devoted enthusiasts who, out of pure love of the cause, have given freely of their time and labour for the service of the Journal under his inspiring guidance’. The note goes further to mention that Narayan Rao undertook a nationwide campaign in 1938 and visited many of the university centres and the capitals of Indian States in western and northern India ‘as the envoy of *Current Science* pleading for increased financial support’, the response to which was ‘both spontaneous and generous’¹⁴. Narayan Rao was much appreciated for the ‘policy and power of the leading articles’, the high standards that he had maintained in the contributions to *Current Science*, and for the special issues that were brought out during that time, on subjects such as ‘Laue diagrams’ and ‘Genetics’ (Figure 4). (Unfortunately, the practice of bringing out special issues was abandoned till many years later when S. Ramaseshan became the Editor.) There were also single essay supplements on various topics, such as ‘Mechanism of enzyme action’,

‘The problem of reality in physics’ and ‘Chemical effects of electrical discharge’; many more came out in subsequent years during M. Sreenivasaya’s Editorship.

The University of Madras and IISc had made grants towards the maintenance of *Current Science*, and there was some income generated from the sale of the journal and advertisements. Yet, *Current Science* suffered from shortage of funds in its first year, and Narayan Rao had to shepherd the journal through this too. Fermor mentions in his Presidential address to the 1933 ISC: ‘... the present year’s budget of the journal has been framed on the basis of only 300 subscribers. . . 200 additional subscribers would square the budget. . . if Indian science deserves the dignity of supporting an All-India journal in science, it can easily secure this dignity by what is really a trivial increase in the number of subscribers; for what are 500 subscribers amongst over 300 million people?’²

The second decade, and a new Editor

Ten years after the inception of *Current Science*, two major changes took place – Narayan Rao retired, and the Current Science Association was formally registered. J. C. Ghosh, the then Director of

IISc, who would later become the first Director of the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), Kharagpur, was the first formal President of the Association, from 1942 to 1947. Sreenivasaya (5 December 1895–16 January 1969), who was in the Department of Fermentation Technology, IISc, took over as the new Editor. It is possible that Sreenivasaya’s association with *Current Science* started when he was a student at Central College, where Narayan Rao was a Professor¹⁵.

Sreenivasaya was a biochemist and a ‘self-taught’ microbiologist, who was greatly respected for his contributions to both these fields. In 1919, he had just given up his training in law in Bombay due to ill-health; and his family had been rendered homeless after their house was burnt down due to arson. At this difficult juncture, a three-year scholarship to study biochemistry in IISc came to his rescue, and he joined the institute as a student. He stayed there till his retirement as the Head of the Fermentation Technology Unit in 1953. He was also associated with the South India Science Association. In fact, it was during his tenure as its Secretary that Raman first publicly announced the discovery of the Raman effect in his famous 16 March 1928 lecture at Central College, under the auspices of the Association³ (Figure 5).

Sreenivasaya contributed greatly to research on an amazingly broad variety of subjects: sandal spike disease, lac production, the chemistry, structure and functions of proteins and enzymes, methods of separation and purification of enzymes, various aspects of plant biochemistry, etc.¹⁶. He also worked on the development of microbial methods for the estimation of vitamins and amino acids. P. R. Krishnaswamy, a student of Sreenivasaya, points out that these methods were particularly important in those days when instruments for the estimation of biological molecules were hard to come by¹⁵. Sreenivasaya was largely responsible for the initial work on the National Collection of Type Cultures, which was originally housed in IISc before it was shifted to the National Chemical Laboratory (NCL), Pune. He is also said to have been a skilled glass-blower and designer of scientific instruments, and an excellent teacher and guide, whose ‘tradition’ of research is being followed and passed on to this day¹⁵. In 1954, Sreenivasaya was invited to the Central Drug Research Institute

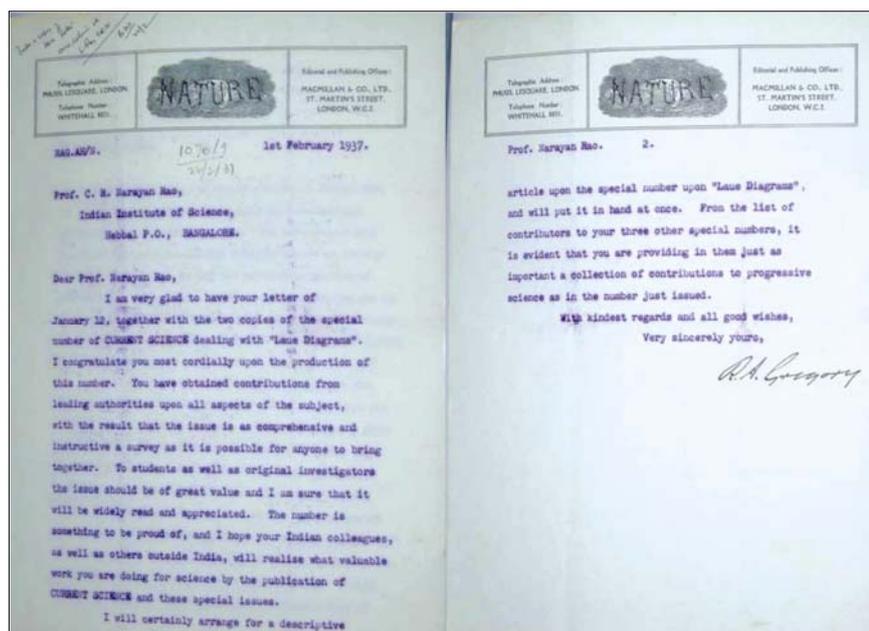


Figure 4. Letter from R. A. Gregory to C. R. Narayan Rao, commending the publication of the special issue on Laue diagrams.

NOTICE

THE Editorial Office which was temporarily located at Madras-25 has now been transferred to Bangalore permanently.

All material intended for publication in *Current Science*, corrected proofs, books for review and exchange journals may, therefore, be sent to the following address hereafter:

The Editor,
Current Science,
Malleswaram P.O.,
Bangalore-3.

Remittances, correspondence regarding subscriptions to the Journal, advertisements, etc., may please be addressed as usual to:

The Manager,
Current Science Association,
Malleswaram P.O.,
Bangalore-3.

Figure 6. Notice in *Current Science* about the change of address of the Editor's office³².

shifted back to Bangalore, 'permanently', when GNR stepped down as Editor (Figure 6).

A number of issues of *Current Science* during GNR's Editorship began with articles written by Raman, about the optical properties of diamonds and other precious gems. The journal has also been enriched by the numerous articles that GNR wrote before he became its Editor, during his Editorship, and that he continued to write till long after.

In 1957, one of Raman's most trusted and close research scholars, A. Jayaraman (b. 5 December 1926), took over as the Editor for a year. In his biography of Raman, Jayaraman narrates how he telephoned Raman one morning and was appointed as Raman's research assistant at the Raman Research Institute (RRI), Bangalore, by that evening. Jayaraman is currently in the United States, where he settled in 1960 after working closely with Raman for 11 years at RRI. The 1950s were the time when RRI, which would later house both the IASc and the Current Science Association, had just been set up. Talking about Raman's influence on him, Jayaraman says: 'I learnt my physics from him and the methodology of research and intuitive thinking. He taught me how to write scientific papers, give talks and taught me to appreciate nature. There is a difference between a narrow specialist and a true Man of Science that Raman was. I learnt this from him at every turn in my life (pers. commun.)'. In the US, Jayaraman worked for three years as a postdoctoral researcher at the University of California, and then joined Bell Labs, where he served till 1990, and made significant contributions to research in high-pressure physics.

During his Editorship, Jayaraman contributed articles to *Current Science* on magnetic resonance, masers and lasers and radio astronomy. However, by this time, the bulk of the articles submitted to *Current Science* were from the biological sciences. As the Editor, this was challenging to Jayaraman, since he 'had to rely on the judgement of people in the field'. Jayaraman also had to juggle his duties at RRI with his Editorship of *Current Science*. He says, 'It was difficult but somehow I managed it, because I enjoyed doing the work' (pers. commun.).

A. S. Ganesan (27 May 1900–2 January 1986), who also worked under Raman for a while at IACS, took over the reins from Jayaraman.

After completing his B Sc (Hons.) from St Joseph's College, Tiruchirappalli (an institution in which GNR also studied), Ganesan worked for a while in Raman's group, before doing his Ph D in Imperial College, London. Ganesan rejoined Raman's group in 1926. He served as a physics professor in various universities in the country for three decades, notably in the University of Nagpur, where he set up a research school in Raman spectroscopy. In 1958, he came to Bangalore to serve as the Editor of *Current Science* at Raman's instance, and steered the course of the journal for 15 years (Savita Sastri, pers. commun.).

It was during Ganesan's Editorship that a major change was forged – *Current Science* was converted from a monthly to a fortnightly journal in 1964 (the idea to make the journal a fortnightly had been conceived much earlier, in 1946–48 (ref. 20)). M. R. A. Rao, who later became an Editor of *Current Sci-*

ence, wrote in Ganesan's obituary: 'A man of strong principles and a strict disciplinarian, he was known for his impartiality as an Editor. With the cooperation of the meagre but devoted staff of the Journal, he was able to build up this fortnightly into one of the best publications in the country.'²¹

Raman, who was the head of RRI, IASc and the Current Science Association, passed away in 1970, and with him, a great unifying force was lost. Raman is reported to have appealed from his deathbed to Ramaseshan, his nephew and student, later the Editor of *Current Science* and a person very close to him, not to let the journals die²². Ramaseshan, true to his word to Raman, ensured that *Current Science* regained the position of importance that it had originally enjoyed. But Ramaseshan's Editorship of *Current Science* began only in 1989.

Middle-aged obscurity?

In the 1970s and 1980s, the journal's importance began to fall drastically. Subscriptions fell to less than a thousand²³. Editorials were few and far apart, there was no correspondence, and there were very few articles of general interest. 'Letters to the Editor', which had short scientific communications, constituted the bulk of the journal. There were a few longer scientific articles at the beginning of each issue, and a few book reviews towards the end. The number of pages in the journal also came down since the number of manuscripts submitted became fewer, making it rather difficult to maintain the journal as a fortnightly publication. As Balaram says, '*Current Science* as a medium for communication between Indian scientists was somewhat limited in its scope. . . It had lost some of the national reach that it had in the 30s and 40s'¹⁸. It is difficult to pinpoint the reason for this decline, because *Current Science* continued to have eminent and dedicated people at the helm – M. Sirsi served as the Editor from 1973 to 1974, and M. R. A. Rao from 1974 to 1988.

Sirsi (24 April 1911–27 January 1999) was a physician by training, but contributed greatly to research in malaria, tuberculosis and cancer biology. After a short stint at the Pharmacology Laboratory at IISc in 1949, Sirsi joined CDRI, in 1952. He might have met Sreenivasaya who was at CDRI during the same

time. Sirsi returned to IISc in the 1960s, and headed the Pharmacology Laboratory in 1964. He retired as the first Chairman of the Central Animal Facility at IISc in 1972. Sirsi was also the Founder Editor of the *Mysore Medical Association Journal*²⁴.

M. R. A. Rao (7 November 1910–24 May 1992) was a chemist and was Head of the Inorganic and Physical Chemistry Division at IISc when he retired. S. S. Krishnamurthy, who was a student at the IPC Department in the 1960s, recalls that Rao was extremely methodical and meticulous in his scientific work, and that his interest in science was not restricted to the narrow area of his research^{25,26}. He was also known for his language skills and his outstanding ability to move with people.

It is evident that Sirsi and Rao were concerned about the diminishing value of the journal: an unsigned Editorial published in the first issue of the 50th volume looks back at the glorious past of the journal, but also presents a realistic ‘stock taking’ of the not-so-happy situation in which the journal was⁴. The Editorial also notes that a reorganization of *Current Science* to help it regain its popularity could ‘brook no delay’, and the proposed changes were published in an annexure of the issue. Innovative ideas such as the introduction of ‘*Current Science* 50 years ago’ – a section in which interesting or important articles from the archives were reproduced – were implemented. However, these efforts did not really bear fruit.

Ramaseshan and the revamp of *Current Science*

Seven years before he formally took over as the Editor of *Current Science* in 1989, Ramaseshan had published an article in the journal, presenting a clear analysis of what was wrong with Indian science journals, and suggesting a course of action to make the situation better²⁷. He implemented all the suggestions when he began the task of reviving *Current Science*.

Ramaseshan (10 October 1923–29 December 2003) was known for both his scientific contributions and his capacity to build institutions and groups. He was responsible for setting up the Physics Department in IIT-Madras, and the Materials Research Laboratory and India’s

first High Pressure Laboratory at National Aerospace Laboratories (NAL), Bangalore. He served as the Director of IISc from 1980 to 1984, when he retired from formal service. After retirement, undeterred by failing health, Ramaseshan devoted all his time to fulfil Raman’s last wishes – to revitalize RRI, IASc and *Current Science* by forging changes in the structure and the nature of work in all three institutions, and by ensuring that they had adequate funding²⁸.

In 1991, Ramaseshan wrote a letter to G. Madhavan, whom he had brought with him to IASc from NAL, in which he listed the changes that he proposed to bring about to make *Current Science* a nationally important scientific journal once again. These ideas probably formed the basis of the 10 July 1991 Editorial that he wrote in *Current Science*, detailing the steps that he proposed to undertake to improve the reputation of the journal. Soon, Ramaseshan catalysed a complete transformation of *Current Science* – in its appearance, content and everything else.

One of the first things that Ramaseshan did was to hold meetings and group discussions with scientists to find out what was wrong with *Current Science*, and to get feedback about the changes that he had brought about after taking over as Editor. He constituted an Editorial Board, to ‘accelerate the process of change’ and to ‘interact with the scientific community in enhancing the quality’ of the journal²⁹. The members of the Editorial Board also had the responsibility of helping to increase the submissions made to the journal. (*Current Science* did have an Editorial Board when it started, and even had the Editors of *Nature*, *Science* and *Die Naturwissenschaften* as members. But this practice was somehow discontinued in later years²⁰.)

In order to make *Current Science* more attractive and readable, Ramaseshan introduced the idea of having a cover illustration for every issue of the journal, and also took steps to improve the quality of printing in the journal. Describing the steps that Ramaseshan took in this direction, Madhavan says, ‘Ramaseshan negotiated with reputed presses such as Macmillans and Thomsons and reorganized the printing of the Journals. The Academy journals were one of the earliest in the country to switch over to computer phototypesetting and later on to desktop composition’²³.

Ramaseshan secured the financial status of the journal too, by seeking and obtaining a grant from the Department of Science and Technology, Government of India. Further, he cemented the relationship between the Current Science Association and IASc (that had emerged in an informal way when Raman was the President of both, and was strengthened in 1981, when IASc took over the financial and managerial responsibilities of *Current Science*), by making *Current Science* a journal co-published by the two institutions.

Ramaseshan also realized that it is important to ensure that diverse branches of science are equally represented, if *Current Science* was to be truly interdisciplinary. But ‘a journal can only publish from among the manuscripts that it receives. It cannot create manuscripts’¹⁸. Balaram describes the problems Ramaseshan had to face when he tried to persuade people to write for the journal: ‘He’s told me that sometimes, in a lunch or a meeting or some sort of gathering, when he begins to approach them, some people disappear, because they are afraid he’ll ask them to write for *Current Science*’¹⁸. ‘Every single day he would write a dozen or so letters inviting people to write an article for *Current Science*. At every seminar he attended, or a colloquium, or a public lecture, he would wait till the audience had started dispersing, approach the speaker and ask him (or her) to “write it up for *Current Science*”. Given his charm and the disarming smile, he invariably succeeded. So much so that many hesitated to give talks because they knew what was in store for them’²², says G. Srinivasan. But Ramaseshan was a ‘perennial optimist’, and continued to solicit articles for *Current Science*. Though Ramaseshan’s efforts improved the quality of *Current Science* manifold, the over-representation of some branches of science, such as classical biology and earth sciences, when compared to others such as physics, chemistry and molecular biology, is still a problem that the journal is trying to address.

Current Science today

If the founders of *Current Science* were alive today, they would probably have been quite pleased to see that the journal is fulfilling the purpose for which it was

created – it is an interdisciplinary journal with a national reach, devoted to the cause of ‘representing the progress of a large section of Indian science’. It functions as a ‘useful medium for scientific contact between India and the rest of the world’³⁰, and acts as a forum for discussion of matters of interest to scientists, Indian scientists in particular. Its task of disseminating scientific information to the public was made all the more efficient when the journal became freely available on the Internet in 2000. Now, where do we go from here? In the present Editor’s words, ‘The journal is larger, glossier and hopefully, more readable than it was fifteen years ago. Publication schedules are adhered to, circulation has increased and the journal’s finances are no longer a nightmare for its managers. The journal’s local impact appears to have risen, although its “impact factor”, as measured by ISI, could do with considerable improvement. There are several issues of concern. . . The journal must attract authors and readers; it must necessarily offer rapid publication for the former and interesting fare for the latter. In a hark back to 1932, my colleagues and I must appeal to the Indian scientific community; subscribe, contribute, read and cite the journal. As an interdisciplinary journal which publishes original research, reviews, general articles and commentaries on issues of policy, *Current Science* is unique in the developing world. In opening its pages to debate and dissent the journal upholds the tradition of free enquiry’³¹.

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