

Changing Indian Traditional Structures and Cultural Institutions: Rationales and Inferences

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Abstract

In this paper an attempt is made to present how, in the twentieth century, Indian rural societies wound up their traditionalist approaches and embraced new ideals as a consequence of indigenous societal issues. The literary works chosen for the present study are Hepzibah Jesudasan's *Putham Veedu*, Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*, U.R Ananthamurthy's *Samskara*, and Anita Desai's *Fasting Feasting*. It also analyzes the causes which may have contributed to this process of social change during the period. Twentieth century is a modern era and the beginning of postmodern era, in which one could find tremendous change in all the facets of society, especially polity, culture and belief system, which influenced people over their customs, practices and lifestyles. This new era dealt with so many problems which were mostly derived from the roots of Indian social setups, conventions and convictions. Here, some of the issues taken up for discussion are power struggle between higher and lower caste groups, rationalism as against religious beliefs, flourishing women liberation movements and questioning of patriarchal family system, industrialization versus agrarian crisis, reform movements as opposed to religious tradition, empiricism in contrast to superstitious beliefs. The rationale being all these causes pressurized or shook the social institutions such as caste, family and culture and led to detraditionalization in every aspect of conventional system during the twentieth century.

Keywords: Social Change, Detraditionalization, Industrialization, Social Institutions, Modernization, Social Equilibrium.

Introduction

India is a land with rich history and generally, people live in a well-structured family system, especially in villages. Here, social institutions play a vital role in administering the growth and development of the cultural communities. At the same time, they cause stagnation in progress because of the basic norms and values they possess. Among the institutions, family is a major institution which holds a variety of conventional beliefs and practices. However, in India, the family is controlled mostly by the injunctions of the caste system. For example, the rituals and practices vary from caste to caste, some are patriarchal in nature, some are matriarchal, some are religion based and others are occupation based. These categories actually derived from the unwritten tenets of the caste system, was the major factor which influenced the family system and determined the overall development or the fall of communities during the twentieth century.

As many sociologists argue, social change is a process which takes place in human interactions and interrelations throughout human society and it occurs over time in response to complex environmental, political and social factors. Primarily, it is necessary to understand what type of influence causes social change in India, whether it is indigenous or foreign. Systems like the Zamindari in rural villages has oppressed the people of the lower rung in the society during the period. Likewise other prominent internal aspects such as ritual tradition, patriarchal system, superstitious belief, industrialization, strictures of religion, caste and class hierarchies aggravated people for a long period of time. The suppressed who tried hard to come out of those clutches by adopting modern ideals voluntarily. Here the internal influence represents indigenous social issues and the external influence represents the sources that derive from outside India.

Every element of a society has its reason for instigating conflicts. The society itself needs to change its structure from time to time in order to produce social order and establish sustainability for its survival, which can be understood through Karl Marx's social conflict studies (Marx & Engels, 2017), it gives space to examine the class conflicts and the traditional social arrangements. It argues that social change is required to correct social injustices and inequalities. Whenever and wherever conflict arises there is a societal need to neutralize and to equalize the inequalities or to correct the injustices. Thus, conflict causes change and leads to deriving modern thoughts as well as withdrawing the social conventional practices.

As structuralist De Saussure observes, sign's meaning is derived from its context and the group to which it belongs (Saussure, 2009). Similarly, the tendency of social change is possible only when a society has its need and its susceptible nature to adopt new. We could understand the social change in India apparently by looking into the elements of Indian social structure which needs change to sustain its survival rather than the interventions of external forces. Yogendra Singh states clearly about modernization in India in his article, "Modernization and its Contradictions: Contemporary social Changes in India:"

Modernization was often confused with westernization without taking into account its historicity primarily, the initial structural and cultural attributes of the societies in their first encounter with this process. The significance of the historical factors, particularly in India with its own cultural and civilizational exposure of the centuries old history to other cultures with diversities enabling it to make adaptive accommodation with them was lost in such analyses. We have to take note that India in the past had evolved an and an [Sic] economy with deeper roots in trade, manufacturing having linkages with other economies at the international scale. It had its own principles of division of labour, training of skilled man power and accommodation of innovation. (Singh, 2012, p.154)

He states that the major social change happened mainly because of historical factors rooted in the structure and the cultural attributes of the Indian societies in the past centuries. There were many indigenous social phenomena which precipitated conflicts in every part of Indian societies especially in villages. To resolve the conflicts, people started practicing several new and different approaches. In fact, the factors which provoke conflicts in the society could be viewed as polar opposites or the binary opposites found as the themes and motifs in the texts of Indian writing in English published during the twentieth century.

This qualitative investigation is made through the textual analysis of four literary texts from different languages of south India such as Tamil, Kannada as well as English writings written by Indians. The works considered are: Hepzibah Jesudasan's *Putham Veedu*, Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*, Anita Desai's *Fasting Feasting* and U.R Ananthamurthy's *Samskara*. All these works of art were published in the middle and the second half of the twentieth century. These novels express a wide range of indigenous social issues explicitly and give the graphic representation of facts and conditions of the twentieth century. Through these writings, we can understand extensively the problems faced by the people of twentieth century and to know how the indigenous issues tended the rural communities towards modernization.

For instance, *Putham Veedu* is a classical Tamil novel written by an English professor Hepzibah Jesudasan and published in 1964. It highlights women's liberation while being severely critical of traditional restrictions on women. It's a Tamil novel which equals the standard of novels written in English in the twentieth century and its theme is as big as that of the great Indian women writers like Anita Desai, Kamala Markandaya. Ambai, a famous Tamil writer comments in the preface of the book, "It (*Putham Veedu*), is not only the book of a love story but also a symbol of changing ages" (Jesudasan, 1964, p.11).

The decadence of the institution of family in India may be said to begin in the 1960s. It disbands itself from its core ideals to take a new form as the nuclear family system by denigrating and abandoning its rituals, changing its customs and practices etc. In this novel, the egocentric attitudes and the male dominating patriarchal social structure and its components are criticized. *Putham Veedu* typically explicates the intra and interfamily disputes within the same caste group and the clashes between the younger and older generations and also between the classes. The new generation rejects the age-old conventional beliefs and practices as many age-old customs create divisions in the family. For instance, women were suppressed in olden days with restrictions enforced by the caste and family systems but nowadays women are also educated and hence they oppose the idea of suppression in the various contexts of coexistence.

The title 'Putham Veedu' means '*Puthiya Veedu*' in Tamil language which means 'new house'. But here, the term is used for an old tiled house situated among the traditional thatched houses in that underprivileged village. In fact, the house is too old and it has lost its strength and it would collapse at any time. The author remarks, "*Intha kukiramathil odu potta veedu entral ilesana kariyama*" (Jesudasan, 1964, p.15). The construed meaning is that when the tiled house was constructed newly in the midst of the thatched houses, people called that as '*Putham Veedu*' (new house) and later, in due course, it becomes the proper noun of the house. The author's description itself exhibits the class hierarchical structure of the villages in India

The novel revolves around the lifestyle of palm sap tappers, especially the Nadar caste of Panaivilai village in Kanyakumari district of Tamilnadu, India. It explicates a vivid picture of the customs and practices and changing traditions of west Kanyakumari district in the late twentieth century. It is typically about Christian families with Tamilnadu's and Kerala's cultural backgrounds and with the fusion of Tamil and Malayalam bilingual slang. Even though they belong to Christian families their practices are more or less in conformity with the Hindu caste system. They practise so many rituals and all of them were traditionally followed by their ancestors. Even if they knew about the demerits of such rituals, they do not want to give up any of them. For example, when a girl reaches puberty, wearing of *Pavadai-Thavani* or half- sari was one of the important customs which was strictly followed by the particular society and also the

girl should not take part in public functions until her marriage. Entrapping of teen girls inside home was a bigger issue in those days and the practice was named in Tamil '*Ircherippu*' (Jesudasan, 1964, p.35).

Actually, Nadar caste is considered as low-ranking in the rung of Indian caste hierarchy but the wealthy ones of this caste lorded over the poor nadars. For instance, when the poor people conduct any family function, they should inform the rich minimum three times about the conduct of the function viz. one or two weeks before, previous day or night and on the particular day early morning respectively. It had been followed by the lower caste people compulsorily for years, otherwise the privileged class would not attend the function and also it would end their relationship as well. That was an indirect pressure imposed on the lower castes for a long time through the Indian caste system. Incidentally, people who wanted to rid themselves of these issues got converted into Christianity. However, the caste and class hierarchy are still followed by the people irrespective of which religion or clan they belong to.

The male dominant nature of the characters is vividly narrated in the novel. For example, only the male characters can take decisions and also, they are the authorized persons over women's complete life especially in the choice of studies, career, dressing, marriage etc. At the very beginning of the novel, the family head and Lissy's grandfather, Kannappachi stops Lissy's schooling when she reaches puberty; the other men (father, uncle) in the family decide on her dress (wear only half sari after reaching puberty). Generally, no woman in the house is allowed to enter the *Adichikootu* (front extension of a house) (Jesudasan, 1964, p.18) and also, she is not allowed to go outside of the house even to the church, pond or relative's house etc. Generally, a woman has no role to play in the social affairs in the past. The common practice, whenever any question is asked to any woman in a house, it is the male who would reply, '*ava solvatharku enna irukirathu*' (Jesudasan, 1964, p.84) meaning, "woman has nothing to say on this issue." In India, every caste group or clan encourages endogamous marriage only, yet, they never quit from the class hierarchy on the basis of occupation within the same community.

The author shrewdly presents how the familial job determines one's status in the society. Even though Thangaraj's family and Kannappachi's family belong to the same caste, Thankaraj's family is always treated inferior to Kannappachi's family since they are palm sap tappers. When the Pastor comes to know about Thangaraj's love affair, he immediately advises, "*Sonnaal vizhangavillaiya oie? Kulam ellam ontruthan, aanaal pazhakka-vazhakkathinaal irandaki kidakuthu theriyuma?*" (Jesudasan, 1964, p.94) meaning, "Couldn't you understand? You both belong to the same caste only but your classes and practices are different, you know?" In yet another situation, Kannappachi's family is envious of the development of Anbaiyan's family but they are satisfied with his obedience and submissiveness after all, for they do all the trivial works to Kannappachi's family.

In course of time, Anbaiyan is economically well off than Kannappachi, but Kannappachi and their family always speak loudly, in a raised tone, to show their supremacy over Anbaiyan's family only because of his occupation. After the disclosure of the love affair, Lissy thinks, "*Putham Veetukararkazhin paarampariya perumaikazhukku munnaal oru vaalibanin aasai evzhavuthan nirka mudiyum.*" (Jesudasan, 1964, p.100) meaning, "How could a youth's wishes be worthy in the midst of the *Putham Veedu* family members' pride". They are stuck with the ethos of traditional customs and practices as well as egotistic attitudes of the middle-class community. The author exemplifies many situations where we find the feeling of caste and class

hierarchies among the family members and their dominant role over working class people belong to the same caste.

Moreover, there is another custom in Tamilnadu that the people of different castes including the Nadar community are very much addicted to, which is the desire for a male child owing to the prevalent dowry system, dominant patrilocal order and also for upholding their family traditions. For example, Lissy's mother says, "*Pethene pethene, penna pethene! Oru movana iruntha enaku innu payapadanuma?*" (Jesudasan, 1964, p.103) meaning, "I gave birth to a female child, if it was a male child, then I need not be worried." In this story, at the end, when the grandfather has lost all his sons, even at that critical time, he says, "*namma pillaiya panaiyerikku kudukkava?*" (Jesudasan, 1964, p.150) meaning, "Should we give our daughter after all to a palm sap tapper?" However, even in the worse condition, the older generation was never ready to give up any of the traditional customs and practices. Hence the newer generation searches for new models and ideals to live a better life. Thus, the author describes the worst conditions of the family institution of the twentieth century and how the social issues influence the traditional customs and practices through the characters.

Radhakamal Mukarjee observes in his article "Caste and Social Change in India," that industrialization plays major role in making the people to abandon their conventional rituals and practices and also leads them to assimilate new ideals:

Because of the urbanization and industrial development, usually, these castes abandoned their restrictions and compromise with the new system of the industry and society. Though India is a land of different races with different standards of culture, the tribe, the caste, the joint family, the village community represented an effort to organize a workable social system based on the autonomy of each group, collective discipline, and mutual tolerance. It has interwoven compact structure which is ancient and solid but now become plastic and bending to economic forces. (379)

Mukarjee's discourse comes true when we read Kamala Markandaya's novel *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954). The novel reproduces the life of the peasants who lived in the mid-twentieth century. It depicts the social change that takes place due to rapid industrialization in rural Indian villages. The agricultural lands are encroached to build factories by the landlords (Zamindaris) as they easily get low paid workers during the period. This makes them abandon their traditional job and they are forced to vacate their own lands and migrate elsewhere to work in the tanneries. Markandaya states the condition as, "It was great sprawling growth, this tannery. It grew and flourished and spread. Not a month went by but somebody's land was swallowed up, another building appeared" (Markandaya, 1954, p.51). The shameful misery of starvation makes them reluctant to follow their rituals and customs and also the situation enforces them to become thieves, prostitutes, and murderers etc. to meet their daily needs. Industrialization creates a dreadful change in their serene lifestyle and healthy surroundings of the agrarian community.

Another major social issue Markandaya discusses is gender inequality, as soon as the protagonist, Rukmani bore five sons, the husband and wife feel very proud of having sons, for they thought, during their old age the sons would look after them and the sons will protect their ancestral occupation also. They celebrate the birth of all the sons by sharing joy and happiness with the neighborhoods whereas they do not even feel happy about the birth of their only

daughter Irawaddy. Here the author discusses, how, sometimes, difficult living conditions in Indian villages lead people to change their religious beliefs and even convert themselves into other religions. For example, when Rukmani describes the lifestyle of the Muslim women with Kali, another woman character, about the restrictions that are given by the Muslim men, Kali, immediately rejects Rukmani's views and give positive comments that she is ready to wear bourka and would like to live as a muslim as she is struggling hard to survive with the social restrictions of the Hindu tradition:

They have their compensations. It is an easy life, with no worry for the next meal and plenty always at hand. I gladly wear a bourka and walk veiled for the rest of my life if I, too, could be sure of such things. (Markandaya, 1954, p.52)

Yet another consequence of Industrialization is a threat to the extended family structure of villages. Industrialization can easily penetrate through the family, for the reasons, they have inadequate resources, family disputes, and dependence on diminishing food supplies produced on the ever less fertile land which split the extended families into nuclear families by giving low wages. This provides an example of how changing industrialized economies alter extended family structures that tend to convert agricultural coolies into industrial labourers. Rukmani, the story teller remembers how the rapid growth of industrialization sweeps out their lives from the village:

Somehow, I had always felt the tannery would eventually be our undoing. I had known it since the day the carts had come with their loads of bricks and noisy dusty men, staining the clear soft greens that had once coloured our village and cleaving its cool silences with clamour. Since then, it had spread like weeds in an untended garden, strangling whatever life grew in its way. It had changed the face our village beyond recognition and altered the lives of its inhabitants in a myriad way. (Markandaya, 1954, p.135)

Migration is another major reason for the people losing their self-identity and even their caste group as well. Su. Venkatesan writes in his book *Kaaval Kottam*, how the small caste and ethnic groups constantly change their identity, rituals and customs in course of time. Sometimes they could adopt the new customs of nearby caste groups and assume themselves as the dependent caste, and finally, they might change their caste name also. The below lines state how the *Vaduhar* caste name had been changed by itself into *Okkalikar* caste, in course of time:

Okkalikar aadhiyil vadukarhalthan. Munnoru kaalathil kaappukal srisailatthai izhanthu vadakkae pona pothu athil oru pirivinar merke vanthu nammodu kalanthu vittanar. Namathu sadankuhalthan avarkazhukkum. Puthithaha vanthavarhal aathalal avarkazhathu thevara aavukku kambazhi athikaram mattum tharavillai. Pirahu benukondavilirunthu kannada thesathirku poi vadukai maranthuvittanar. (119)

Actually, *Okkalikar* caste group of Karnataka belonged to *Vadukar* caste of South India. Earlier, they migrated from Srisailam to Penugonda, Andhra Pradesh and then they went to Karnataka where they settled as *Okkalikar*.

The same trend could be seen in most of the Indian creative and literary writings during the Twentieth century. Yet another novel by Anita Desai's *Fasting Feasting*, published in 1999,

reflects the family lifestyles and cultural differences of the two countries, India and America. It brings to light the practices of typical Indian families who follow customs, rituals and rites of the Hindu tradition in the late twentieth century while also narrating the customs and practices of a Christian family, living in America in the same era but without restrictions. The Hindu families in India seem to be adamant in practising traditional societal strictures regularly. The whole novel shows the decadence of the family institution from the Indian rural societies because of their conventional social restrictions particularly to the women in the families. When Mama expresses the condition of feminine among the masculine dominant nature of the family members:

Mama said, 'In my day, girls in the family were not given sweets, nuts, good things to eat. If something special had been bought in the market, like sweets or nuts, it was given to the boys in the family. But ours was not such an orthodox home that our mother and aunts did not slip us something on the sly.' She laughed, remembering that—sweets, sly. (Desai, 1999, p. 6)

The novel portrays how the superstitious rituals, practices and male-centred beliefs of the Indian families lead them to ruination. Desai describes the routine of a widow Mira-masi as the preoccupied notions that a neglected woman can do some particular kinds of work or duties only as rituals in her day to day life and she can't even dream of a normal life, "Her day was ruled by ritual, from the moment she woke to make her salutations to the sun, through her ritual bath and morning prayers, to the preparation of her widow's single and vegetarian meal of the day and through the evening ceremonies at the Temples she visited" (Desai, 1999, p. 39).

Gender inequality is another important theme discussed in this novel. Women are imprisoned in their own home for meeting the needs of their men. The author specifically notes that women are being used by men as the tools for their achievements. The birth of the male child leads the girls in the family to another kind of oppression. In the presence of Uma and Aruna, MamaPappa give more attention to Arun, the newborn boy baby. Papa gives him special attention in food and clothing. Worse, the elder daughter of the family, Uma is stopped from attending school to look after her brother and she continues her life as a nanny without wage in her own home.

The novel questions the patriarchal family system of the orthodox middle-class families and at the same time, the novel exemplifies the causes for obsoleting the traditional customs and beliefs which were imposed on the youngsters and women centuries ago. In the late nineteenth century also, no one had the courage to oppose any well-established practices in the rural set-up whereas, if anyone questioned any of the beliefs pertaining society's taboos, he or she would be treated very cruelly until his or her death in order to restore the 'honour' of the family. The author showcases a mirror ritual that is common in many castes during the twentieth century. In the marriage of Anamika also, there is a mirror hanging a little above the bride's head to see the bridegroom in the mirror. She couldn't see directly even her husband-to-be before marriage and after marriage she should remain at home. It is mentioned, "Anamika was simply an interloper, someone brought in because it was the custom and because she would, by marrying him, enhance his superiority to other men" (Desai, 1999, p. 70).

In Uma's family, Mama always supports and gives strength to Pappa's words. This also, she does not do out of her own wish but merely out of compulsion. When Dr. Dutt comes to Uma's house to ask permission to take her to a job, Pappa and Mama answer, "Our daughter

does not need to go out to work... as long as we are here to provide for her, she will never need to go to work” (Desai, 1999, p. 143). In these families’ women are compelled to agree to men’s opinions irrespective of their opinions. After several marriage proposals are cancelled, Mama cries to Mira-masi that all the astrologers who have been consulted for Uma’s horoscope are liars. The author vividly narrates how a woman living in a family, in a society and in a country like India must be spoiled by the male-dominated norms and some religious strictures. Women cannot open their mouth and utter a word against such evils during the period.

We also have similar instances from another novel *Samskara* written in Kannada by U.R. Ananthamurthy and published in 1965. It is all about the lives of Brahmins in Karnataka which is entirely governed by the rigid conventions of the holy scriptures of Hindu religion, based on the hierarchical caste system. The evil consequences of caste discrimination is clearly depicted in this novel. It also opens up modern thoughts to follow instead of practising age-old convictions, beliefs, customs, and traditional practices. The contradiction is that the superstitious beliefs and dogmatic convictions that are followed by the caste fundamentalists do not have any proper reason or relevance to the modern society.

The novel *Samskara* is all about Naranappa’s death, an anti-brahminical Brahmin who spends all his life in defying Brahmin beliefs and lifestyles. He brings a lower-caste woman to the agrahara and lives with her in his house. This made other agrahara people to hate Naranappa. Lakshmana expresses his hatred towards Naranappa, “It’s your word, your command. What do we know of the subtleties of dharma? As Garuda says, Naranappa had contacts with a lowcaste . . .’ He stopped in the middle of his sentence, opened his eyes wide, and dug into his nose with his upper cloth. ‘As you know, he even ate what she cooked . . .’” (Ananthamurthy, 1965, p.8).

Another accusation on Naranappa is that he invites Muslim friends to the agrahara and openly consumes alcohol and non-vegetarian food. When he dies, the Brahmins do not want to do the last rites. Here the superstitious belief of the Brahmin community stops people from performing the last rites to another Brahmin. They have two problems with the corpse, one is the funeral rites for Naranappa and the other is who the person for doing the rites since Naranappa does not have any children. At the same time, they want the burial to be over as soon as possible because their rituals do not permit to eat or drink anything while a Brahmin corpse awaited cremation in the agrahara. Finally, they leave the issue to Praneshchaarya who is the head of their community in the village. Praneshacharya refers the entire holy books to find a solution but he does not. Actually, the ritual leaders of the caste groups may know the procedures of rites and rituals to some extent and mislead the people using different interpretation to unite as a whole under one caste banner, but the ordinary people of the same caste know very less about the text so they have their own views on the rituals and practices. When Dasacharya speaks about his condition regarding the funeral rites of Naranappa:

As you all know, we let him stay in our agrahara, so for two whole years we didn’t get calls for any meal or banquet. If we do the rites for him now or anything rash like that, no one will ever invite us for a brahmin meal. But then we can’t keep his dead body uncremated here in the agrahara either, and fast forever. This is a terrible dilemma. .” (Ananthamurthy, 1965, p.10).

Chandri, the concubine of Naranappa, agrees to submit all her jewels to meet the expenses of the burial rites further complicate the issue. On seeing such a large quantity of gold, the other Brahmins turn to do the rites. Praneshacharya has frightened that the love of gold might corrupt the whole agrahara. When Garuda informs about Naranappa's death to the Parijatapura Brahmins, the low caste Brahmins, they are happy to do the rites because he had such a relationship with them without any caste pride and also, they considered it as a pride of doing rites for a high caste Brahmin. The Brahmin community itself has many divisions as high caste Brahmins and low caste Brahmins, so the low caste Brahmin is not allowed to perform the last rites for the high caste Brahmin.

Later, Chandri pleads the lower caste people to do the burial but they also refuse out of fear. Finally, she finishes the burial with the help of a Muslim, Ahmed Bari from another village. He performs the Samskara for Naranappa's body without informing anybody. The worst condition of the Indian people during the twentieth century has been portrayed in this novel understandably. Now, perhaps, we could not imagine that what had happened in the twentieth century to the lower caste people but one could understand easily from the words of Naranappa. The following lines reveal the seriousness of the issue that the lower caste people are not allowed inside the temple to worship and they could not even touch the materials of the higher caste people. Ananthamurthy expresses his anger, "Your texts and rites don't work anymore ... you'll have to open up the temples to all outcastes,' and so on irreverently" (Ananthamurthy, 1965, p.21). Thus, this novel is a better example for showcasing the caste hierarchical discrimination as an internal social pressure which makes social tensions and conflicts among the people of different castes and religions who live nearby. Under these circumstances, people were ready to abandon the traditional beliefs and practices and try to choose or adopt the modern ideals concurrently.

Conclusion

The indigenous challenges like Zamindari system, patriarchal family system, superstitious beliefs, industrialization, strictures of religion, caste and class hierarchy of Indian society function as the root causes for the change of traditional structures and functions of institutions such as caste, family, and religion. Twentieth-century was the period where the traditional ethos of culture was questioned by the rational and modern school of thoughts. When the culture itself was questioned, possibly, the structure itself got staggered from its position. Thus, the people lost their trust in rituals, beliefs and practices and failed to keep cultural institutions.

These novels give a comprehensive account of the internal social factors which influence the lives of people and they are the causes for the social change. The above said indigenous social issues control people and their actions and also the causes tending the Indian rural societies towards the structural change. During the twentieth century, these elements from every internal social issue pressurized people directly and indirectly, as a result, many of them migrated to other places, abandoned their ancestral jobs, neglected rituals, converted to other religions, adopted modern ideals and got modernized themselves accordingly.

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