

# Bhutan: Political Culture and National Dilemma

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Political culture, as an inseparable aspect of larger values and beliefs, provides a package of theoretical and empirical orientations to understand national politics at one level and local politics at another. The recurrent themes in studies of political culture emphasise normative patterns such as roles, institutions, "community", "realm", participation, power and authority, rules of the game, symbols, scope of government, issue agenda, etc. The concept, though based on the Anglo-Saxon experience of a pluralistic tradition of communication and persuasion, consensus and diversity, change and continuity, is flexible enough to encompass the nuances of non-Western political systems. The present paper first tries to identify some salient features of Bhutanese political culture. Next, on the basis of its history and traditions we shall endeavour briefly to track down the decline of the Bhutanese theocratic system to a near British colony. And finally we shall comment on the present predicament, in which Bhutan must achieve a balance between its traditional political culture and the incomplete process of an emergent Bhutanese nation state.

## Drukpa Political Culture

On ecological and ethnological grounds, Bhutan is a frontier society away from the riverine centres of civilisation. Though pre-lamaist ethnic groups existed in the *lho mon* (the classical name for Bhutan in Tibetan)<sup>1</sup> it was the *Drukpa* (or *Druk*) theocracy that provided the social base of the contemporary Bhutanese social structure. On an apparent animistic and Bonpo social base, the Tibetan lamaist missionaries — invariably house-holding monks — were either engaged in magical/divine warfare, discovering lost holy texts, or fighting sectarian battles.<sup>2</sup> The mainstay of the economy was pastoralism and barter trade, which was adjusted as per the demands of transhumance. Dzongs (initially significant structures for strategic purposes in Tibet) were adopted in Bhutan first for defence-cum-ritual purposes and then as administra-



tive centres. Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal's charismatic leadership (1594-1651) laid the foundations of the Bhutanese system by providing a sound theocratic legitimacy and evolving a flexible status in the regional power structure and functioning of the Bhutanese system during the medieval period.

Some of the significant aspects of Drukpa polity were: ubiquitous oligarchic conflict, a shifting capital and seat of authority, duality of authority, and an extremely fragile and limited economic base.<sup>3</sup> With a view to understanding this political culture, it is imperative to examine the traditional Tibetan pattern of government among the Shakya orthodoxy, which is closest to the Drukpa sect of Buddhism. The system of government was possessed of both *dharma* (*chhos*: religion) and *samsara* (*srid*: the world). While in an organisational sense *chhos-srid* meant a diarchy of clerical and lay elements, in an ideological sense it meant a synthesis. In this view the norms of *dharma* and *samsara* were two sets of laws, one for the domain of the church and the other for the state. There were two sets of officials, monk and lay, not necessarily working to the exclusion of each other. One also finds monks and nobles closely connected and thus overruling the possibility of absolute separation between the spiritual and temporal estates.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, because of the institution of the incarnations and prince-abbotship, the sacred and secular roles were invariably mixed up. There was a provision that when a secular chief was elected to an office of the State, he was expected to take lower religious vows.

The first Shabdrung (or *Dharmaraja*) himself began as a prince-abbot under the patronage of his grandfather and became a householding monk ruler over the estates of the Drukpa sect. Once his domain had been extended and established on a sound footing after various skirmishes with the Tibetan Gelugpa rulers, he himself appointed a Je-Khenpo (the ritual head), a Deb Raja (the secular head) and the penlops (regional governors) while retaining the office of the Shabdrung (the one who rules as per the tenets of the *Dharma*) for himself. Since the Shabdrung's time there have been between five and eight Shabdrungs, 66 Je-Khenpos and 55 Deb Rajas.<sup>5</sup> The system was simple enough, as there was no hereditary distinction of landed aristocracy in the rugged topography and harsh climatic conditions. Taxes were paid to the penlops and dzongdas (district heads) in kind for the



consumption of the monk body at Punakha, Thimphu and other monastic establishments.

Technologically, it was a simple system. Apart from climatic and geographical hardships, the small Drukpa society was also exposed to a number of diseases. In such a situation, gainfully employed persons were small in number, generating little economic surplus. Apart from the maintenance of the monk bodies at the cost of the state exchequer, ubiquitous wars and feuds demanded the involvement of productive forces. A relatively isolated and near-nomadic community such as the Drukpa had a limited appreciation of the settled plains people. This explains the continuous excursions of the Drukpas to the southern Duars (gateways to the southern foothills) to catch slaves and livestock and to collect economic surpluses and other consumer goods. The various sets of functionaries, with their limited exposure to the affairs of the state administration, remained on the periphery of the universal state and tribal polities. Needless to say, the Drukpa polity itself acknowledged nobody except its most immediate neighbours.

#### **Bhutan under the British colonial fold**

Between 1705, when the first Shabdrung's death was made public, and 1903, when the last official sovereign Shabdrung died, the Drukpa theocracy exhausted all its internal and external relevance. Internal requirements and geopolitical compulsions conspired to the emergence of the Wangchucks' dynastic rule in 1907, almost as a creation of British Indian frontier policy. The monarchy was created as a matter of expediency, without appropriate legitimacy and institutional props. This becomes obvious from the confusion that surrounded the institutions of the Shabdrung and Deb Raja after the establishment of the Wangchuck dynastic rule. For example, though the office of the Shabdrung was reported to have been abolished after 1907, we are informed that Jigme Dorji (1905-31) was the Dharmaraja born in Tawang region, who crowned the second Wangchuk Maharaja and died in mysterious circumstances in May, 1931.<sup>6</sup> It is said that his reincarnation was discovered in the 1950s and is located at Rewalsar in the Manali district of Himachal Pradesh in India. Similarly, the institution of the Deb Raja, which was reported to have come to an end in 1905, finds its continuation in the form of the Wangchuck rulers as an afterthought in the 1970s. In this way, "the Wangchuk dynasty lacked the



traditional ideological legitimation that has been so crucial to the survival of monarchies.”<sup>7</sup> It appears of late that there is an effort to discover theocratic legitimacy for the Wangchuck ruler as the Druk Gyalpo.

Up until 1931, the British Political Officers in Sikkim and the Wangchuck Maharajas were unanimous in their view that Bhutan was an Indian principality within the British Empire. The Maharaja visited Calcutta to pay homage to the Prince and Princess of Wales, and attended the Delhi Durbar to pay homage to the King Emperor along with other rulers of Indian princely states. Similarly, the second Maharaja was taken to Gauhati, Calcutta and Sarnath on conducted tours by the resident Political Officers. The Maharajas and their second men in command - father and son Dorjis - Ugyen and Sonam Tobgyel - were decorated with British imperial titles like other princely dignitaries. In fact, on at least two occasions Ugyen Wangchuck himself is reported to have said that Bhutan had become part of the British Empire: once when the treaty of Punakha was signed in January 1910<sup>8</sup> and again in 1923, when the Maharaja's request to increase his annual subsidy from 100,000 rupees to 300,000 rupees was turned down. On the latter occasion, he is reported to have remarked: “[I]f they are unable to accede my request, I do not mind it, as it is by the kindness of the British Government that I have become what I am now”.<sup>9</sup> The British encouraged the Crown Prince to learn English and Hindi like other Indian princes. In fact, a number of Political Officers made it a point to report that the prince spoke good English and Hindi.

Charles A. Bell, the Tibetologist and successor to John Claude White as Political Officer at Gangtok, was considered to be one of the architects of British policy in the Eastern Himalayan region in the first two decades of the 20th century. He was so close to the Maharaja of Bhutan that after learning that the former had filed papers for his retirement, the latter wrote, on March 2, 1919, that it was as if his own father had died. Bell had submitted a proposal, to the Foreign and Political Department on January 23, 1914, for the creation of a North Eastern Frontier Agency (NEFA) with its headquarters at Tawang, modelled on the North Western Frontier Agency (NWFA) at Peshawar. The Agency was to deal with political works connected with Sikkim, Bhutan, Tibet and the Assam hills (Arunachal Pradesh). Luckily for Bhutan, the proposal was not implemented by the British.<sup>10</sup> Bhutan



contributed to the War Fund during the two World Wars like other princely states in spite of its meagre financial resources. In fact, except for bureaucratic fussiness, the status of Bhutan as defined in 1911 remained unchanged: "there is no doubt that Bhutan is a native state of India under the suzerainty of H.M.G."

There appears to be a distinct change in the overall orientation of British policy towards Bhutan after the 1931 conflict between the second Maharaja and the last officially reported Shabdrung, Jigme Dorji. The Shabdrung considered the Maharaja to be a usurper of his authority, backed up by British support. He was not only in touch with the Indian National Congress leader, M. K. Gandhi, but was also in contact with the Dalai Lama in Lhasa. The British supported the Maharaja against the Shabdrung, so much so that the Shabdrung was quietly poisoned at the instance of the Maharaja with almost open British approval. Col. J. L. R. Weir, then the Political Officer at Gangtok, who guided the Bhutan Durbar on the Shabdrung crisis, did not crown himself with diplomatic glory when he openly lied to the Dalai Lama that the late Shabdrung was a born Bhutanese and he was convinced that he had died a natural death. A grateful Bhutan Maharaja confided to the Political Officer: "if an Indian were ever to be made Political Officer in Sikkim, he would never be invited to set foot in Bhutan". The report by Col. Weir was greeted with relief.<sup>11</sup>

The British bureaucracy left a message of warning-cum-advice to the successor Indian Union on her relations with Bhutan, in the form of a note<sup>12</sup> prepared for the Cabinet Mission on August 10, 1946: "In practice it may well prove difficult to secure a tidy solution of the future of Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan and even of the eastern marches of Kashmir. This will largely depend on the future policy and fate of China and hence of Tibet. The Government of the [Indian] Union must be prepared for complications on the North-East Frontier and evolve a policy to meet them. This may well have to be that of maintaining all the principalities in virtual independence of India but as buffer and, as far as possible, client states. There may be greater advantages in according Sikkim a more independent status than in seeking to absorb Bhutan as well as Sikkim in the Indian Union, adding the communal problem of Bhuddhism to those of Islam and Hinduism ... the Government would be well advised to avoid entering into fresh commitments with any one of those frontier states or seeking to redefine their status. Their impor-



tance is strategic in direct relation to Tibet and China and indirectly to Russia. Such adjustment of their relations with the [Indian] Union as can usefully be affected ... by those political strategic considerations ... account which it is hoped that the treaty will take rather than by constitutional niceties which do not help defence policy”.

### The Predicament of the Bhutanese Nation State

The British bureaucracy, especially the old Tibet experts such as F. M. Bailey, Basil Gould, and A. J. Hopkinson, appear to have had little faith in the Maharaja and the Indian democrats in the aftermath of the British withdrawal from India. They were apprehensive that the emergent democratic India might try to absorb Bhutan, to the extent that they vainly pleaded that this imaginary issue should be taken to the United Nations Organisation and that Bhutan should be turned into a crown colony, or at least have some sort of British patronage. It is a tribute to the Bhutanese and Indian policy-makers that the transition from British overlordship to Indian assistance for a meaningful coexistence was a smooth and almost effortless enterprise. For the first fifteen years after the British departure, Bhutan appeared prominently in the newspapers only twice: first when its second ruler expired in 1952 and again in 1958, when the Indian Prime Minister paid a visit to it. In between, the Bhutan State Congress raised a little storm in the placid Bhutanese teacup<sup>13</sup> which was almost totally ignored by the newspapers.

Meanwhile, the administration was run on an autocratic feudal pattern. The landlords controlled the bulk of the state's income and sent the residue to the government treasury. The government was in fact a body of about 130 semi-elected members, drawn even from the village headmen as official representatives of their districts. The Council “met once a year, if an emergency arose, or if the Maharaja had an announcement to make ... the Government merely rubber-stamped the Maharaja's wishes. There were no trained people and illiteracy was one hundred per cent ... the Government was so scattered and isolated, [that] administration was limited to a few officials ... the “capital” moved with the Maharaja and nobody bothered a great deal about anything. The hospitals and dispensaries were more often than not without medicines, which expired beyond their effective dates in storage through lack of interest or authority to issue. Schools were unattended



because teachers were not paid and had to find other means to supplement their income. Even the "Army" was subject to their feudal indifference, for while "on paper" it was supposed to number two thousand five hundred with a ceiling of twenty thousand it was really only a militia who were occasionally issued guns for firing practice for a few days, after which guns were returned to the headmen and the "army" returned to the villages and field." <sup>14</sup>

The eighty-five-year-old Bhutanese dynastic rule of four successive kings may be divided into two broad periods. The first four decades and the regime of the first two Maharajas provided a typical picture of a distant, exotic, archaic family enterprise under the benign gaze of the British bureaucracy. The regime of the third and fourth rulers over four decades from 1952 exhibits an effort to refurbish the old structure to receive inputs from an imminent transition. A period of transition is always painful and strenuous, demanding urgent decisions. All significant decisions affecting the course of the emergent Bhutanese nationhood were initiated during the reign of the third Wangchuck ruler (1952-72). He tackled the political challenge posed by the Bhutan State Congress in the 1950s, invited the Indian Prime Minister (the first international leader to visit Bhutan) and took a far-reaching decision for the planned economic development of his country through Indian financial aid. Besides the introduction of transport, education, health care and other welfare and infra-structural schemes, he created various administrative bodies. It is said that he was engaged in a type of hurdle race in terms of human resource development. He sent selected trainees abroad for education and decided to go slow on having his own centres of higher learning.

Almost the entire development assistance for the first four Five Year Plans came from India, and since then India has remained the single largest donor of aid to Bhutan. Apart from India, Bhutan is very choosy about aid givers and external relations. Apparently the Bhutanese do not want to flood their country with tourists and advisors from abroad, who would adversely affect the small and ill-educated population. Thus, Bhutan chose either distant countries such as Australia, New Zealand, Canada and Japan, or small and mountainous countries such as Switzerland, Sweden, Kuwait, etc. as potential foreign collaborators. Besides these countries, Bhutan joined various international fora for economic and social development. This all resulted in



the almost hundred per cent employment of its youth, a higher standard of living and a better quality of life for the average Bhutanese. However, in spite of all the precautions, geopolitics have conspired against the kingdom in its natural resource location. Because of the obvious southward orientation of the infrastructural network, most of the labour-intensive urban industrial enterprises were located in the southern "negative land" of the past. Thus, Samchi, Phuntsholing, Chukha, Geylegphug, Chirang, Lamidara, Sarbhang, Samdrup Jongkhar, and many more small settlements located on and near the Indian borders turned into limited trading and industrial centres, producing consumer goods and contributing to the exchequer in a considerable way. Most of the labour-intensive development projects were to be located in the south.

A regional imbalance in the course of economic development is not unique to Bhutan. However, the ethnic policy of the country is that the Nepalese (*Lhotshampa*) immigrants are not permitted to settle north of an imaginary line drawn from east to west just behind the southern Duar foothills. There has been another problem related to the ethnic policy and that is a "politics of statistics", if one puts it mildly, or rather "a war of statistical figures" if one so desires. In a thinly-populated, infrastructurally poor country such as Bhutan, which lacks transport facilities, it is no wonder that there has never been a formal census or enumeration of the population. The official statistics collected by village headmen are merely imaginary figures, as they are always reported to be the latest census estimates, with the last three digits invariably consisting of zeros.<sup>15</sup> In the absence of a universally reliable and acceptable population figure, the claims and counter-claims of the size of the Lhotshampa population vary from sixteen per cent<sup>16</sup> to sixty four per cent<sup>17</sup> of the national population, depending upon the ethnic affiliation of the claimant. The thickly-populated and intensively-cultivated southern region of Bhutan presents a contrast to the thinly-populated northern Drukpa pasturelands. In such a situation, a potential ethnic powder-keg developed in the southern Nepalese ghetto in Bhutan, which ignited in 1988.

It was Kazi Ugyen Dorji, the chief of the King's household (*Deb Zimpom*), the Royal Chamberlain (*Gongzim*) and the Governor (*Dzongpen*) of Haa in western Bhutan, who encouraged large-scale Nepalese settlement in the southwestern part of the country in the last



decades of the nineteenth century. Charles A. Bell found 14,000 Nepalis on the Torsa river bordering India in 1903.<sup>18</sup> In no time, the land-hungry Nepalese cleared the thick vegetation and organised themselves as cultivators in the southern Duars. Some twenty five years later, Captain C. J. Morris of the Gurkha Regiment was commissioned to investigate the possibility of recruiting Bhutanese. He made an extensive tour of the two Nepalese districts of the south and made a crude estimate that the 1,500 households of the eastern districts and 4,000 households of the western districts contained a population of 60,000 out of a total population of 300,000, making the immigrants twenty per cent in 1932. He remarked upon the largeness of Nepalese families within polygamous marital alliances.<sup>19</sup> Morris stated that the actual number of Nepalese settlers in Bhutan was much higher than his estimate, because he had not included Sipchu area to the extreme south west. Nepalese immigration to Bhutan continued well into the present century even though there was a shortage of arable land. The government eventually banned further Nepalese immigration in 1958. It is apparent that the bamboo and thatch houses of the Nepalese are less substantial than the multi-storeyed stone houses of the highlanders. The Nepalese areas are predominantly agricultural, producing rice, maize, wheat, pulses, oranges, pineapples, ginger, cardomom and so on. Migrating across from Nepal, Darjeeling and Sikkim over the past 125 years, the Nepalese turned his "negative land" into a productive bread basket.

The Nepalese lead a frugal life. They are available for any type of work, and well suited to the extreme climate of the Bhutanese hills. In addition to agriculture, they have provided the work force for recent development programmes. With the emergence of Samchi, Phuntsholing, Daga, Sarbhang, Geylegphug, Chirang and Samdrup Jongkhar as the new commercial and (albeit modest) industrial towns of southern Bhutan, the role of the Nepalese in the national economy became more pronounced. Their food, dress, perseverance, industriousness and "mercenary" character make the Nepali speakers one on an alien soil. They look to Nepal and India as the founts of their civilisation and historical achievements, and where their places of pilgrimage are located. Higher Nepalese Hindu castes practise ritual purity and shun beef, polyandry and widow remarriage. The Nepalese are new entrants in Bhutan and also occupy a lower economic and political status



in national life. As residents of Bhutan, however, Nepalese do expect a share in the destiny of their new homeland and they have some genuine expectations from the Bhutanese nation state.

#### **Drukpa - Lhotshampa ethnic conflict**

On a different occasion we identified the Bhutanese national dilemma at four different levels: national versus ethnic, the king versus the parliament, elitism versus populism and frontier particularism versus universal modernisation.<sup>20</sup> Events beginning with the 1988 census enumeration have telescoped the entire dilemma into a conflict between Drukpa-ethnic-elitist-particularism versus Nepalese-ethnic-immigrant-populism. Never before has the Bhutanese polity put so much of its survival at stake. The total assimilation or outright rejection of the Lhotshampas appears to be the slogan of the day. In the absence of a creditable mass media, the publicity material produced by the Bhutanese establishment gives two aspects of Bhutanese thinking. One aspect is a sad, forgiving, repentant and rather remorseful Druk Gyalpo<sup>21</sup> and another is an aggressive, determined and vindictive Bhutanese bureaucracy<sup>22</sup>. Are these postures two sides of the same coin? Before we answer this question, it will be instructive to view the Bhutanese ethnic orientation towards the Lhotshampas.

In the Bhutanese hierarchy, faith and loyalty to one's superiors goes unquestioned. A society of pastoralists and subsistence farmers was happy to leave trade, commerce and industry in the hands of the royal family. Bhutan's dynastic rule did not permit an aristocracy to emerge. Thus, today's Drukpa society consists of an all-powerful ruling family at the top, commoners at the bottom, and a monk body in between. The geographical compulsions of a mountainous country further isolated the Drukpa commoners from the shared experiences of a modern technological society. Under such circumstances, the urge for democratic participation practically does not exist. Any semblance of representation has to be sponsored from the top, and the regime is notoriously intolerant of dissent. The stage was, thus, set for a conflict. While the Drukpas tried to impose an assimilationist policy, demanding oneness in language (Dzongkha), dress (*gho* and *kira*) and cultural systems, the Nepalese regarded themselves as culturally superior.

The Bhutanese administration had always kept a careful watch on anti-feudal movements in Sikkim and Nepal, because the Lhotshampas



have natural allies among them. It therefore came as a shock to the Bhutanese ruler when the 334-year-old Namgyal rule over Sikkim came to an end in 1975, succumbing to a movement organised almost entirely by Nepali-speakers. Even closer to home, the Bhutanese found an armed struggle in Darjeeling ending with the district also being governed by Nepali-speakers. The realisation dawned that, in the long run, New Delhi's commitment to prohibit anti-Bhutanese movements on Indian soil as per the provisions of the Punakha Treaty had no meaning. In a changed political scenario, the Nepali-speaking rulers of Nepal, Sikkim and Darjeeling could nullify New Delhi's assurances. This they could do by instigating, supporting or even financing agitation. Acting on these fears, the Bhutanese implemented an aggressive policy of cultural assimilation, starting with the implementation in 1988 of the Driglam Namzha code of conduct. The rest is the story of the Lhotshampas' flight from their Bhutanese paradise.

Bhutanese officials maintain that the refugees in the various camps belong to three categories: (1) Indian refugees from Assam, Meghalaya and other eastern states; (2) illegal immigrants to Bhutan, who had no business to be in Bhutan (and were, thus, expelled after the 1988 census operation), and (3) Lhotshampas, who willingly surrendered their Bhutanese subjecthood and since then are busy in anti-Bhutanese terrorist activities. They say that none of the above has any claim on Bhutan and, thus, the Bhutanese have nothing to do with the Lhotshampa refugees residing in the various camps: they are necessarily Nepalese and Nepal should take its responsibility seriously. They also view the Nepalese presence east of the river Teesta as a part of a Nepalese scheme to carve out a greater Nepal (*Maha Nepal*) at the cost of Bhutan and India. And, thus, the Bhutanese and the Indians should ideally make common cause against such a nefarious design. Though India may decide to ignore the "menace" of the Nepalese immigrants because of a Nepalese presence in India, treaty obligations, cultural and religious ties and its own huge plural ethnic base, Bhutan cannot afford to accept them as equal, as such an acceptance may threaten the very core of its ethnic and national identity.

The Bhutanese have adopted a number of strategies to deal with the crisis. They consider Nepalese identity to be a myth and portray the Nepalese as divided into small groups such as Tamang, Rai, Gurung, Kami, Magar, Damai, Bahun, Chhetri, Newar, Madesi, Sherpa, etc.



They straight away deny their presence in Bhutan prior to 1900. They paint the Nepalese as an anti-national mercenary menace to the legal regime. They have of late started to cultivate scholars and journalists, who could be more sympathetic to the cause of the last surviving lamaist monarchy in the world, and to invite such persons on conducted tours of Bhutan. In this context, they are concentrating of late more on Indian academics and journalists. They themselves have done their homework thoroughly and prepared illustrated documents to support their stand.<sup>23</sup> Lastly, they see to it that the representatives of the Lhotshampa refugees are not invited, wherever they make their presentations.

A classical theocracy turned into an exotic Wangchuck-ruled Bhutan and had little experience of ethnic coexistence on its own soil. It has not been able to weigh the implications of its aggressive ethnic policy to assimilate an ancient, martial and substantive Nepalese commonwealth into its then relatively simple and recent Drukpa fold. Policy-makers such as the Foreign Minister appear to have an exaggerated image of their powers. They tend to forget that their aggressive ethnic policy and false sense of absorptive capacity is bound to affect the pace of economic transformation. The Bhutanese aberrations might slow but cannot stop the Nepalese expansion in the Eastern Himalayan foothills; rather, such antics as the Drukpa regime is currently engaged in may provide an impetus for a Nepalese resurgence in the region.

If nation-states are the reality of the 20th century world political scene, resurgent ethnicity is going to be the concern of the first decade of the 21st century. There is hardly a nation-state in the world today that has no ethnic minority within its fold. Added to this is another aspect of the Himalayan states in the Asian heartland: the existence of numerous divided frontier communities across legal national boundaries. To date, no state has been able to completely resolve the vexed and over-arching ethnic claims from across or within its frontiers. Bhutan, one of the world's smallest and least developed nations, is trying to achieve the impossible, i.e. the absorption or expulsion of Lhotshampas. It should be in the interest of the Bhutanese to realise the limits of their aggressive ethnic policy. Once they do it, they may take the initiative in helping the SAARC countries to evolve a policy of ethnic coexistence without affecting national priorities. Once a regional consensus on ethnic policy has been hammered out, it may decrease the



heat on Bhutan and morally bind Nepal and India to extend their support to it in its hour of crisis. In this way, the apparent conflict between Bhutan's national identity and the Lhotshampas' ethnic aspirations within the Drukpa polity may be resolved.

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