


NEPAL AND HIMALAYAN STUDIES



Dawn of Democracy

in the
Eastern
Himalayan
Kingdoms

THE 20TH CENTURY

Awadhesh C. Sinha

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INTRODUCTION

The eastern Himalayan kingdoms of Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan were ruled by the feudal oligarchy on the name of religion prior to the advent of the British in India. The three kingdoms unavoidably were linked with the district of Darjeeling of the Bengal Presidency in British India. Darjeeling, thinly inhabited by the Bhutia and Lepcha communities, was originally a Sikkimese territory, which soon became a predominantly Nepali-speaking district. Soon it became known for its thriving tea plantations invariably owned by the British entrepreneurs. It was secured by the British from the Sikkimpati Maharaja in 1835 and developed as a health resort for the convalescent Europeans. The Christian missionaries joined the administration with a number of evangelical, educational and service-oriented institutions within decades. Within a few years, urban centres of Darjeeling, Kalimpong and Kurseong turned out to be known hill resorts in India with a variety of amenities for the tourists. Its significance further increased by the British efforts to open the trans-Himalayan trade to Tibet and then to China by laying down roads and railways.

Impoverished labour, skilled artisans, the ambitious traders and all types of fortune seekers turned to Darjeeling by the end of the 19th century. Within no time, the blue coat Nepalis began improvising their tongue, variously known as Khas Kura, Gorkhali or Nepali, as the link language among the bulk of the migrants. It may be remembered that prior to the British takeover, the Darjeeling hills and Sikkim, west of the river Teesta, were parts of the kingdom of Nepal for about four decades. Similarly, parts of the foothills and the present Kalimpong sub-division of the district were taken over by Bhutan from Sikkim. Thus, Darjeeling was the focal point where Nepalese, Sikkimese and Bhutanese intermixed under the benign gaze of the British. Within no time, it turned out to be the ethnic melting pot for the region where

labour, traders, missionaries and scions of regional ruling families rubbed shoulders through the medium of Nepali.

Darjeeling as the cultural hub of eastern Himalayan kingdoms

Darjeeling emerged as the cultural hub of the Nepalese of India, Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan by the end of the 19th century. The Darjeeling Government School was started in 1892 by merging the old Government Middle School and the Bhutia Boarding School. Prior to that, Padri Ganga Prasad Pradhan had already published his pioneering works on Nepali grammar and vocabulary. The Nepali speakers and their sympathizers petitioned to the provincial government to grant Nepali as one of the native languages for the entrance examination of the Calcutta University, which was accepted in 1918. By then, one of the pioneers of the Nepali language movement, Parasmani Pradhan, was editing a Nepali journal, *Chandrika*, with a view to providing the forum for the authors and standardizing diction, spelling and grammatical forms in the language. Very soon, a triumvirate of Suryavikram Gyawali, Dharanidhar Sharma Koirala and Parasmani Pradhan – with the acronym of SUDHAPA created from the names of the three scholars – emerged as the driving force behind the development, spread and acceptance of Nepali as the most significant language in region. Apart from that, they began publications in Nepali, staging Nepali drama in the public, opening up the public libraries and canvassing for Nepali candidates in various vocations.

This was also the time when an important political forum of Nepalis in India, the All India Gorkha League (AIGL), was established in Dehradun by Thakur Chandan Singh, an ex-soldier with connections with the Ranas of Nepal, but soon it shifted to Darjeeling. The AIGL was basically a pro-Rana, pro-British and Hindu forum whose functionaries invariably attended the sessions of the Hindu Mahasabha. The League was active among the ex-soldiers in most of the cantonments towns with the Gurkha soldiers. However, its decline set in by the 1930s and it became inactive by 1940. It was revived by another ex-soldier, Damber Singh Gurung, in 1943 with a demand for a separate autonomous administrative unit for the loyal Gurkhas in Darjeeling (Subba, 1992). In view of Matrika Prasad Koirala, AIGL “was inspired by the White Missionaries and the White (British) tea planters of Darjeeling. This organization was avowedly pro-Rana and was very critical of the nationalist movement in Nepal and its leaders” (Koirala, 2008: 97).

By then, though the Second World War was being fought on various fronts, the nationalist Indians had taken their struggle against the British colonial rulers to a crescendo. The political atmosphere in the region was clouded with uncertainty. The Communist Party of India (CPI), which had a sizeable following in Darjeeling and tea plantations around, passed resolution for creation of Gorkhasthan, consisting of Nepal, parts of Sikkim, Darjeeling, southern Bhutan and north Bengal as a homeland of the Gorkhali-speaking peoples. Incidentally, by then Darjeeling had emerged as a cosmopolitan region with Nepalese, Sikkimese, Bhutanese, tea tribes and a sizeable multilingual plainsman. Two more points need to be added to the above: Darjeeling had also seen the growth of a strong creative literary movement in Nepali language and a vigorous left-oriented trade union movement affecting almost every walk of organized labour in Darjeeling. These developments strongly influenced the placid political atmosphere of the three Himalayan kingdoms leading to formation of political parties with serious consequences. In terms of the sequence of events, the democratic movement started in Sikkim among the three kingdoms, which was followed by Nepal and then Bhutan. We shall follow the same sequence in terms of our presentation.

The broad issues to be examined

In what ways did the Nepali cultural renaissance in Darjeeling influence the three eastern Himalayan kingdoms of Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan? Will it not be desirable to understand the reasons for a hundred-year-old demand of regional autonomy raised by the Nepalese remaining unfulfilled? As the politically more experienced and organizationally more mature operatives, in what ways did they influence the political events and democratic movements in Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan? Has the failure of AIGL in its central objective to secure Darjeeling as an autonomous political entity in India influenced the course of political movements in the three Himalayan kingdoms for the Nepali-speaking peoples?

Democratic movement in the Namgyal principality of Sikkim

Sikkim was a Buddhist principality ruled by a Bhutia king since 1642. It had an archaic feudal-cum-theocratic political structure, which was invariably belaboured by Bhutan from the east and Nepal from the west. The scenario changed after the British colonial power emerged

on the Indian horizon after the Anglo-Nepalese War of 1813-15. The British not only settled the present boundary of Nepal but in 1817 they also gave back to Sikkim their territories in the hills and adjoining plains secured from Nepal. Within the next five decades, they created the district of Darjeeling in the Bengal Presidency by taking territories from Sikkim, Bhutan and Nepal and fixing the boundaries of these kingdoms. They stationed a resident political officer in Gangtok, the capital of Sikkim, since 1889, and ruled it indirectly through the ruler and his autocratic courtiers, the Kazis. These feudal lords ran the administration, had their own police and jails and exploited the tenets through a series of impress labour. It was a ruthless system in which subjects were mercilessly assaulted by the landlords with a view to creating a reign of terror and compliance to their wild demands.

Suppressed commoners got together at various localities to organize themselves in the social welfare bodies with a hidden political agenda, as any political activity was ruthlessly suppressed. Once Indian independence was declared, they boldly unfurled the flag of resistance to the feudal accesses by organizing a public meeting at the capital to criticize the state of affairs and form the first political party among the three Himalayan kingdoms on December 7, 1947: the Sikkim State Congress (SSC). That was the day the Sikkimese heard political speeches being made on their soil for the first time. Till then nobody in the principality knew how to address a public meeting, how to draft a political resolution and how to conduct a public meeting with mass attendance. SSC was a multi-ethnic political outfit with three significant demands to the Maharaja: (1) formation of a popular government, (2) abolition of *zamindari*, and (3) merger of Sikkim with India. The State Congress reached the Maharaja with its resolution, which remained unanswered; they resorted to squatting around the palace (Dharana); and the Maharaja ran away to the political officer to take shelter against his own people.

All through these years, politically conscious volunteers from Darjeeling and other neighbouring states in India, Nepal and Bhutan took part in the democratic upsurge in Sikkim. So much so that apart from others, even B. P. Koirala attended the Rangpo session and Girija Prasad Koirala was at the Malli session of SSC on behalf of their Nepali National Congress. At last, a popular government was formed with three representatives of State Congress and two representatives of the Maharaja in April 1949 without defining the contours of the functioning of the so-called popular government. The two palace nominees in the cabinet, it appears, were only to expose that the State Congress leaders were inexperienced in administration and arrogant in their

behaviour. Popular expectations were very high from them, but they were unable to accomplish much because of the deliberate hurdles created by the palace and the administration. In the process, chaos was being created by unruly and drunken behaviour of the Congress volunteers in the capital town of the state. Consequently, the political officer dismissed the popular government in the name of the Government of India on May 29, 1949 (Basnet, 1974; Sinha, 1975).

The Maharajkumar Palden Thondup Namgyal, who looked after administration on behalf of His Highness, answered the Congress resolution by organizing a parallel outfit, Sikkim National Party (SNP), as an 'antithesis' of the Sikkim State Congress. By the mid-20th century, Sikkim had two-thirds of its population of Nepali extraction and the rest of the Sikkimese consisted of the indigenous Lepcha tribesmen and Bhutia immigrants from Tibet, a community to which the ruler belonged. The Maharaja refused to accept about a hundred year old Nepali immigrant residents as the Sikkim subjects of Sikkim. And he insisted that as the immigrants were brought by the British, they were the responsibility of the Indian Union, as being the successor to the British power. In that situation, at last, a compromise was hammered out at the instance of the Government of India, in which two-thirds of Nepalis had to have an equal representation in the State Council with one-third Lepcha-Bhutia combined. This formula came to be known as the 'parity system', in which two artificial ethnic blocks were envisaged. The parity formula was agreed for political representation of the people in the administration, which was soon extended to every walk of public life of the principality. The Nepalese had struggled for a democratic system in Sikkim, but they got a communal representation, which naturally they resented. However, they lost sight of the fact that at least they were recognized as the Sikkimese subjects at the teeth of opposition from the obstinate Maharajkumar, the proxy ruler of the land.

The Durbar was determined to show that SSC was out and out an immigrant Nepali party and the leaders of Lepcha and Bhutia communities among them were discredited troubleshooters without political support of their community. With a view to prove the above, the Maharajkumar used all his resources to see that Congress could win on the reserved Nepali seats only and Sikkim National Party candidates won on the Lepcha-Bhutia reserved seats by defeating inexperienced and loudmouthed congressional leaders in the election for the State Council. Two hand-picked state councillors were appointed as the executive councillors in 1953, who miserably failed to continue in the trust of the masses. The next general election held in 1958 was

more chaotic, and by then the political atmosphere of the state was getting dirty by labelling charges of corruption on most of the councillors. By then, though the Sikkim National Party continued to be run by the Maharajkumar, the Sikkim State Congress got reduced to a Newar Party, as its affairs were controlled by Kashiraj Pradhan, a Newar and his relatives. Fed up with the antics of sectional politics, old stalwarts such as former president and one of the main founders of SSC, Kazi Lhendup Dorji, resigned from its active membership and formed a parallel political forum, the Sikkim National Congress, which pushed SSC to the political margin within the state. This new outfit attracted a large number of former political activists such as Sonam Tshering and C. D. Rai, from both the old political parties. The SSC continued for another decade, but for all intents and purposes, it was politically a dead horse (Sinha, 2008).

The issues to be examined

Why did a politically pioneering political forum such as the Sikkim State Congress, with clear objectives, multi-ethnic leadership and mass political support, fail to negotiate a transition from politics of agitation to redressal of the popular demands of the masses? Was it really a multi-ethnic political party? If so, why did the supporters of the Lepcha and Bhutia communities desert it on the eve of electoral politics? What was the social base of the party in the state, and why and how did it permit itself to be reduced to a Nepali party, a charge flung on it by the crown prince and others? Does it mean that the democratic movement launched by the SSC went in vain? Why is it that nobody has cared to write the social history of the SSC as an integral part of the Indian democratic movement?

Ranacracy, Nepali Congress and the Nepalese Revolution of 1950 and its role in the 1950s

Rana Jung Bahadur, the founder of Ranacracy, and his family created for themselves a new class, completely cut off and isolated from society. M. P. Koirala, the commoner to be the prime minister, informs that

they would not even marry into a commoner's family. Their mode of language, behaviour and bearing had completely changed; and bore the stamp of audacious arrogance. They always spoke about themselves in the royal plural and expected the people in general to treat them as such. The people on the

other hand knew very well that they were usurpers of power at the expense of the real royalty, which was the dynasty of the Shahs. They married their sons to the daughters of the royal house and their daughters too to the royal princes or else or to the scions of the princely states in India. Thus, they completely lost touch with the common man in Nepal from among whom they themselves came, and alienated the common fellow brethren . . . Power made them blind.

(Koirala, 2008: 29)

The Ranas were themselves divided on a variety of sub-groups and to add to the confusion, they were classified in three categories (A, B and C) and accordingly they controlled the offices in the state at different levels. Many of disinherited Ranas resided in India with their considerable ill-gotten wealth and were invariably engaged in conspiring against the reigning Ranas. And further they saw to it that any chance of opposition to their omission and commission was ruthlessly suppressed. One such sufferer was Krishna Prasad Uppadhyay (Koirala), father of three future prime ministers of Nepal: M. P., B. P. and G. P. Koirala.

Soon after the Second World War, the Nepalese residing in India, many of whom had participated in the Indian democratic movement, made efforts to organize themselves politically with a view to effecting political change in Nepal. For example, there was a political forum functioning from Patna known as the Nepal Democratic Congress (NDC), and there was another one at Banaras known as the Nepali National Congress (NNC), almost with the same objectives. However, none of them operated from within Nepal, as the Ranas could not permit any political activities. In such a situation, the functionaries of both the Congresses realized the need for a collective struggle and for that they decided to merge the two outfits into one and work together under a collective leadership. With that objective in mind, the two sides met and hammered out a common strategy for their merger and action. Thus writes the first president of the newly created political forum, M. P. Koirala:

Finally it was decided that I shall be the president of the newly merged parties, while the flag of the NDC would be adopted for the new emerging party. And the mouth-piece paper *Nepal Pukar* would remain the same name as it had of the NDC. The executive would be so nominated that it would give adequate representation to both the wings. The main points of negotiations having been agreed to, it was decided to give everything a final and formal shape. The Working Committees of

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both the parties ratified the proposal and a joint statement of appeal by presidents of both the parties was issued. The two parties announced a date to meet in a national convention in Calcutta.

(Koirala, 2008: 108)

About 200 delegates of the two parties met on April 8, 1950, in Tiger Cinema, Chawringhee, Calcutta, and by and large approved the above proposals and thus founded the new political party of Nepal, the Nepali Congress (Koirala, 2001: 97).

The Nepali Congress (NC) raised a Nepal Liberation Army (Mukti-Vahini) and decided to launch a guerrilla war against the Rana establishment in October 1950. The entire country was divided into three command zones (eastern, central and western) and regional commanders were appointed under General Shubarna Shamsher, the commander in chief. The armed attack was mounted from the eastern Terai at Biratnagar, which was followed in the middle at Birganj and Bhairwa in the western Terai. Many demobilized soldiers of the Second World War vantage joined the Liberation Army on their own. Volunteers came from adjoining Bihar and West Bengal for providing logistics to the voluntary Liberation Army: Kuldeep Jha, Bhola Chatterjee, Narnarayan Singh, Phenkan Chaudhury, Dasrath Chaudhury, Madhusudan Singh, Bhola Mandal, Surya Mishra, Phanishwar Nath Renu and Tarapada Babu. Some of them, like Kuldeep Jha and Tarapada Babu, expired in action (Renu, 1977).

This heroic struggle in one of the most backward regions was not in vain; within three months they would liberate almost one-third of Nepal from the Rana regime. However, it was reported that King Tribhuvan had taken shelter in the Indian embassy in Kathmandu on November 7, 1950, and asked for political asylum in India, which was granted. The king was evacuated from Kathmandu to New Delhi, and the desperate Rana prime minister crowned his four-year-old grandson, Gyanendra, as the legitimate king of Nepal by deposing the rightful king in self-exile. However, the king, popular leaders and the Rana prime minister were forced by the circumstances to negotiate for an agreed formula to end the impasse. Thus the Delhi Agreement was signed on February 17, 1951, and the king returned to his capital with honour. Naturally, the negotiation and Tripartite Agreement were resented by the common members of the Nepali Congress and its mukti-bahini, who had taken to arms against the Rana autocracy. And naturally, they felt let down with the very idea of compromise and working with the autocratic Ranas.

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As per the terms of the Tripartite Delhi Agreement, a cabinet of five members each from the Nepali Congress and the Ranas was formed under the Rana prime minister, Mohan Shamsheer as the prime minister. B. P. Koirala from the NC was appointed as the home minister and leader of his group in the cabinet. This experiment of taking everybody together did not work to the expectation of anybody and very soon the prime minister had to resign. That led to a series of democratic experiments and cabinet formation without a constitution and set rules and procedures. Though the Ranas had formally lost the power, democratic political parties suffered from internal attrition and factionalism. In the process, the king emerged as the strongest institution in the country within a few years. He could call upon anybody to form his cabinet and most of such worthies proved their inadequacy within a few months. At the top of it, the popular King Tribhuvan developed a serious illness and expired in Switzerland after months of treatment. Crown Prince Mahendra, who was antithetical to his father in his political approach, was sworn in as the next king of Nepal in 1955.

King Mahendra did not hide for long his ambition to reign and rule simultaneously over his kingdom as the Hindu king, an incarnate of the Lord Vishnu. He invited various political operators to form the government, which could last for some months. At last, he ordered a general election in May 1959 on an ill-prepared constitution, in which the Nepali Congress led by B. P. Koirala was victorious with a comfortable majority in the National Assembly. He was invited by the king to form his cabinet, which he did, and he began functioning assured of his majority in the house. The popular prime minister perhaps forgot that Nepal had a very limited tradition of democratic functioning and the political culture was still attuned to the feudal court culture in its overall orientation, which rubbed the king the wrong way. The clash of intent and purpose between the two was bound to happen. And thus, on December 15, 1960, the king dissolved parliament, imprisoned the prime minister and most of his ministers, banned the political parties and took the administration into his own hands. And for the next three decades, it was the king, Mahendra, and his son, Birendra, who ruled Nepal in the name of the Panchayati Raj.

Issues involved

Did the Tripartite Delhi Agreement evolve among the contracting parties or was it thrust upon the unwilling partners? Was there an alternative available to them which could have been explored? Was the democratic attrition among political parties in general and the

Nepali Congress in particular inevitable, or was it because of the clash between styles and personalities of the two senior Koirala brothers? Was the social and organizational base of the Nepali Congress strong enough to sustain the liberation struggle at its own? The Nepali Congress liberation struggle had attracted instant support from neighbouring Bihar, Bengal, Sikkim and possibly the Bhutan Duars. There are enough instances to support the view that the Nepali Congress tried to reach Darjeeling, Sikkim and Bhutan in their democratic movements. Why did it fail to cash in such an instant support in its hours of crisis? Why was the Nepali Congress not readily available to stand by the beleaguered fraternal bodies from its eastern frontiers among its brethren when they badly needed their counsel and support?

Bhutan State Congress, its democratic movement and aftermath

The All India Gorkha League and the Ranas of Nepal saw the Bhutanese Nepalese (Lhatshampas, the 'southerners' in Zongkha), settled in Bhutan Duars, as their special preserves. It was possible because of the fact that there was no effective control over the Nepalese settled Southern Bhutan Duars from Bhutanese authorities, where the Nepalese had been going and coming at their will. There were individual Nepalese from the Duars who tried to raise some mild voice in the favour of their suppressed brethren, which led to harsh treatment inflicted on them in the early 1940s (Dhakal and Strawn, 1994; Hutt, 2003). It is claimed that Bhutan State Congress (BSC) was established at Patgaon in the Goalpara district of Assam in 1952. It petitioned to the king of Bhutan on the plight of the Bhutanese Nepalese and demanded clear administrative arrangements and equality with the Dukupas, the dominant ethnic group, in treatment by the state in terms of taxation (Rose, 1977; Sinha, 1991). As their petition remained unanswered, they decided to resort to civil disobedience with a clear charter of demands such as formation of popular government, abolition of zamindari and merger of Bhutan with India. With these demands, they launched their march to Sarbhog in southern Central Bhutan from Goalpara with about a hundred volunteers drawn from Nepalese in Bhutan, Assam, Nepal, Sikkim and Darjeeling.

Both sides were unprepared for this eventuality, as this agitation was the first of its kind in the history of Bhutan. Volunteers did not know what to do and expect from the administration and the Bhutanese militia had never experienced handling such a crowd in their memory.

Before somebody could reach to the authorities with the charter of demands, the nervous J. B. Pradhan, the commissioner of Southern Bhutan, the man on the spot, ordered to open fire. The crowd ran back to the Indian Territory on the sound of guns. Naturally, a few of them reportedly died and some were injured in the firing. The entire civic agitation ended in a fiasco for the leaders of the BSC. They did not know what to do next, as there was no regular administrative structure in the region, nor was there a fast and reliable way to reach the king at his 'capital' with the grievances in the absence of communication. The young king appeared on the scene after many weeks and took some decisions. But the Bhutanese administration lodged a protest to the Government of India that the Indian Territory was being used for anti-Bhutan activities by the non-Bhutanese Nepalese, who had created disaffection among the loyal Bhutanese subjects. Naturally, the Government of India took corrective measures and warned the BSC activists not to do anything against Bhutan from India. The leadership of BSC, especially its president, Dal Bahadur Gurung, kept on filing claimed 'resolutions' of the party to various visiting authorities and kept on writing in the journals for years. The last anyone heard of him in 1958, when he gave a petition to Pt Nehru at Gangtok, when the latter was on a state visit to Bhutan.

Issues involved to be pursued

What was the social support base of the Bhutan State Congress? What were the sources which inspired the BSC programmes and its organizational affairs? Why did it not reach its political activities inside Bhutan before and after the 1954 agitation? What impact did it make to the politics of Bhutan as the first organized political party in the country or the region at large?

Common denominators

Did the lack of opportunity to participate in the political process in the three archaic kingdoms prior to August 15, 1947, the landmark date of Indian independence, affect the outcome of the democratic struggles in the three kingdoms?

How did the rudimentary middle class and newly educated persons in special positions react to the democratic participation in the state of affairs against the feudal-colonial dispensation?

What were the inspirations behind the charter of demands made by SSC and BSC and the Mukti-Bahini in Nepal?

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- Why did the anti-feudal democratic struggles in Sikkim, Nepal and Bhutan not receive similar support from the Indian political class after Indian independence, as they had received earlier?
- Why could the Nepali Congress functionaries, who had tried to reach their eastern brethren of Sikkim and Bhutan in their struggles, not sustain their momentum in 1950s when such support was urgently needed?
- What were the factors responsible for the re-emergence of the rulers much stronger in the 1950s after the democratic movements in the princely states?

It is significant that the dawn of democracy in the region that was initiated by the AIGL in Darjeeling in 1940s effectively came to an end in 1960 with the arrest of the democratically elected prime minister of Nepal, B. P. Koirala, and proscription of the Nepali Congress. The democratic movement, which had been revived in 1943 by D. S. Gurung of AIGL, met a setback when the State Re-organization Commission, empowered to recommend creation of new political units by the Indian Union, rejected AIGL's demand for creation of a linguistic state of Gorkhaland in Darjeeling. Next in sequence, the Sikkim State Congress, launched in December 1947 and despite getting its members elected to the Sikkimese Nepalis seats for the State Council elections in 1953 and 1958, lost its sheen once it became a party to the notorious parity system. The dramatic rise in 1950 and fall in 1960 of the Nepali Congress cast a question mark on the course of democratic movement in the eastern Himalayan region. Lastly, the Bhutan State Congress appeared to be in a hurry to catch up with its western sister feudatories in the democracy and met with a sad demise, as perhaps it had not done its homework properly to reach the dominant community of the state, the Dukpas in Bhutan. Neither was Bhutan, universally illiterate in modern administration, ready for such a political step, as she still lived in the mediaeval age. The dawn and fall of democratic movements in the eastern Himalayan principalities within an eventful span of about two decades was a significant development. These setbacks to the cause of democracy continue to haunt the travail of participative democracy in the eastern Himalayan states and it will be worthwhile to draw appropriate lessons for the future. On the other hand, the rulers in the eastern Himalayan kingdoms emerged much stronger than before after the first phase of democratic experiments in their domains. The study has been largely based on the secondary data from various sources. However, various sources of information were tapped and

still surviving individual activists and knowledgeable individuals were interviewed for the purpose.

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