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## **Socio-Economic Transformation of the Tribals in Central India: Lessons and Experiences**

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### I

#### INTRODUCTION

This paper is about people living at the periphery '*the tribal*' in central India. Development efforts since Independence have failed to narrow the gap between tribals and other social groups. The irony is that tribals in India in general and that of central India in particular, live in an area which is characterised by rich natural resources like forest, land, water, biodiversity and minerals. It would not be an exaggeration to state that poverty, misery and deprivation continue to persist among tribals of central India. The paper is based on years of working with various governmental and non-governmental organisations located in the western (Rajasthan, Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh) and eastern (Odisha and Jharkhand) part of central India.

The paper begins with a broad overview of the central India - its resources, tribal and their present socio-economic conditions vis-a-vis rest of India. This is followed by the debate and concern for tribal development between Nehru and Elwin, a British Indian citizen whom Nehru had appointed as an anthropological advisor to the Government of India. Both of them were equally concerned about the tribals but their approach to their development vastly differed. The next section describes the two recent developmental interventions one each in western central India by the N M Sadguru Development Foundation (henceforth Sadguru) and eastern central India by Professional Assistance for Development Action (henceforth PRADAN). Both these non- governmental organisations are working towards the upliftment of the tribals for the last three to four decades.<sup>1</sup> The final section brings out the lessons from the above interventions.

### II

#### RESOURCE AND SOCIO- ECONOMIC STATUS OF TRIBALS IN CENTRAL INDIA

Central India geographically consist of parts of Rajasthan, Gujarat, Maharashtra and West Bengal and whole of Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and

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Odisha. However, the disaggregated data of central India exclusively is not available, therefore the whole of all the above states is included as part of central India to understand the socio-economic status of tribals in this region. From the above definition central India is roughly half (49 per cent) of the total geographical area of the country. The area is rich in forest (above 20 per cent) and also in biodiversity except in Rajasthan and Gujarat. The average annual rainfall varies from 500 mm in west to 1,500 mm in the east (Table 1).

TABLE 1. SALIENT FEATURES AND RESOURCES OF CENTRAL INDIA

State (1)	Geographical area <sup>a</sup> (2)	Per cent forest cover (3)	Area under foodgrains (per cent) 2009-2010 (4)	Percentage cultivated area irrigated 2008-09 (5)	Cropping Intensity (in per cent) (2010-2011) (6)	Rainfall (mm) (7)	Minerals (8)
Rajasthan	34.22	4.7	13.27	26.4	141.7	550	Lignite, copper, iron-ore, zinc, manganese ore, limestone, mica
Gujarat	19.62	7.48	3.69	44.7	118.9	1000-1200	Lignite, bauxite, limestone
Madhya Pradesh	30.83	25.15	12.46	44.5	145.8	1370	Coal, bauxite, copper, iron-ore, manganese ore, limestone, diamond
Chhattisgarh	13.52	41.14	4.86	27.6	120.8	1400	Coal, bauxite, iron-ore, limestone
Maharashtra	30.77	16.45	12.11	16.8	138.3	2000	Coal, bauxite, iron-ore, manganese ore, limestone
Odisha	15.57	32.33	5.41	33.6	116.0	1451.2	Coal, bauxite, iron-ore, chromite, manganese ore, limestone
Jharkhand	7.97	29.45	1.62	5.9	115.1	1400	Coal, bauxite, copper, iron-ore, manganese ore, limestone
West Bengal	8.88	18.93	6.24	48.2	191.6	1582	Coal
Central India <sup>b</sup>	161.38	21.9	7.46	30.96	136.02	500-1500	–
India	328.75	21.23	121.33	48.3	140.5	100-2000	–

Source: [www.indiastat.com](http://www.indiastat.com).

Notes- a: Area in million ha; b: simple average of all states of central India.

However, the total area under food grains is low. Irrigation and cropping intensity are also poor relative to many other states like Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh where the cropping and irrigation intensity are almost close to 200 per cent. Central India is

also rich in mineral reserves (Table 1). The states which are leading in mineral production are Odisha (10.62 per cent), Jharkhand (7.72 per cent), Chhattisgarh (6.65 per cent) and Madhya Pradesh (5.28 per cent).<sup>2</sup> Thus, it may be concluded that despite being rich in land, water and forest, the area has not benefited from the green revolution technology and the agricultural productivity and production continue to remain poor in the region (Bhalla and Singh,2001).

In terms of population, 505.65 million (41.78 per cent) Indians live in central India occupying approximately half of the Indian land mass. Thus, land man ratio in this region is better than other parts of the country.<sup>3</sup> However, of the total tribal population in the country, 72.25 per cent lives in central India (Table 2).In some of the states in central India, the tribal population is very high such as Chhattisgarh (30.62 per cent), Jharkhand (26.21 per cent), and Odisha (22.85 per cent). The decadal growth of tribal population is also high and is almost close to the overall population growth of the country. Thus, it may be concluded that the tribal people form an integral part of central India and their development is *sine qua non* for inclusive development of the region. It is also interesting to note that the sex ratio (Table 2) is relatively better in the tribal society than overall population. This may be attributed to their egalitarian values.

TABLE 2. DEMOGRAPHIC FEATURES OF TRIBALS IN CENTRAL INDIA

State (1)	Total population (in millions) 2011 (2)	Percentage ST population in the state 2011 (3)	Percentage of STs in the state to the total ST population in India 2011 (4)	Decadal growth of ST population (in per cent) 2001-2011 (5)	Sex ratio of ST (per 1000 males) 2011 (6)
Rajasthan	68.54	13.48	8.86	30.16	948 (928) <sup>a</sup>
Gujarat	60.43	14.75	8.55	19.20	981 (919)
Madhya Pradesh	72.62	21.09	14.69	25.20	984 (931)
Chhattisgarh	25.54	30.62	7.50	18.23	1020 (991)
Maharashtra	112.3	9.35	10.08	22.54	977 (929)
Odisha	41.97	22.85	9.20	17.75	1029 (979)
Jharkhand	32.98	26.21	8.29	21.98	1003 (948)
West Bengal	91.27	5.80	5.08	20.20	999 (950)
Central India	505.65 <sup>b</sup>	14.9 <sup>c</sup>	72.25 <sup>b</sup>	21.90 <sup>c</sup>	992 (947) <sup>c</sup>
India	1210	8.6	100	23.66	990 (943)

Source: Government of India, (2013). *Statistical Profile of Scheduled Tribes in India*, Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Statistical Division, New Delhi.

Notes: a: Figures in parentheses shows the data for the whole population, b: total of central India; c: simple average of all states of central India.

Based on the latest published data, the socio-economic status of the tribals in the central Indian states is presented in Table 3. The five parameters included in this table are: (i) percentage of population living below poverty line; (ii) literacy rate; (iii) infant mortality rate; (iv) under five child mortality rate; and (v) life expectancy at birth. These data are taken from authentic government publications such as Census of

India, 2011; report of National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO) and National Family Health Survey-3 (NFHS-3) report. On all the five counts, the tribals in central India lag behind the other social groups, for example tribal population living below the poverty line is 51.57 per cent whereas for the population as a whole it is 30.2 per cent, the maximum being for the tribal people of Odisha (63.50 per cent). It should be noted that the total population also includes the tribals, thus if one removes the tribal population from the total population, the gap between the rest of the population and tribal people will increase. Similar is the case for literacy, infant and under five child mortality and life expectancy at birth.

TABLE 3. SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS OF TRIBALS IN CENTRAL INDIA

State (1)	Percentage of population below poverty line (2011-2012) <sup>a</sup>		Literacy rate (2011) <sup>b</sup>		Infant mortality rate (IMR) <sup>c</sup> (per 1,000 live births)		Under -five mortality rate (U5MR) <sup>c</sup> (per 1,000 live births)		Life expectancy at Birth <sup>d</sup> (2001)	
	Total (Rural) (2)	ST (Rural) (3)	Total (4)	ST (5)	Total (6)	ST (7)	Total (8)	ST (9)	Total (10)	ST (11)
	Rajasthan	16.1	41.4	66.1	52.8	65.3	73.2	85.4	113.8	62.05
Gujarat	21.5	36.5	78.0	62.5	49.7	86.0	60.9	115.8	64.03	65.8
Madhya Pradesh	35.7	55.3	69.3	50.6	69.5	95.6	94.2	140.7	57.25	55.2
Chhattisgarh	44.6	52.6	70.3	59.1	70.8	90.6	90.3	128.5	57.25*	58.0
Maharashtra	24.2	61.6	82.3	65.7	37.5	51.4	46.7	69.8	67.99	65.1
Odisha	35.7	63.5	72.9	52.2	64.7	78.7	90.6	136.3	59.17	58.5
Jharkhand	40.8	51.6	66.4	57.1	68.7	93.0	93.0	138.5	61.94*	62.6
West Bengal	22.52	50.1	76.3	57.9	48.0	NA	59.6	NA	65.07	63.0
Central India **	30.2	51.57	72.7	57.23	59.27	81.24	77.8	120.48	62	60.67
India	25.7	45.30	73.0	59.0	57.0	62.1	74.3	95.7	65.5	60.3

Source: a: [www.indiastats.com](http://www.indiastats.com); b: Government of India,(2013), *Statistical Profile of Scheduled Tribes in India*, Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Statistical Division, New Delhi :Government of India, c: Government of India,(2014), *Report of the High Level Committee on Socio-Economic, Health and Educational Status of Tribal Communities of India*, Ministry of Tribal Affairs, New Delhi :Government of India.

Notes: NA: Not available; \*: Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh were newly carved states from Bihar and Madhya Pradesh respectively and the data given are for the combined states of Bihar and Madhya Pradesh. \*\*: simple average of all states of central India.

Overall it may be concluded that central Indian tribals are lagging behind in all aspects of development and 65 years of planned economy has not been able to bridge the gap. It should also be noted that there was no lack of concern, but many programmes launched for the development of tribals did not succeed to bring them in the mainstream of development.

## III

## CONCERN AND DEBATE ABOUT TRIBAL DEVELOPMENT

The issue concerning the tribal development was brought into the centre of agenda immediately after independence. There are evidences that prior to and after

Independence an intense debate for the development of tribals took place. It was because of these concerns that the Prime Minister, Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru had appointed Verrier Elwin as an anthropological Advisor to the Government of India. Nehru acknowledged that he learnt a lot from Elwin about life, culture and issues concerning the tribal people. Beyond this however, both of them differed, the disagreement was mainly on four counts (Guha, 2001; Rath, 2006) – (i) Are the tribes different from caste society?, (ii) Are their history different?, (iii) What is the relationship between caste society and tribes? and (iv) What should be the approaches for their development?.

Nehru strongly disagreed that the caste and tribes are different from each other. The sociologist and anthropologist including Elwin at that time believed that caste is organic and tribe is segmentary; that their land holding structure is kinship based and the transfer of land is restricted to kinship only whereas such a restriction does not exist in caste, society. Similarly Nehru also differed with many, about the historical difference between caste and tribes and was of the view that most colonial writings sought only to reflect disunity among human beings and is based on conjectures that needs re-examination. Nehru also questioned the authenticity of foreign writers to open up the mysteries of savage cultures on Indian soil without understanding the social coherence between tribes and non-tribes. Nehru argued that the difference between tribes and non-tribes is not structural, whatever difference between them is observed are a result of settlement of these people in two different time periods in the history of civilisation (Rath, 2006).

Elwin, however, strongly differed with Nehru on this count. He argued that the relationship between caste and tribe, if any, is exploitative, the caste society has not contributed positively to the development of tribals (Rustomji, 2001). Nehru believed that the commercialisation of tribal produce was not only an appropriate strategy but also income generating means, which would mitigate tribal people's poverty and misery. Elwin on the other hand was concerned about the exploitation of tribals by the moneylenders, traders and contractors and therefore argued for protectionist approach<sup>4</sup> to be given for tribal development. Though Nehru agreed for special attention to the tribes in specific contexts but strongly opposed that National Planning Commission should be burdened with it. Thus Nehru strongly advocated and followed integrative approach for mainstreaming tribals in the development process and their special case of context specific were largely ignored (Guha, 1999).

What has happened to the tribes after 65 years of planned Nehruvian development and industrialisation? Nehru followed the path of mixed economy for rapid industrialisation, launched several hydroelectric, irrigation projects and established steel plants. Though there is no precise estimate but approximately 60 – 65 million people, are displaced with these so called development projects. Of these 40 per cent are tribals and another 20 per cent consists of dalits and other rural poor. Displacement has led to widespread traumatic psychological and socio-cultural consequences. It has caused dismantling of production system, desecration of

ancestral sacred zones, scattering of kinship group and disorganisation of informal social network and mutual support (Ballabh and Batra, 2013). Thus the modern 'temples of India' are built on the blood and sweat of millions of people and it is not surprising to find the farmers who leave off their land, forest and other resources, are being impoverished in the name of 'development' (Fernandes, 2008). Nehru of course had given a famous statement that the problems of the tribals shall be viewed in their own context, as the tribal economy cannot be separated from their cultural disposition and sovereignty (Rath, 2006). However, he did very little to protect the culture, economy and social ethos of central Indian tribes.<sup>5</sup>

#### IV

##### BUILDING AND NURTURING TRIBAL ECONOMY

Two successful cases of tribal development one each from western central region and another from eastern central region are narrated in this section. These two cases demonstrate that human artifacts are required to build the tribal economy.

##### *Case 1 :*

N.M. Sadguru Water and Development Foundation (Sadguru), a non-profit NGO has been working in the tribal areas of Gujarat, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh since 1974. It began its work from a tribal village Shankerpura (Ballabh and Thomas, 2002), a typical semi-arid tropical village in an undulating topography with steep slopes in certain pockets and plain lands in low lying areas. Resource degradation and poverty mark the landscape of the area- deforestation, erosion of top soil, reduction in soil fertility and declining agricultural productivity were the hallmarks of the area. As a result, to keep the households going, the distress migration in search of livelihood was a norm rather than exception, when Sadguru began its work (Thomas and Ballabh, 1995). Thus Sadguru constructed a lift irrigation system, developed farm forestry and improved agriculture productivity, with an overarching concern in its entire programme to improve the living conditions of the tribal communities and strengthen their livelihood system.

The Sadguru model of development is centered around water. It is based on the premise that tribals have the capacity to undertake agricultural activities, productivity and risk can be managed with assured irrigation water, there is adequate rainfall and through technological, financial and institutional interventions water can be harvested, stored and utilised properly. Sadguru adopted strategies to provide the critical inputs of technology, finance and institution for agriculture and rural development (See Singh and Gupta, 1997 for details about Sadguru model). Water has been the starting link between community and natural resource endowment available in their habitat. Community participation and their institutions play an important role to ensure sustainable livelihood security with equity and justice. The model is built around check dam, lift irrigation, watershed development and afforestation. All these

lead to increase in on-farm and off-farm activities and subsequently, reduction in risk and vulnerability, elimination of distress migration, sustainable livelihood security and improved quality of life (Ballabh and Panda, 2013). In order to elicit participation, people had to be first convinced about the utility and feasibility of the programme. Therefore, proper sequencing both in terms of type of activity and the scale of activity was of extreme importance. The compulsion to leave the village in search of wage labour could not be removed by a measure like tree- growing, whose benefits would take 4-5 years to reap. Thus development of agriculture was necessary condition for people's participation. For agriculture to be a viable proposition in rainfed area with undulating topography, water was critical. In order to guarantee this, the first intervention was in the area of irrigation with lift irrigation schemes. The beginning with irrigation and land development, led to cultivation being accepted as a satisfactory and rewarding option as an alternative to eke out one's living through migration.

Once Sadguru established its credibility and created confidence among the people demand for its services increased by many folds. Today it is a well-known organisation in its domain and is placed with reverence. Sadguru has come a long way since its inception. As on March 2012, it is estimated that 3.4 lakh acres of area involving 2.6 lakh households and 15.8 lakh individuals are directly affected by Sadguru's interventions. It has been able to create close to 2800 village level institutions, build 377 lift irrigation co-operatives, 358 check dams and recharge more than 18000 wells and plant around 6.3 crore trees. For an NGO, which largely depends on external sources for funding, it is by no means a small achievement (Agoramoorthy, 2009; Ballabh and Panda, 2013).

#### *Case 2:*

Professional Assistance for Development Action (PRADAN) since its inception began working with India's most poor people in the central region. Its outreach has increased to over 2,71,921 families in 10,309 hamlets under 5,159 revenue villages in 135 blocks spread across 41 districts in the seven states Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Rajasthan, and West Bengal. It is reported that 72 per cent households belong to vulnerable groups such as Scheduled Tribes (ST) – 61 per cent and Scheduled Castes (SC) - 11 per cent and the remaining belong to Other Backward Communities (OBC) and Others. It is pioneered by a group of young professionals, who were inspired by the conviction that individuals with knowledge resources and empathy for the marginalised must work with communities at the grassroot levels in order to help them overcome poverty.

PRADAN'S core has been to create livelihood options for the poor tribal women and the development of their livelihood to make it sustainable. On the top of this framework is entry through SHGs in the villages and bank linkages which help Women's group to overcome high indebtedness, exorbitant interest rates and set the

stage for larger development. PRADAN'S interventions are accomplished in three phases in a particular village. In the first phase, it forms, promotes and nurtures the SHG as a viable financial intermediary between its members and commercial banks. As a part of its activities it initiates capacity building trainings for the office bearers and members of the SHG. PRADAN has developed a robust step-by-step methodology for developing, nurturing and promoting SHGs as an independent functionary. In the primary stage, the first step for an SHG is to begin as a mutual aid association of poor women. This is an informal association of 10 to 20 poor women belonging to the same village and sharing a common socio-economic background. Women, belonging to a particular SHG, pool in Rs.10 to Rs.20 each on a weekly basis, to create a collective fund. A series of training is conducted to improve the capacity of the SHGs in credit and thrift, record keeping and management of the fund. Since most of the SHG members are illiterate, they are provided assistance from PRADAN to keep their records up to date.

In the second phase, PRADAN helps to develop the livelihood options for group members of SHG through intensive analysis of various opportunities, potential and constraints. It intervenes in the field of agriculture (improved paddy cultivation, cultivation of new crops and vermicomposting); horticulture (vegetables, mango plantation, floriculture, development of local nursery); livestock (goat rearing and rearing of livestock); forest based livelihoods (lac cultivation, siali leaf plate and tasar cultivation); small scale irrigation (construction of ponds, check dams and pump sets) and watershed development (lift irrigation-wasteland plantation and soil moisture conservation structure). PRADAN also promotes micro-enterprises such as poultry, tasar silk processing and rearing. Some members of the SHG group are encouraged to practice diversified agricultural activities while others have taken up forest based activity, livestock and other micro entrepreneurial activities to enhance their livelihood support systems. PRADAN identifies young men and women from the community and trains them who in turn strengthen the livelihood support system of the community and work as Community Resource Providers (CRPs).

In the final phase, PRADAN intervenes by leveraging development finance by linking the SHGs to government programmes and banks. Finances are necessary for the rural poor to create livelihood assets and as working capital for enhancing the productivity of resources, creating service infrastructure, and building people's skills and capabilities. PRADAN leverages support to livelihood projects by linking the rural poor to government programmes/agencies at the district, state and central levels and with development banks like NABARD and act as a facilitator in them. In order to scale up the livelihood activity, PRADAN promotes and nurtures Producer's Collectives as an institutional support to poor farmers. It works with the producers so that they can play an effective role in the critical aspects of governance, management and operations of the existing collectives. This provides a large-scale expansion of agriculture-based livelihoods and positions producer collectives to effectively channelise production, marketing and financial services to its members.



The three phases described above have distinct but intertwined objectives. In the first phase, PRADAN seeks entry in the village/hamlet, builds confidence and forms Women Self Help Groups (SHGs). Not only does PRADAN make them realise their collective potential but it also makes them believe that their current situation and predicament is not because of their sins or some curse but due to socio-political situation. PRADAN also helps them believe that with persistence and collective efforts positive changes can be made.

Both Sadguru and PRADAN are working predominantly with the tribals of central India and have succeeded in mobilisation of the community and in improving their socio-economic status. Various studies indicate (Agoramoorthy, 2009; Ballabh and Batra, 2014; Shylendra and Rani, 2004) that these interventions have brought on-farm changes with tribals- imbued by the new technology leading to diversification of crops; development of a healthy financial behaviour; increased security of women with a sense of confidence and improvement in their status within the household – for instance tribal women who were shy, reticent and under confident, have emerged as leaders and are more articulate having better self-perception and confidence. These interventions have also brought about a change in the thought process of the tribals, their increased income generated from various livelihood options is invested in quality education and health of their family members. They are now willing to take up new enterprises and are open to modern technology.

It is interesting to understand how these two organisations have succeeded; this is particularly important because literature is replete with examples of the failure of intervention in the tribal region (*Barik, 2006*). For both Sadguru and PRADAN for every intervention and activities an overarching consideration was development of human capacity among the tribals so that they themselves take control of their destiny. For this their entry point was different – Sadguru through water development and PRADAN through SHGs, but both the organisations made tremendous investment in building people's capacity in managing and governing their developmental institutions like SHGs, lift irrigation co-operatives, check dams or poultry co-operatives. Both the organisations placed emphasis on collectivism as opposed to addressing individual household problems. Sequencing in terms of scale of operation and skill building pace moved step-by step and was more to enrich the capacity of member household and women rather than meeting the targets of the programme. Emphasis on involving women in their core programmes was also helpful in achieving the success. Tribal women are the most vulnerable section of the society and have suffered a lot from underdevelopment, indebtedness, alcoholism, illiteracy and malnourishment.

Both Nehru and Elwin died in 1964, had they been alive, would have realised that they were fundamentally wrong or at best only partially correct. Elwin of course would have realised that keeping the tribes in isolation did not prevent their deprivation and protect them from exploitation. He would have also realised that the tribes do not have any inherent incapability to learn new technologies or newer ways

of producing goods. At the same time Nehru's industrialisation also did not help the tribal community; it only brought misery, deprivation and even uprooted them. Both of them would have realised that building people's capabilities and putting the instrument of development in the hands of the tribals would have been a better approach to address the problems of tribal communities. This requires social engineering of the tribal society and bringing institutional innovations which has the capacity to support them as producer, consumer and resource manager.

## V

## LESSONS FOR TRIBAL DEVELOPMENT

In this paper an attempt was made to connect the debate on approaches for tribal development since Independence. The central Indian tribal community lags in development in almost all aspects and their economic status is lower than even the Scheduled Castes (Government of India, 2013). The 65 years of planned development has not helped them. However, they live in an area characterised by abundant forests and water resources. The two cases presented in this paper demonstrate that the tribal people have the ability to learn and adopt new technology, enterprises and skills with appropriate institutional interventions. Since the area they inhabit has tremendous potential for high value food production including organic food like fruits, pulses, vegetables, poultry, goat, medicinal and aromatic plants, opportunities for their development is vast. The market for tribal produce however is riddled with imperfection and the tribal community is exploited. Thus new institutional innovations are required to reap the benefits of market expansion by the tribals. This could be achieved through the development of interlinkages between production and market institutions like cooperatives, mutual self-help groups. These institutions should be governed and managed by the tribal community themselves and the developmental institutions role should be limited to create capacity among the tribals to sustain these institutions as demonstrated by Sadguru and PRADAN. This requires investment in capacity development of the tribal community on one hand and expansion of their ability to produce and scale up of their operations on the other. This strategy would go long way and help the tribal community in central India achieve higher social and economic growth.

## NOTES

1. The works and achievements of Sadguru and PRADAN are described briefly due to space constraint.
2. Source: [www.mines.nic](http://www.mines.nic)
3. The land man ratio is better in predominantly tribal areas for example Jharkhand 414 person Km<sup>2</sup> whereas 1102 person per Km<sup>2</sup> in Bihar (Census, 2011).
4. Indian academia also criticised the park and isolationist approach on the ground that property right in land and land market was created by the British colonial rulers. Such property right was not developed for the central Indian region which led to their continuance of communal ownership (see Ghurey, 1943 and Srinivas, 1944 cited from Rath, 2006).

5. Nehru made several concessions for North Eastern Tribal regions but those concessions were not given to the central India tribal region, see for detail (Rath, 2006).

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