

Translation as a Multicultural Discourse pp. 38-56 September 2013 published in Critical Enquiry (ISSN: 0975-0096).

Abstract

Translation as a Multicultural Discourse

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Translation is understood as a multicultural discourse. It is retextualization of source texts. It is simply not an interlingual transfer but involves scores of factors like diverse contents of STs, authors' intentions, readers' needs and expectations, linguistic and cultural aspects of TTs, principles of equivalence, fidelity to STs, the degree of acceptability in the target language (TL), equivalence of culture-specificity, achievement of coherence and cohesion in the TTs. Such multicultural variables play vital roles in a translational discourse. Translation as a copy of the Original is precisely a colonial notion and not a Third World. Indians as polyglots use more than one code (*Bhasha*) while speaking or even thinking. Indian literary traditions have originated in translations and gained substance through repeated acts of translations. Issues of caste, gender, sexuality and identity search in the translations of Indian *Dalit* autobiographies have provoked translational multicultural discourse. A cultural discourse begins through translational hegemony, if *culture* is considered *text*. The translation agenda as manifestation of culture has received more attention. It is a process of meaning creation within a network of texts. Eurocentrist concepts are inadequate; they did not go beyond pre-linguistic theories. The present paper examines a few Indian texts in English (TTs) and Marathi (STs) to illustrate the argument.

Keywords: Translation a multicultural discourse, retextualization of source texts, Eurocentrism inadequate

Translation as a Multicultural Discourse

I

Gregory Rodriguez¹ in a dialogue with the American important Journal of California speaks on multiculturalism; his definition of multiculturalism has a typical Western notion, which distorts the concept of multiculturalism. He defines multiculturalism as an 'ideology that promotes the permanent coexistence of separate but equal cultures.' Rodriguez is wrong in his views of multicultural history and society. This docile definition and argument paints a monolithic national picture of divisiveness and difference created by people of color and language minorities. After constructing this view of multiculturalism, Rodriguez compares it with the old and discredits view of America as a cultural 'melting pot'.

Indians are essentially a diverse people in terms of linguistic, ethnic, racial, literary and religious ethos. Even the identity of Hindu Religion is debated in the critical perception of India as a Hindu nation according to Bhalchandra Nemade². He writes:

The mainstream life of our country has been constantly changing since ancient times. The element of *Hindutva*, which is prevalent in our country since a few decades did not exist in the past. When Fa-Hi-En came, our country was not known by the name *Hindustan*. He was told that if you are going to study *Buddhism*, there are also other smaller sects like the orthodox *Vedic Brahmins* etc., you study those sects also. It implies the fact that the *Hindu Religion* around 410 was not known as a *Religion*. On the Ashoka's inscriptions, it is written that if you happen to meet Brahmins anywhere, you behave with them modestly. It shows that the *Hinduists* were so meager in number that they were somehow able to survive in the Ashoka period. They were literally annihilated in the era and so advice was given to treat them modestly. Therefore, the mainstream culture in our country for 700 hundred years was the *Buddhist culture*. So if I say that the mainstream of our country is *Hindu mainstream*, it would not be historically acceptable as a valid statement. But if we are negating the history then one cannot help. The majority of people in our country are Hindus; it is superfluously a true statement. The

category called *Hindu* came very late in our country; as late as that if you ask my grandmother if she is a Hindu, she would get confused and say that *I am Warkari* or *I am Mahanubhavi* etc. (Nemade, 2005: 12). (*My Translation*)

If we look at the ethnic identity of India, since ancient times we are diverse and never held monolithic cultural identity. An attempt was done to turn the Indian diverse communities into a national (?) and a monolithic culture by the British during the colonial period. The British left in 1947 receding behind a people of a nation (?) ethnically ambivalent mixed in half-baked cake and the impact of English language, modern science and technology, the Western mythical ghosts dangling in our cultural whirlwind-like consciousness. The Post-Colonial Indian cultural pot since then has been melting. The year 1973 proved to be a decisive one when the pressures of globalizations were initiated in India. The collapse of communistic and socialistic Russia as a world power began and within period of a decade, Russia was dismantled; she was torn into pieces and lost her grip as a world power. Subsequently, around 1990's, the pseudo-Americanism took over the charge. Nevertheless, it was not a new thing that was happening in Indian for the first time; the process of Westernization had indeed begun long back in the nineteenth century with the famous Lord Macaulay-minutes. Lord Macaulay addressed the British Parliament on 2 February 1835; it is a well-known document and a significant one for the Indian culture. Probably, Macaulay understood more the strength and power of Indian culture, education and heritage more than most Indians do today. He observed India as a country of high moral values and people possessing high caliber and so he found it difficult to break the backbone of this country. He considered it its spiritual and cultural heritage. He also found it difficult to replace her old and ancient educational system. It was against this cultural background of our country, he introduced the English Education System so that the Indians might lose their native culture, their self-esteem and the Indians shall become what the British want them to become.³

The process of Westernization started with Lord Macaulay-minutes of the Indian life took absurd and distorted forms politically and culturally and today we are at a very different altar where we could be described as a people losing our nativity and local colours. Hegemony of the English was later strengthened by pseudo-Americanism.

It is indeed true that the English education did offer us several fascinating things; we were modernized and introduced to modern science and technology which was absolutely absent in our culture. This was a multicultural transformation, a result of several translational discourses. But the nativist phenomenological threads of Indian cultural hegemony were disturbed. It affected the translational homogeneity of Indian ethos. The Western influence brought about transformation in world view, perceptions and outlooks of Indians; subsequently, our local and traditional native cultural standards were marginalized.

Amitav Ghosh points out that translational, cultural, textual and literary transfer, and intercultural communication in today's global society is 'the only language we had been able to discover in common is based on the scientific and military supremacy of the West' (1993: 127). Ghosh is obviously referring to the English language. Does the global language (English) really provide with a general background for communication which will gradually make translation redundant? Samuel Huntington on the other hand claims that the main axis of international conflict on a world scale will be the difference of cultures rather than of nations and between political and economic systems or standards of development. According to him, 'for the relevant future, there will be no universal civilization, but instead a world of different civilizations, each of which will have to learn to coexist with the others' (1993: 49).

It would be interesting to understand the Western metaphysics of translation in this context. The source text (ST) as ORIGINAL is essentially a Western notion. The *Original* is perceived as being superior to the translation. It is merely understood as a copy of the Original. It is more precisely a colonial notion and not an Indian or a Third World concept. It is therefore rather 'an intrusion'. European cultures have been monolingual cultures and probably that must be a major reason for them to hold translation in loud and acute cry as a copy of the *Original*. Translation for J. Hills Miller is 'the wandering existence of a text in a perpetual exile' (quoted by Devy, 1999: 182).⁴ The notion of 'wandering' and 'exile' connects translation to the Christian myth of the Fall. Translation therefore is a 'fall' from the Origin. Translations come into being *after* the original. So 'the consciousness of guilt' which is central to the myth of Fall configures translation as 'exile' and inferior to the Original in Western metaphysics. Paz asserts that 'each text is unique and at the same time it is a translation of another text. No text can be completely original because language itself, in its very essence, is already a translation and then, each sign and each phrase is a translation of another sign, another phrase' (Paz, 1992: 154). Translation

cannot be simply a transfer from one code to other code; it is not therefore an isolated art. On the contrary, it is essentially a continuous discourse. It involves a process of interlingual transfer and an endless culture-discourse. It is not simply a transfer, but 'the continuation of a process of meaning creation, the circulation of meaning within a contingent network of texts and social discourses' (1996: 22). It is as well 'a manipulative activity' (Bassnett, 1999: 2). It is more precisely not an innocent and transparent activity. Translators are necessarily involved in a politics of transmission, in perpetuating or contesting values which sustains a literary culture. While remarking on Indian metaphysics, Devy writes:

Indian metaphysics believes in an unhindered migration of soul from one body to another. Repeated birth is the very substance of all animate creations. When a soul passes from one body to another, it does not lose any of its essential significance. Indian philosophies of the relationship between form and essence, structure and significance are guided by this metaphysics...elements of plot, stories characters can be used again and again by new generations of writers because Indian literary theory does not lay undue emphasis on originality. If originality were made a criterion of literary excellence, a majority of Indian classics would fail the test. The true test is the writer's capacity to transform, to translate, to restate, to revitalize the original. And in that sense Indian literary traditions are essentially traditions of translations (Devy, 1999: 183).

Translation is the principal means of understanding the world we live in. Besides, translation can be understood as phenomena of texts producing activity; it is essentially an amalgamation of texts or to use an Octavio Paz phrase 'a growing heap of texts' (1992: 154). 'Translation could be considered as a mode of engagement with literature, or as a kind of literary activism contributing to cultural debates and new lines of cultural communication' (Simon, 1996: ix).

Post-colonial Indian contexts of translation are unique and are different. Venuti (2009) calls for naturalizing of alien texts aiming to conceal a translation by ironing out stylistic oddity or 'foreignness' and create an illusion that the text is natural and not translated. According to Ketkar, Western approach is inadequate enough to translate Indian texts. One of its limitations is

that in spite of the rhetoric of rigour and discipline, it did not go much beyond the pre-linguistic theories and only managed to provide a long list of specific strategies and manuals for the translators and the approach which began as descriptive ended up being covertly prescriptive and normative. He therefore defines the compromising formula of West as ‘old wine and a new bottle kind of thing’ (Ketkar, 2010: 29).

Polyglottism has been a unique linguistic feature of Indians since ancient times. Pointing out India as a translating area, Indra Nath Choudhari (2010) argues that Indians are essentially polyglots; they use more than one language, while speaking or even thinking. Tracing the development of Indians as ‘translating consciousness’, Choudhari quotes from the learned work of Suniti Kumar Chatterjee that much of Sanskrit literature particularly *Mahabharata* and the *Puranas* is based on a translation substratum from the literatures of Indo-Aryan languages or the *Bhasha* literature. He writes in this context:

The literatures of Indo-Aryan languages include the languages of born-Aryans, mixed-Aryans, non-Aryans and foreign speakers, particularly, settled groups of foreign people who spoke Greek and old Persian. When Sanskrit attained pan-Indian prestige status its speakers became reluctant to disclose the translated character of its literary substratum...in every literary tradition there is not one but several literary schools and they exist in literature simultaneously, but one of them represents the canonized crest, and Sanskrit, in due course, achieved that status. The others existed obscurely (Chatterjee, 2010: 113-14).

Translation and history are essentially interrelated to one another. Translations however have been received as peripheral and subordinating texts in course of history and therefore they have been paid seldom serious thought in the aesthetics of translation. G. N. Devy argues that ‘most literary traditions originate in translation and gain substance through repeated acts of translation’ (1999: 183). He therefore attempts to connect translation to historiography and demands a utilitarian theory of literary history to support a theory of literary translation in Indian context. Third World countries and India have a 5000-year-old history of multilingual civilization. He hopes to develop an Indian theory of translation in a multilingual ambience of Indian cultures to be pieced together. In a post-colonial Indian context, the metamorphosing multiplicity of political and cultural contexts is therefore riddling.

Gopal Guru's article (2011: 36-42) presents complexity of the emerging political and cultural scene in the last few decades in India. He refers to *six types of Indias* as a post-colonial hegemony distributed in different cultural uneven blocks. These blocks assert their own cultural hegemony upon one other: Brahmin, non-Brahmin, *Desi*, *Dalit*, Subaltern, Deviant or *Varn*, Caste, Sub-caste, Creed, Minority, Residual or even a meta-category in Indian context like Class. The character of heterogeneity in Indian metaphysics is indeed ancient and people lived their mundane life with burden of this heterogeneity. Ambedakar made efforts to democratize the *Dalit* within the critique of political Hinduism, but he did not go for changing the grounding principles on which 'minority' was defined. Ambedakar's conversion, his efforts to find out an alternative religion to Hinduism was phenomenal. The *Dalit* personal narratives that emerged after 1956 particularly have had their seeds sown in Ambedakar's conversion to *Buddha* religion. Gail Omvedt observes that even the secular movements that made attempts to pave a path to the *Dalit* communities in India got entangled into the Hindu ethos⁵. So the complexity of post-colonial ethos never grew on a simpler plain. Sharad Patil's attempts of finding an alternative aesthetics to non-Brahminical literature and Sharankumar Limbale's to *Dalit* are obvious illustrations of this heterogeneity. Academic intelligentsia of the Third World countries is largely depending on derivative theoretical notions from Western aesthetics neglecting the complexity of the Third World post-colonial ground realities. Devy's statement that 'excessive individualism and the metaphysics of guilt render European literary historiography incapable of grasping the origins of translations' (Devy, 1999: 182) enables us to understand the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial scenario of translation in a non-Western realm.

Eurocentrism is a problem in Indian disciplines of knowledge today. It is true that an awareness of 'a careful understanding of the methodological and conceptual issues involved in the diversification, interdisciplinary and the advancement of the Western systems of knowledge' (Verghese, 2011: 91) is required. The resurrection of a past culture is no longer an option (Gohain, 2011: 23). The post-colonial societies have suffered a half-understood and incomplete decolonization. Therefore, the issues of power in society and the role translations play in cultural and identity formation will be of increasing importance to the future of translation studies. Lefevere and Bassnett suggest that translations have always provided a vital link enabling different cultures to interact (Bassnett, 1990: 12). Translation studies thus becomes a new era of interdisciplinary research, a critical mass of scholarship. Translation studies therefore today have

a performative functionalism of intercultural and multicultural communication. G. N. Devy, Tejaswini Niranjana, Gayatri Spivak, Samia Mehrej, Harish Trivedi and Haroldo de Campos have begun rethinking the role of translation in processes of Western imperialism. A theory of translation is understood in terms of anthropology or 'cannibalism' (Vieira, 1999). A growing pressure to develop a non-Eurocentric approach to translation is visualized in the works of the Brazilian poets. These view translation as a form of transgression and develop a new set of terms such as (including transcreation) transtextualization, transillumination, transluciferation and cannibalization. The Western sense of cannibalization is capturing, dismembering, mutilating, and devouring on animal flesh. Cannibalization is understood not as a negative construct but as *a symbolic act of taking back* (out of love), of absorbing virtues of a body through a transfusion of blood. Translation thus comes to be understood as an empowering and nourishing act, a life force that ensures a literary text's survival. Recent contributions in Brazil, Malaysia, Ireland, South Africa and India challenge the traditional notions of translation. Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi (1999) focus on asymmetrical power relations and how translation theory might overcome intercultural, multicultural as well as barriers within a culture. Bassnett and Trivedi's book explores issues of translation and brings the Third World texts to achieve maximum of cultural transfer by mediating and recording differences rather than sacrificing them (Gentzler 2001: 199). Thus translation as a multicultural discourse plays a vital role in culture studies.

II

Translational discourse is a multicultural discourse as it involves multicultural transfer from one code or codes to other code or codes. Multicultural coexistence and multicultural conceptions require that differences be maintained. It is often necessary to take advantage of obstacles and conflicts that arise in the exchange between cultures. It is often therefore difficult to define cultural positions. A culture is not a monolithic entity; it involves in overlapping of several cultures or cultural practices. A literary text can bring antagonism within one culture between modernization and concurrent religious fundamentalism. A text can be demonstrated as not being an assimilating multiplicity of multiculturalism but on the explosive articulation of cultural 'hybridity'.

Literary expressions could be often misunderstood as manifestations of cultures. Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* is a classic illustration in this context. Rushdie presents the *Koran*, the most important canonical text of a world religion, to the other system of the world as *a*

secular text. This brings in a *clash of cultures* in *The Satanic Verses*. The rigid Islamic positions like fundamentalism, traditionalism, nationalism are brought in collision with modern globalism and its blurring dynamics. Rushdie finds the *hybrid* space of cultural confrontation in *The Satanic Verses*. It is Rushdie's one kind of attempt to *rewrite* 'religious dogmata experimentally and provocatively with the objective of their opening with the objective of internationalization.'⁶

Issues of caste, gender, sexuality and identity search in the translations of Indian *Dalit* autobiographies like other Indian texts have provoked translational multicultural (or cultural communication?) discourse in recent times. Several of these translated *Dalit* and subaltern texts have been included as a part of curricula in foreign universities. It is an indication of an initiation of a cultural communicative dialogue between Western and Eastern cults. Whether this is a positive or a different kind of sign is a matter of insignificance; but the intercultural communication between a Westerner and an Indian text definitely leads to a multicultural discourse.

Indian *Dalit* women's translated texts (especially in English) have been a very recent literary phenomenon in the Indian literary history. The social reformers in India were upper caste men and their concern was evil practices of upper caste Hindu families like *Purdha* system, *Keshwapan*, (to make widow's head bald after her husband's death) child marriage, encouraging of widow marriages etc. These reforms were in no way related to issues of lower caste women. Sharmila Rege holds the view that both the leftist women's organizations and other groups failed completely to emancipate women of lower caste from violence and oppression (2006: 90-101), whereas Anupama Rao brands this phenomena as 'Brahminical feminism' (2003: 47). It is equally true that upper caste women like *Dalit* women suffered (and they still suffer) from male domination. But as pan-Indian phenomena, the oppression of male chauvinism surfaced through intracultural and intercultural translations only. The English translations nevertheless have come up very recently. Baby Kamble's *Jina Amucha*, which was originally published in Marathi in 1986 came up in English translation as *The Prisons We Broke* in 2009 and Bama's *Karukku*, the first *Dalit* autobiography in Tamil came up in 1992 and its English translation in 2011. A similar analogy is found with several both upper caste and lower caste women texts. The scattered Indian women texts of both *Dalit* and Brahminical remained unnoticed perhaps due to the fact that they belonged to different castes, classes, communities, languages and religions. Majorities of *Dalit* women are illiterate even after six decades of India's independence. In this context,

Sumitra Bhave's (1988) attempt in *Pan on Fire* can be considered a brave one as she recorded eight Dalit women's life-stories; these were originally narrated in Marathi and were translated later into English by Gauri Deshpande⁷.

If *culture* is considered *text*, one can argue that a cultural discourse begins at a pan-Indian level or global level (through English translations) through translational hegemony only. In the whirlwind of globalization, the translation agenda has received more attention. However, it is equally not true to say that the translation agenda was not important in the pre-globalization period. On the other hand, translation is a manifestation of culture and a principal means of understanding the world we live in. It is essentially an amalgamation of texts or to use an Octavio Paz phrase a 'growing heap of texts' (1992: 154). It is a kind of literary activism contributing to cultural debates and 'new lines of cultural communication' (1996: ix). Paz asserts that 'each text is unique and at the same time it is a translation of another text. No text can be completely original because language itself, in its very essence, is already a translation and then, each sign and each phrase is a translation of another sign, another phrase' (1992: 154). It cannot be simply a transfer from one code to other code; it is not therefore an isolated art. On the contrary, it is essentially a continuous discourse. It involves a process of interlingual and intralingual transfer and more significantly an endless culture-discourse. It is 'the continuation of a process of meaning creation, the circulation of meaning within a contingent network of texts and social discourses' (Simon, 1996: 22).

Baby Kamble, the *Dalit* woman Marathi writer's *The Prisons We Broke* (2009, trans. from Marathi) raises protest against rigid and hierarchical social order. Bama, similarly, the *Dalit* Christian woman Tamil writer's *Karukku* (2011, trans. from Tamil) narrates evils of caste discrimination and inhuman practices of bonded labour putting across complex relationships between the *Dalit* 'Paraya' and upper-caste, mainly 'Pallars' and 'Parriyars'. Bama identifies herself with the movement of feminism in Tamil Nadu. Like Sumitra Bhave's eight life-stories in Marathi, Viramma's life story is a 'narrated autobiography'. It is interesting to note how the original narrated Tamil text, *Viramma: Life Story of an Untouchable* travelled from one code to another. It was first originally produced as the French text by Josiane Racine in 1995 and later, Will Hobson translated it from French into English in 1997. So the originally narrated Tamil text was not first produced in Tamil but in French and from French it was transferred in English. The journey of the narrated Tamil Dalit woman text transfers in English is an interesting illustration

of a multicultural discourse. For the English translator, the originally written French text becomes the source text; however its origins are in non-standard Tamil. So Paz's argument 'no text can be completely original because language itself, in its very essence, is already a translation and then, each sign and each phrase is a translation of another sign, another phrase' (Paz, 1992: 154) appears more valid in the context of Viramma's 'narrated Tamil text'. Similarly, a few Marathi Dalit autobiographies of women like Kumud Pawade, Shantabai Kamble and Urmila Pawar translated into English are illustrations of multicultural discourse.

To conclude, it can be argued that translational discourse specifically through English, which was peripheral in the pre-globalized era i.e. before 1990's was shifted to the centre in the last two and half decades. Especially during the post-colonial period, it received prominence. Its consequences shall be evaluated in due course of time. Today, the translations of Indian texts are done on a larger scale; one of the prominent purposes is to get a world readership. A large number of Dalit writers are busy in getting their works translated into English. Several of the major writers' works have already been translated. To give a few examples of Marathi Dalit writers like Laxman Mane, *Upura* (1997), Laxman Gaikwad, *Uchalya* (1998), Sharnkumar Limbale *Akkarmashi* (2003), Narendra Jadhav, *Mee ani Maza Baap* (2003) and Arjun Dangle's (edited) *Poisoned Bread: Translation from Modern Marathi Dalit Literature* (1994) have already been introduced to the Western world. Consequently, it is leading to a multicultural discourse. In Europe and America, the translated Indian texts are received for several reasons. However, one of the important effects of these translations is an exposure to the pan-Indian culture. The subaltern and Dalit texts and women texts are presenting a very different realm of world to the West. The post-colonial sphere of translation opens up incommensurable ways of life and refracted meanings (Bhabha, 1994: 127). With respect to this complex situation, the paradigm of *culture as text* could help cultural sciences to maintain on the ground of cultural semiotics, the possibility of translating one culture into another. Culture *as* translation, is a new paradigm; it stresses the aspect of negotiation and assertion of cultures as well as emphasizing the problematic search for cultural communication and at the same time, for local-historical grounding.

Notes:

1. Gregory Rodriguez in a dialogue with the American Journal California Local Newspaper speaks on multiculturalism; his definition of multiculturalism is a typical Western notion, which distorts the concept of multiculturalism. "The Future Americans," Opinion, *Multiculturalism Demographic Fact*, March 21, 2001 in California Local Newspaper.

2. Bhalchandra Nemade delivered a speech on *Literature, Culture and Globalization* in Marathi on 14 May 2002 at Shramik Pratisthan, Kolhapur; later the speech was published as a monograph by Lokvangmay Gruh, Mumbai.

3. Lord Macaulay's famous speech addressed to the British Parliament on 2 February 1835:

'I have travelled across the length and breadth of India and I have not seen one person who is a beggar, who is a thief. Such wealth I have seen in this country, such high moral values, people of such caliber, that I do not think we would ever conquer this country, unless we break the very backbone of this nation, which is her spiritual and cultural heritage, and therefore, I propose that we replace her old and ancient education system, her culture, for if the Indians think that all that is foreign and English is good and greater than their own, they will lose their self esteem, their native culture and they will become what we want them, a truly dominated nation.'

4. The statement that *translation is the wandering existence of a text in a perpetual exile* is a quote from Devy's personal notes based on a lecture delivered at Professor J. Hills Miller, the IX Centenary Celebration Symposium, University of Bologna, Italy, in October 1988. The words quoted by Devy are without any changes.

5. See Gail Omvedt's *Dalit Visions*.

6. Doris Bachmann-Medick (Göttingen) presented a paper entitled, *Cultural Misunderstanding in Translation: Multicultural Coexistence and Multicultural Conceptions of World Literature* in the *International Conference on Translation and Multiculturalism* organized by University of Malaya in July 2010 under the title 'Found in Translation a Common Voice in a Multicultural World'. Bachmann-Medick maintains the view that new concepts and new examples of world literature call attention to new horizons of language and text: to the explicitly ambiguous and negotiable cultural symbolizations. Contrary to the languages of global internationalization, which express and support a growing assimilation of life circumstances, the decentralized literatures of the world are an important medium of difference. They go beyond the scope of traditional views of a pre-defined (Western) common language of a universal culture and literature.

7. Sumitra Bhavé's *Pan on Fire* is a text that can be termed as a 'Narrated Autobiographies' where eight Dalit women narrate their life-stories. The stories were originally narrated in Marathi and later they were translated into English by Gauri Deshpande. The life stories were collected by a Research Team headed by Sumitra Bhavé under the auspices of Ishvani Kendra Pune. The very objective of the Project was to find out image of woman's self. While narrating their life-

stories, the women were particular about selecting those parts of their lives, which they thought had a greater bearing on their present day situations. It is an unfortunate fact that even after the independence of more than sixty years a majority of Dalit women are illiterate.

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