



## Melancholic Status of the Bauris: A Dive into Their Past Realm

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Received : 13 January 2024 • Revised : 24 February 2024;

Accepted : 04 March 2024 • Published : 30 June 2024

**Abstract:** The Bauris are a prominent scheduled caste community dwelling in the states of West Bengal, Odisha, Bihar and Jharkhand. Possessing a strong affiliation to some Indigenous community, the Bauris were earlier designated as ‘race-caste’, ‘semi-Hinduised aboriginals’, ‘exterior caste’, ‘depressed caste’, ‘tribal caste’ or ‘criminal aboriginal tribe’.

For centuries, the Bauris endured a wretched social life and this had later snowballed to their demeaning status in the society. The present article sought to uncover the historical background of the Bauri community through the lens of literary works, mythological stories and several discussions by eminent scholars.

**Keywords:** Bauri, past, origin, untouchable, scheduled caste

### Introduction

The Bauris are a prominent scheduled caste community residing in the states of eastern India. They are of some non-Aryan origins and basically count themselves as Hindus. In West Bengal, their population counts to 1,228,635 which is approximately 5.72 per cent of the total scheduled castes of the state. Numerically, the Bauris represent the fifth largest scheduled caste community of West Bengal after Rajbanshi (17.71 per cent), Namasudras (16.33 per cent), Bagdi (14.25 per cent) and Poundra (11.41 per cent). In Jharkhand and Bihar, the Bauris represent just 4.67 per cent and 0.01 per cent of the total scheduled caste population in the respective states while it represents about 7.27 per cent in Odisha as per the 2011 Census.

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#### TO CITE THIS ARTICLE

Roy, S., & Biswas, S.K. (2024). Melancholic Status of the Bauris: A Dive into their Past Realm, *Man, Environment and Societys*, 5(1), pp. 19-32. DOI:10.47509/MES.2024.v05i1.02

In West Bengal, it was Sasmal (1967) and Bhowmick (1968) who had conducted extensive fieldwork among the Bauris. From there on, we lack such an elaborate study as per the authors' knowledge. Meanwhile, it was extremely important to get a masterful portrait of the Bauris of the twenty-first century. In this article, we do not propose to provide any means of bridging any gaps. Rather, we have attempted to build an introduction to their historical background which will eventually help to explore their roots and their evolution through decades. This is truly a pivotal quest as the social status of any caste is induced by cumulative factors such as tales of their origin, customs and rituals, food habits and food sharing, occupation and animal domestication, the attitude of other castes towards them, etc.

### Connotation of the Term 'Bauri'

Hypothetical interpretation of the very term 'Bauri' elucidated their degraded position in society. Although the etymology of the term seemed to be enigmatic, it is presumed that the Bauris could not keep hold of the authentic name of their community and it was the upper Hindu castes' people who had named them as 'Bauri' in order to specify their subjugated status in the society. Eminent scholar Babu Rakhal Das Haldar conjectured that the word '*bauri*' had actually hailed from a Sanskrit word '*varvar*' or '*barbara*' meaning a barbarian (cited in Sengupta, 1979: 30). Acharya (2017: 21) commented that the word might also come from local term '*bana*' meaning forest which eventually signifies that they were forest dwellers much earlier before they got started to live a settled life. Dalton (1872) argued that the term 'Bauri' might have stemmed from an Assamese word '*bori*' meaning subjugated or dependent. This clarifies that the Bauris were indigenous before and they had later submitted themselves to the upper caste Hindus. In some legendary stories, it was also said that once the Bauris were chased by Parashurama. As the only means to get rid of Parashurama's clutches, the Bauris acted like mad people in front of Parashurama. It is against this background that the term 'Bauri' happened to emanate from the word '*baura*' meaning mad people.

It is noteworthy to mention that this community used to keep their caste name 'Bauri' as their surname. However, this probably made the other castes pinpoint their caste with ease. In order to prevent that, the community gradually started to adopt surnames of the local community such as Chalak', 'Das' in Bengal; 'Behera', 'Das', 'Hati', 'Kandi', 'Naik', 'Pani', 'Bisoe', 'Rout' and 'Samal' in Odisha; 'Nag' and 'Bagh' in Assam (Singh, 1996). One of the unique and remarkable surnames adopted by them is 'Khetrapal' which literally means 'protector of the land'. This surname is related to their occupation as agricultural labourers or earth-cultivating adopted by most of them.

## A Peep Into Some Literary Works

In 1979, an American anthropologist named James Freeman in his book 'Untouchable: an Indian Life History' scrupulously characterized the then plight of the Bauris of Odisha through a comprehensive narrative of a 40-year-old illiterate Bauri man named Muli. Muli was a resident of Kapileswarpur village (probably three miles from Bhubaneswar). His illustration opens at a tea stall where Muli being untouchable was found sitting outside on the ground whereas the higher caste people were sitting on benches near the stall and enjoying their tea. Despite being a little boy, the waiter at the tea stall was found to call Muli disrespectfully. He happened to serve Muli tea in his own glass which he had brought from his home. In the first place, Freeman tried to portray the existence of untouchability through the social prohibitions against eating together and using the same utensils. Through the character of Muli, Freeman portrayed how the Bauris were not permitted to speak until they were asked to do so. Furthermore, to avoid any physical touch, a Bauri had to crouch whenever any higher caste people would pass by them. Freeman (1979: 67) also portrayed an explicit scenario of the existence of untouchability that the Bauri children had to face inside the school premises. He described how the children of the higher castes were permitted to sit inside the classrooms while the Bauri children were impelled to sit in the verandahs. In addition, the teacher who probably belonged to some higher caste used to throw canes at those Bauri children in order to beat them while the higher caste children used to throw mud at them.

In 1951, a renowned Bengal novelist Tarashankar Banerjee depicted the lifestyle of a Kahar Bauri (i.e. a sub-caste of Bauri) as the 'embodiment of everything that is considered immoral and excessive by the *chasi* caste' (cited in Nielson, 2018: 97). Nevertheless, it was during the reign of Communist-led-Left Front (LF) party in West Bengal, the Bauris reoriented themselves by preventing drinking, brawling and womanising. Another small story 'Omni-eaters' by Nanda (2023) dictated how the children of Brahmin and other higher castes felt disgusted regarding the Bauris eating the flesh of dirty pigs and how the former had to bath every time they accidentally touched any Bauri individual. In Bengal, the breeding of pigs was found to be common among the lower caste group of people. In addition, the act of eating pork was disgusted by the Brahmans and was strictly banned for the latter as described in *Manusmriti*. Another story 'The Darkness Covered Them' by Ghose (translated in 2001) shared how the Vaishnav weavers of Dhulgara looked upon the Bauris as 'boorish' and how the former used to put a coloured cloth over their shoulders in order to show off their higher position in the society. In Odisha, another novel by Sisir Das (1998: 94-97)

gave a vivid picture of how the Bauri men were heavily addicted to palm wine and how they thrashed their wives when the latter tried to stop them.

Social discrimination against the Bauris prevailed for a long time. In an interview with S. Rosen, Frédérique A Marglin (1992: 217) once quoted that 'local songs and stories tell that Jagānnatha prefers the low-born and he wants to show his mercy to them in particular'. In this vein, the legendary stories of how Lord Jagannath was mesmerized by the unflinching faith and true devotion of Dasia Bauri could be cited (Bhaduri, 2021: 19-22). In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Dasia Bauri was a resident of Baligram (also called Baligaon) village near Puri who used to work as a weaver in the nearby village named Praharajpur. Since Dasia belonged to a lower and untouchable caste, he was not allowed to enter any temple premises nor was he allowed to participate in the prayer hall where the saints used to discuss Bhagawat Gita or other Hindu scriptures. Once, he had insisted a rich villager offer a coconut to the Lord in his name. He also mentioned a condition that in case the Lord did not accept the coconut, the villager must return the coconut to Dasia. Though all the villagers mocked his childishness, they were later taken aback when Lord Jagannath accepted the coconut. Another story of Dasia Bauri would also mystify us. On another occasion, Dasia Bauri gathered a few mangoes to offer to the Lord. However, he was forbidden to cross the Lion Gate of the temple where the priests were arguing as to who would offer those mangoes to the Lord. Dasia assured the priests that the Lord would readily accept the mangoes from outside the temple. Having said that, Dasia Bauri held two mangoes in his hands and stared at Nilchakra and to his utter surprise, the mangoes vanished within seconds. He kept doing so until all the mangoes were accepted by the Lord. The priests later found the seeds and peels of those mangoes at the altar which confirmed that the Lord had accepted the offerings of Dasia Bauri despite the fact he was debarred from entering the temple. The tales of Dasia Bauri yielded a clear notion of untouchability that was confronted by the then Bauris of Odisha. This resonates with the biography of Muli by Freeman (1979: 124) where Muli described that his grandmother often used to visit temples from outside and was never allowed to enter inside. Mahapatra (1978) commented that the Bauris of Bhubaneswar used to serve as servants of Lord Jagannath temple. They were employed to do only menial jobs in the temple premises and not inside the temple.

### **Assembling Mythological Fragments**

The Bauris seemed to be unretentive of the stories of their genesis. On top of that, the exiguous resources of their folklore failed to provide the same on account of which the

details of their origin remained cryptic so far. Nevertheless, few collections revealed several justifications as to why they were so degraded in the past. According to one story, the Bauris were downgraded for stealing food from the banquet of the gods. Another story claimed that they might have a mythical ancestor named Bahak Rishi (also called the bearer of burden) due to which the Bauris were earlier known as a palanquin-bearing caste especially in Bengal (Risley, 1892). It is said that once while returning from a marriage procession, the Bauris sold the palanquin and got heavily drunk. Being in that drunken state, they assaulted Bahak Rishi who got furious and cursed them for conducting such profanity and were later sentenced to degrade to the lowest position in the caste hierarchy (Risley, 1892).

Ghosh and Ghosh (2000: 50) revealed another fascinating story about the genesis of the Bauri caste. It is said that once *Maa* Durga rode a lion to a river bank where she was supposed to have her bath. The restless lion happened to express his feelings to *Maa* Durga which outraged her. She kicked the lion so hard that the lion began to weep. The lion cursed *Maa* Durga owing to which blackish dirt came out from *Maa* Durga's body when she bathed the next day. The dirt was carried away by river Damodar and got deposited at various places where dark-complexioned people were born and they were presumed to be the ancestors of the Bauris. Prior to this, Sasmal (1967; 1972) who did a meticulous investigation of the Bauris of Hooghly district conferred that the Bauris were primitively the Brahmans who were found guilty due to some faulty action and were thus stripped of their higher status. Sasmal pointed out a few remnants such as keeping eleven days of mourning period, wearing of sacred thread by Bauri men, embracing Vaishnavism, worshipping goddesses such as *Maa* Sitala and *Maa* Manasa and going on a pilgrimage which delineated their prior connection to Brahmin caste. It was said that Lord Shiva created the first Bauri who served as a domestic servant. However, later due to some fault, Lord Shiva cursed the Bauri servant to join a lower caste. The stories as described by Ghosh and Ghosh (2000) and Sasmal (1967) depicted a careless attitude among the Bauris who were usually very prone to making mistakes. This eventually made them fall under the lower rungs of the Hindu caste system.

Another engrossing tale was put forward by Bhowmick (1968). Once Parashurama (sixth incarnation of Lord Vishnu) vowed to kill all the tyrannical Kshatriyas. This made a few Kshatriyas flee and hide in a dense forest; unfortunately, Parashurama could not trace them there. To save themselves from the death grip of Parashurama, the Kshatriyas pretended to be mad in front of him, which eventually led to his forgiveness.

These impersonating mad Kshatriyas were locally called 'Baura' meaning mad people (in Hindi). Later, the term 'Baura' evolved into 'Bauri'. According to Vasu

(1911), the Bauris could probably be the descendants of the sage Viswamitra. Due to the fear of being prosecuted by King Pratāparudra Deva, they hid themselves and Lord Vishnu happened to protect them by generating an illusion so that no one could touch or harm the Bauris. This made the Bauris untouchables.

The tales of their origin are quite different in Odisha. We do not get any evidence of any sort of carelessness or fault of Bauris that had put them in the lowest rungs of the Hindu social structure. Neither had we found any sort of crisis that might have led to the formation of this caste in Odisha. Rather, we found stories of Hindu gods assigning specific roles to the different sub-castes of Bauris. For instance, it was Lord Vishnu who had offered a Bauri leader a conch shell when the former was unable to offer him food at a feast. This incident made conch-shell blowing the traditional occupation of the Bauris of the state (Mahapatra, 1966-67). Another tale linked Lord Mahaprabhu in assigning the *Ghumara* Bauris with their traditional occupation of beating drums (Mahapatra, 1978).

### **Their Whereabouts in the Caste System**

Risley (1892) referred to the Bauris as being of non-Aryan descendants. In his classification of the Hindu castes of Bengal into seven groups, Risley had placed the Bauris in the last (or in the seventh) group. Dutt (1890) described the Bauris as 'race-caste'. The Bauris were supposed to be some aboriginal races who were actually indigenous to Bengal regions much before the Hindus arrived and started to settle there. For centuries, the Bauris surrendered to the Hindus and gradually started to embrace their language, religion and other lifestyle habits. This stands in consonance with Plowden's (1883) view where he claimed the Bauris to be 'Semi-Hinduised aboriginals'. After five decades, Hutton (1933) placed the Bauris under 'exterior caste' in the Census of 1931. The Brahmans, the Sadgopes and the Goalas generally do not receive any food or water from the Bauris (Ray, 1961). The Bauri community could accept water and food from a few castes such as *Kayastha*, *Napit*, and *Goala* (Singh, 1993). A *Napit* (i.e. barber) and a washer-man never attended a Bauri customer (Danda and Danda, 1968).

In Odisha, Mahapatra (1978) confirmed that the Bauris neither fall into the first three orders of the Varna system nor do they fall under the '*Chhattis Pataka*' or thirty-six sections of the Sudras. As such, the Bauris were designated as untouchables (*acchuan*). The higher castes felt reluctant to share their utensils with the Bauris and hence they used to serve food to them on leaves (Mahapatra, 1966-67). Restrictions were imposed on their dressing styles viz. they could not grow fashionable moustaches, they could not

oil or comb their hair; they could not wear *dhoties* below their knees. To appraise the higher castes' people of their movement, the Bauris had to tie a small bell around their waist (Mohanty, 2003). In Assam, the Bauris were referred to as a non-*Panichal* group which means that the higher castes such as Goala, Koiri, Kurmi, Rajputs, etc. refrained from accepting water from the Bauris. In addition, the Bauris were not allowed to fetch water from sources used by these higher caste people (Singh *et al.*, 2006).

### Uncovering their Traditional Occupations

In western Bengal, Riskey (1892) described the Bauris as 'cultivating, earth-working and palanquin-bearing' people; however, the traditional occupation of palanquin-carrying faded away with the development of roads and the launching of several other convenient modes of transport. As such, they were later bound to adopt other occupations. The Bauris are generally described as 'landless' owing to which the majority of them fail to take up agriculture as their occupation. They were mostly found to be engaged in agricultural labour jobs as well as in non-agricultural jobs. Till the late 1950s, manual jobs at collieries were immensely adopted by them, especially at the Dhanbad-Raniganj belt (Roy Choudhury, 1964). With the growth and expansion of road and railway systems, the Bauris of neighbouring states such as Bihar and Bengal could effortlessly migrate to work in different sections of collieries namely as coal-cutters, coal-beaters, trammers, and so forth (Banerjee, 1981; Buchanan, 1934; Seth, 1940). However, the Bauris were laid off with the influx of several people from other castes following the nationalisation of coal mines in 1971. As such, the reliability of manual jobs in other sectors as paid labour-based jobs, casual workers, truck loaders, construction – site workers, coolies, house servants, and others gradually enhanced after that. Mitra (1953) also listed the Bauris as scavengers and sweepers. The latter is concordant with the traditional jobs among the Bauris of Jharkhand where they adopted menial jobs such as sweeping, cleaning toilets and removing night soils (Gait, 1902; Ziyauudin, 2002). It was due to their primary involvement in menial occupations, that the Bauri caste has been perceived as 'polluting' (Klass, 1995). It is noteworthy to mention that due to the persistence of such perception, this caste was often debarred from several services that were provided to the people of other castes.

### Failing Economy

The Bauris were well-known for their extremely casual behaviour. In a study among the Hindu aboriginals of the Nilgiri state (presently owned by Orissa State Agency),

Sadangi and Mohapatra (2017: 51) reported that the Bauris were least interested in cultivation and whatever agricultural produce they used to get during *dahi* cultivation were dissipated extravagantly in drinking and merrymaking during harvest. They were least bothered by economizing for their future consumption. Owing to this, the Bauris had to rely on forest products such as fruits and roots for most of the year. The married Bauri wives sometimes go outside to earn some money. However, the majority of them had to hand over all their earnings to their husbands (Behura and Mohanty, 2005). Most of the Bauri men usually spend money extravagantly on alcohol, gambling and womanizing. The Bauris are generally bereft of assets such as agricultural land, homestead land, shops, etc. As such, they always remain indebted towards the provider who offers them work and land. Due to a lack of proper planning of the investment, they often face severe challenges in their path towards development. In such a manner, they remain trapped in the vicious circle of poverty and despondency.

### **Lax in their Sexual Activity**

The Bauris were mostly observed to be extremely casual in their married life. Adultery was found to be common. The Bauri women were extremely liberal in their sexual activity. In Freeman's (1979: 257) story, Muli confessed that despite having a dedicated wife, Muli used to run off with prostitutes. Muli was himself a pimp and used to supply (untouchable) female prostitutes to high-caste men (Freeman, 1979: 152). Muli used to perceive this as sexual politics which clearly portrayed how the higher caste men were dependent on lower caste untouchable women for their sexual pleasure. This resonates with the fact that the Bauri women were earlier publicized for their concubinage relationship and unattached bonds of cohabitation (Sengupta, 1979). With the advent of the British army during World War II and with the coming of several capitalists during the industrialization of the Bokaro region, cases of concubinage relationships and prostitution started to grow among the local Bauri girls. As they used to stay far away from their families and children, most of them used to rely on Bauri girls for sexual pleasure in order to get rid of boredom and loneliness. During the reign of the British in India, the landlords used to stay for a few days in the house of a Bauri woman as '*gharjamai*'. The Bauri women used to commit sexual activities for monetary gain. Some of them also acted as agents and used to provide shelter to prostitute girls from other castes at their homes. This sort of offence was protested initially by other Bauris; however, later this was totally overlooked by the community. In Bankura, it was said that a long time ago, during the reign of a king, his second son Hakim had the right to use Bauri women for his own sexual pleasure. Unfortunately, the Bauris never showed



any resentment for this and viewed this act as some sort of privilege (Bhattacharya, 1989: 14). Apart from this, Bhowmik (1968-69) cited the frequent use of slang by the community with special reference to sex-organs as one of the major reasons for their lowest social position.

### Unusual Food Restrictions

Among the Hindus, taboos on different foods and drinks have a serious impact on the ranking of caste in the hierarchy. In 1903, Risley once classified the Bauris as 'unclean feeders'. This was in consonance with Risley's earlier reference in 1892 (p. 81-82) where it was said that the Bauris usually feed on beef, pork, fowls, all kinds of fish and rats. In Gondogram village, the local castes suspected that since the Bauris neither could buy beef due to money issues nor kill cows for beef due to the dominance of the Hindu religion in the area, the Bauris might consume beef in the form of carrion which were generally ejected by the other castes (Klass, 1996). Now, despite counting themselves as Hindus, the Bauris' claiming cows as their sacred animal fell through due to the indisputable truth of being beef-eaters. As such, they had opted to choose dogs as their sacred animal (cited in Bahadur and Chib, 1977: 6). Evidently, the Bauris were rumoured to avoid killing or hurting any dog and moreover, it was even reported that the Bauris used to abstain themselves from touching the carcass of dogs. In case any dog got drowned in any tank or pond, the Bauris used to refrain from using the water of the polluted sources until the latter got washed away by the entire monsoon season. It is rumoured that a Bauri used to observe the same mourning days for their pet dog as they used to do so for their own parents. Liquor consumption is highly prevalent in this community. Generally, country liquor is consumed by them. They also smoke *biris*, cigars and even loose tobacco through *hookahs*. Mohanty (2003) described that the Bauri men generally spend most of their earnings on alcoholic drinks and intoxicants.

### Rearing of Unclean Livestock

The Brahmans or the upper Hindu castes prefer to keep cleaner animals such as cows or ducks. Lower castes such as Bauri usually prefer to rear goats and chickens which happen to make a mess by defecation all around in the house as well as in its surroundings (Nielson, 2018: 98). Pig rearing is highly stigmatized in Hindu society, particularly among the higher castes. In Gondogram village, although the Bauris have refrained from rearing pigs and eating pork, the local Brahmans and the higher castes still viewed them as 'pig-raising' and 'pig-eating' unclean caste (Klass, 1996). In

several states of our country such as Assam, the domestication of pigs and fowls was considered a social stigmas and was thus highly disgraced by the upper castes (Singh *et al.*, 2006). However, since they involve less maintenance cost of feed/ fodder compared to cleaner animals such as cows, the Bauris used to rear them which eventually led them to fall under the lower rungs of Hindu social structure. As mentioned earlier, the Bauris generally never intended to put restrictions on the eating of flesh of several animals. Sacrifices of animals such as fowls, pigs and goats were immensely carried out by them to please folk deities and spirits. One would find animal sacrifice as a regular occurrence in almost all the religious practices of the Bauris (Sasmal, 1967). For instance, the Bauris of Hooghly used to sacrifice goats and fowls to please the goddess *Manasa Devi*. However, such sacrifices and offerings were least conducted by the Bauris of Odisha (Sengupta and Kuanr, 1977).

### **Primitive Rituals and Customs**

Despite being Hindus, the Bauris had retained several rudimentary rituals and customs. The Bauris never could hire a Brahmin priest. Instead, they used to hire a priest either from the other lower castes or from their own caste (Risley, 1892; Sengupta and Kuanr, 1977). Animal sacrifices were conducted on a wide scale. They also had a strong belief in superstitions and the existence of several spirits as well (Sasmal, 1967). Since they could not hire a Brahmin priest, they were least acquainted with the Hindu rituals and customs. Earlier, they used to bury corpses. Mohanty (2003) shared that the Bauris of Odisha used to stand aloof and watch how the upper caste Hindus were cremating the corpses. Probably, they were trying to learn the rituals. Moreover, the cremation of corpses involves more expenses compared to burial.

### **Conclusion**

In India, the social structure among Hindus has historically been organized around a caste system that has existed for centuries. This intricate hierarchy is rooted deeply in the historical, religious, and cultural backgrounds of various castes and communities. Each caste traditionally held specific roles and responsibilities within society, influencing aspects such as occupation, marriage, and social interactions. However, the dynamics of the caste system are influenced by various social factors, including economic opportunities and educational advancements. When communities gain exposure to diverse economic prospects, they often experience significant growth and development. This economic flourishing can lead to increased social mobility, allowing

individuals and families to transcend their traditional caste boundaries. As a result, cultural exchange and innovation become more common, fostering an environment where new ideas and practices can emerge. Over time, this evolution contributes to a gradual transformation of social norms, leading to a more interconnected and dynamic society, where the rigidities of the caste system may begin to loosen.

When a community endures prolonged periods of deprivation and crisis, it often struggles to evolve and adapt to changing circumstances. Such is the case with the Bauris, an indigenous group who, after embracing Hinduism, began to integrate various Hindu customs and rituals into their daily lives. This transformation involved not only the adoption of spiritual practices but also the incorporation of social and cultural elements associated with Hindu traditions. As they navigated the challenges brought about by their circumstances, the Bauris found a new sense of identity and belonging through these rituals, which provided them both solace and a framework for community cohesion. Over time, these practices became an integral part of their cultural heritage, illustrating the resilience and adaptability of the Bauri people in the face of adversity.

However, one can notice the existence of several of the primitive customs, rituals and habits. Being on the lower stratum of the Hindu social structure, the Bauris are forced to take up several menial jobs for centuries. Being untouchable and penniless, they remain unskilled and hence cannot go for other higher occupations.

The income that individuals in impoverished communities manage to generate is predominantly allocated towards their basic needs, such as food, shelter, and clothing. As a result, there is often minimal, if any, financial surplus available to invest in their future. This lack of disposable income severely limits their ability to fund their children's education, acquire valuable assets, or enhance their small-scale businesses. The cycle of poverty has persisted for generations, trapping these individuals in a state of stagnation and preventing any significant progress in improving their living conditions. Consequently, the prospects for upward mobility and long-term development remain bleak as they struggle to break free from the constraints imposed by their economic circumstances.

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