

The 'Performance of Ethnic Identity' of Up-Country Tamils in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

The research paper presents ethnographic material on the performance of ethnic identity of Up-country Tamils in Sri Lanka. Fieldwork at Kanthapola in the Nuwara-Eliya district, provides real insights into the everyday life of Up-country Tamils living in the plantations, as well as an understanding of how they themselves experience, talk about and reflect upon their own ethnic status and its salient characteristics, in relation to other groups in Sri Lanka. The findings show that Up-country Tamils remain a distinctive ethnic group which is seen as inferior in the hierarchical status of Sri Lankan ethnic groups. The results of the study, together with information from existing studies, suggest that the ethnic status of the Up-country Tamils has not changed greatly, despite the fact that there have been considerable changes in the original position of the community. These findings point to the importance of considering Up-country Tamils in regards to reconciliation among the ethnic groups in Sri Lanka.

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The setting

One day in early August 2013, I reached Kanthapola at noon, having used public transport, to meet a Sinhalese Grama Niladari (GN) at his office¹. Since the GN does not attend his office every day, this meeting was organized by an officer in the Nuwara-Eliya Divisional Secretariat. This GN was in charge of one of the divisions in the Kanthapola area where 60% of the population are Up-country Tamils, the third most numerous minority comprising 6 % of the total population of Sri Lanka. Up-country Tamils inhabit the plantation districts of the central highlands, largely concentrated in the districts of Nuwara Eliya, Badulla, Kandy and Ratnapura. The GN's office consisted of a small room with a veranda conveniently located by the roadside. I sat on a small bench outside the office door while waiting to talk to the GN, who was busy conversing with a resident in Sinhala. When it was my turn to enter his office, I was invited in, greeted formally, and asked to explain the purpose of my visit. As I was making my introductions, a man of about 60, wearing a shirt and sarong, came inside the room and interrupted us. He tried to talk to the GN about certifying a document to process someone else's application. At the end of their brief dialogue, the GN requested the man to come back and bring further documents, namely consent letters from the third party he was representing.

I was unable to understand what they were talking about, but his physical appearance helped me recognize the elderly man as an Up-country Tamil². After the man had left, the GN explained:

This man has come on behalf of a third party, as he spoke fluent Sinhala and could charge for his service. In this case, he is helping somebody whose retired mother worked on the estate as a tea-plucking worker and passed away 3 years ago without taking Employees Provident Fund (EPF)³ due to her failure to show the correct identification in the required documents. The deceased woman, who left three sons and three daughters, all married, had attempted unsuccessfully for 2 years to withdraw EPF before passing away. The second son, with whom the mother lived until her death, wants to benefit from this fund, however, the other children have to give their consent. Here, my role is to confirm that the other 2 brothers agree to this fund going to their brother, and that the documents he provides me are genuine (personal communication, August 5, 2013)⁴.

After a brief pause, the GN continued:

I have mostly served this community and this has enabled me to sketch the behaviour of these folks. The documents submitted to me earlier are not

¹ Grama Niladari Division is a subunit of the Divisional Secretariat and it operates through a government servant appointed by the central government to carry out administrative duties at a village level. Grama Niladari (GN) is a government officer, who is responsible for issuing character certificates, reporting deaths due to natural causes, certifying identity card applications, gathering statistics, maintaining voter's registry and acting as peace officers for personal disputes in his area.

² Up Country Tamils are the preferred name for a group of people descended from India to work in the British plantations in Ceylon. In official documents they are often referred to as Indian Tamils

³ In Sri Lanka, EPF is a social security scheme of employees which offers a joint action plan by the employer and the employee to save money by targeting retirement.

⁴ This is my own translation of an interview that was conducted in Sinhala.

originals. These people are not trustworthy and often give us trouble (personal communication, August 5, 2013).

This story illustrates the underlying ethnic discomfort that underpins relations between the Sinhalese majority and the Up-country Tamils in the plantation setting. Even many decades after their arrival in Sri Lanka, Up-country Tamils are still struggling to get access to public support systems. Their lack of language proficiency in Sinhala and their lower level of literacy conspire to make it difficult for this community to communicate effectively with Sinhala government officials. In addition they are frequently met with suspicion and overt discrimination, and stereotypes of them as untrustworthy or shifty, like the one above, flourishes. Hence, government services which are automatically granted to other citizens of the country are often inaccessible for Up-country Tamils.

This recent observation from my fieldwork in 2013, adds to experiences from my own childhood. Growing up in a remote village in the District of Jaffna, Northern Province where Sri Lankan Tamils predominantly live, I remember the presence of Up-country Tamil families who were usually not well integrated with the rest of the villagers. Many Sri Lankan Tamils are of the view that although *Thoddakkaddar*⁵ (Indian Tamils / Up-country Tamils) speak the same language as they do, the dialect differs greatly, and moreover invokes ethnic stereotypes that the *Thoddakkaddar* are uncivilized, unschooled, dishonest, and low caste. The fieldwork in the Kanthapola area provided me with real insights into the everyday life of Up-country Tamils living in towns and plantations in the Up-country as well as understandings how they themselves experience, talk about and reflect upon their own ethnic status and its salient characteristics, in relation to other groups in Sri Lanka. These insights, then, can help us understand the everyday dynamics of ethnic relations in Sri Lanka, and how these shape the lives of Up Country Tamils.

Ethnic identification, in this sense, is defined as an identifying process which is constructed individually or collectively during the interaction between internal self-identification or group identification, on the one hand, and the external categorization done by others, on the other (Eriksen, 2010; Jenkins, 2012; Phinney 2003). In other words, ethnic identification is a kind of social labelling process engaged in by oneself and others. Constructivists, especially Fredrick Barth, define ethnic identity as a production of social ascriptions or social status which is malleable and changeable (Barth, 1998; Banks, 1996). This means that ethnic identities have been molded, reconstructed and refabricated over a period of time. Further Barth explains that political and economic circumstances play a significant role in the construction and mobilization of ethnic identities. According to Barth (1998), individuals change their identity and this may change their locality, their substance pattern, their political allegiance and form, or their household membership. The question addressed in this paper is how Up-country Tamil individuals label themselves, their own group as well as those of other groups in their everyday life of the plantation set up. I draw upon ethnographic data conducted throughout 2013 in order to address this question.

⁵ Sri Lankan Tamils who live predominantly in Jaffna district call Up-country Tamils or Indian Tamils as *Thoddakkaaddar* relating to their workplace estates.

Past, present, and future: Up-Country Tamils

Indian Tamils emerged in Ceylon in the 19th century as Indian immigrants destined for British plantation work. From the 1830s the expansion of British coffee-growing, followed by tea-growing, in the Central Highlands of Ceylon, encouraged Indian immigrants from poverty-ridden districts of Chenkelpettai, Coimbatore, Madurai, Thanjavoor, Thiruchirapalli and other parts of South India to migrate. At the beginning, especially during the coffee times, immigration to Ceylon was of a seasonal character and the expansion of tea plantations from the 1890s onwards generated Indian immigrants to settle permanently or semi-permanently in Ceylon. Permanent settlement accelerated the process of family migration and thus the emergence of a distinct ethnic community in Ceylon.

From the outset their legal status was a hot political issue and their citizenship rights became a defining aspect of the politics of ethnicity in colonial Ceylon and later independent Sri Lanka. “With large numbers of plantation Tamils effectively settled in Ceylon, they began to participate in and stake their claim to political power as co-participants in the island’s affairs as early as the 1920s” (Shastri, 1999). At the beginning of the 1920s, the British government in India was pressured by the Indian Nationalist Movement to secure the rights of Indian immigrants who had migrated to the British colonies, and this led to a resolution in London in 1921. Ceylon, one of the British colonies, accepted the resolution and agreed to grant Ceylonese citizenship to Indian immigrants. As a first step, Indian immigrants were allowed limited voting rights after the introduction of universal suffrage of the Donoughmore Commission Recommendations of 1931⁶ (Hollup, 1991). As a result, at the 1947 General Election, held one year before Independence, the Ceylon Indian Congress⁷ was able to win six seats in Parliament and become part of the Coalition Opposition Party. This situation was met with grave concern by the local Sinhala political elite and eventually led them to seize power of Indian Tamils at the legislative council of Ceylon. The first step to curtail the rights of Indian Tamils was taken by the Sinhalese government when the nation received independence from Britain in 1948, the year the new Ceylonese government enacted and passed the Citizenship Act No. 18. In addition, problems connected with granting them citizenship were influenced by Sinhalese perceptions of Indian immigrants as labourers and 'aliens' (Hollup 1992). The Ceylon Citizenship Act was followed by two other Acts: the Indo–Pakistan Act (1949) and the Amended Parliamentary Act which expelled the majority of Indian Tamils to India. All these parliamentary acts deprived the Indian Tamils of citizenship and made them stateless overnight.

As a result of the Citizenship Acts, a significant number of Indian immigrants was forced to leave Ceylon. The question of citizenship became a subject of continuing dispute between the governments of Sri Lanka and India although in the cause of time, several agreements were reached leading to the granting of Sri Lankan or Indian citizenship to a substantial number of Indian Tamils. Finally, the remaining Indian

⁶ The Donoughmore Commission was responsible for the creation of the Donoughmore Constitution in effect between 1931–47 in Ceylon.

⁷ In 1950, the Ceylon Indian Congress, formed in 1940, changed its name to Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) and became the largest trade union to support work conditions of Indian Tamils, as well as fair wages. Although some support was extended to the Indian Tamils, the CWC as a high caste-led organization did not grant them much in the way of social services and pay rises.

Tamils were granted Sri Lankan citizenship in 2009, with the ‘Grant of Citizenship to Stateless Persons (Special Provisions) (Amendment) Act, No. 5 of 2009.’ Today, almost all Indian Tamils who remain in Sri Lanka have received Sri Lankan citizenship.

The performance of ethnic identity of Up-Country Tamils

Compared to their compatriots who were repatriated to India after the implementation of the Citizenship Act of 1948, Indian Tamils who remain Sri Lankan citizens have witnessed significant progress in terms of legal and political recognition (Bass, 2000). The social and political achievements of Up-country Tamils in the twenty-first century in Sri Lanka are often considered remarkable, given the fact that in the twentieth century they were denied privileges that were given to other Sri Lankan citizens. Despite the low number of Up-country Tamil students in higher education, their educational achievements have improved significantly, especially in Ordinary Level (O/L) and Advanced Level (A/L) examinations. At the 14th Parliament election held in 2010, five of the seven Members of Parliament (MPs) were elected from the Nuwara-Eliya district.⁸ Notably, in the new cabinet, appointed on 23 April 2010, two ministerial portfolios are held by Up-country politicians. Today it is clear that there have been considerable changes in the original position of Indian Tamils.

In recent decades, Indian Tamils, who inhabit towns and plantations in the Up-country, prefer to be called Up-Country Tamils as this relates to their current residence and not their ancestral homeland. However, the Indian Tamils who are scattered around other parts of the island are not aware about this preference of Indian Tamils who used to live in the estates of the Central province. During the fieldwork in the Mullaitivu District, I visited the Kepapilavu village which is located 10 Km away from Mullaitivu town. Although inhabitants of this village were originally from Up-country,⁹ they were not aware of this fact, nor that Up-country Tamil leaders claimed this part of Sri Lanka as their home. Rather their concern was with the demands of Tamil Eelam.¹⁰ In Kepapilavu it was obvious that Indian Tamils who live in the Northern Province have paid a high price during the final battle (2008-2009) between the government of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).¹¹ According to Sri Lankan Tamils, their identity as Indian Tamils has been manipulated and this led them to change their locality, their substance pattern, their political allegiance and form, or their household membership. However, this is not the case in the plantations of the Central Province. The following three portraits explain how Up-country Tamils, who used to inhabit the plantations, label themselves and their own group as well as other groups.

⁸ Currently Sri Lanka is administratively divided into nine provinces and twenty-five districts. Province is the first level of administrative division and district is the second level. The nine provinces are Northern, Eastern, Western, Central, Southern, North-western, North-central, Uva and Sabaragamuwa. Nuwara-Eliya is one of the districts in Sri Lanka, as well as one among three in the Central Province

⁹ These Indian Tamils settled in Mullaitivu, Kilinochchi and some other parts of Northern Province in the 1950s and followed by the 1983 riots in Sri Lanka.

¹⁰ The Tamil Eelam, consists of Northern and Eastern Province of Sri Lanka where Sri Lankan Tamils live predominantly, was the sole demand of the LTTE for three decades.

¹¹ 70 per cent of Tamil-speaking population killed in the final battle in Mullaitivu were Indian Tamils. This fact is unknown to the general public and international bodies.

*Nirmala*¹²

Nirmala is a 32 year old tea-plucking worker at the Park Estate, Kanthapola, Nuwara-Eliya. She is the fifth in a family of seven siblings, born and raised on the Hethershed Estate, one of the estates in Kanthapola. Nirmala went to the estate school since it was much closer to her line-room¹³ and all her estate friends attended the same school. At the O/L examination, she got 5 simple passes of out 8 subjects and had to discontinue her A/L studies.¹⁴ After her O/L, like many female tea-plucking workers after their primary level schooling, she joined one of the estates in Hethershed. This is fairly common for Up-country Tamil women as female tea-plucking workers consider the estate employment as a way of earning a decent income that enables them to look after their family without financial worries. Also they often believe that participation in income-generating activities allow them greater control over family decisions. Their employment at the estate is thus considered socially and economically empowering in the sense that it makes them less dependent on their husbands or others for survival.

At the age of 21, Nirmala married Siva and moved to Park Estate, Kanthapola, where Siva's family had been residing for a long time. Nirmala's husband, Siva, works in a hotel as a bellboy and earns Rs.10,000 to Rs.15,000 (\$ 100 to \$ 150) per month. Nirmala earns around Rs.4, 000 to Rs.6,000 (\$40 to \$ 60) in the off peak season, but can make between Rs.8,000 to Rs.10,000 (\$ 80 to \$ 100) during peak seasons. However, Nirmala is currently the only one in her household that works on the estate. Her mother-in-law, Ponnachchi, had, however, worked there for more than 35 years until she retired 6 years ago. Nirmala's brothers-in law work as coolies in vegetable gardens located within plantations or in nearby areas. None of Nirmala's brothers-in-law is interested in working on the estate as labourers. Nowadays many of Up-country youngsters are unlikely to look for employment opportunities within the estate system. This situation is very different to what it was at the beginning of 20 century.

Nirmala lives with her husband, their three sons, her mother-in-law, and two brothers-in-law in her line-room which is partitioned into a small reception area and a tiny bedroom. The kitchen, made of cement and wood, is roofed by tin-sheets, and is located in a separate section of the line-room. Nobody has their own water tap or toilets but have to share these facilities with three or four other families living in the same line. Up until now, there has been no maintenance of Nirmala's line and the family still does not have the legal deeds for their room. For Nirmala and other residents, keeping their line-rooms clean has become a major challenge due to the poor drainage and sewage systems. Such water and sanitary problems have been a central feature of line-housing for several decades. For Nirmala and many other Up-country Tamils living in these conditions, the quality and sustainability of housing, in which they had lived for several decades without any renovations or upgrades, is a constant worry. Nirmala consequently feels that they are ignored and disregarded by

¹² This is a pseudonym, as are all other references to my field respondents.

¹³ The majority of estate workers live in a "line-room" which is typically a few square meters wide and hardly convenient for a large, extended family. These line rooms are built like barracks in two double rows back to back, accommodating 24 households—one family for each room (Shantha Kumar, 1999)

¹⁴ To continue A/L studies, there should be 6 passes out of 8 subjects. This is a compulsory requirement to continue A/L studies in any of secondary schools in Sri Lanka.

both the plantation management and the Sri Lankan government. However, since she was born and raised on tea estates in Sri Lanka, for her, Sri Lanka is her residence, not India.

Nirmala has been working as a tea-plucking worker from the age of 21. She is currently working in the Park-tea estates together with approximately 120 other female workers that are divided into two working groups. Work is demanding and every working day is structured in a similar way. Nirmala usually leaves home by 7.00 a.m. and walks all the way to the estate harvesting place (in Tamil, it is *Malai*) for the 8.00a.m. start.¹⁵ The first round of tea-plucking finishes at 10.30 a.m. after which the workers are allowed a short tea break for 15 minutes. The second round then continues until 12.30 p.m. After an hours lunch break, tea plucking recommences at 1.30 p.m. and is completed by 5.00 p.m. The most experienced among tea-pluckers acquire the ability to work rapidly and generally set themselves a daily target of 18 Kg of tea leaves. For their small breaks the workers get into groups and share their meals with work-mates. Since Nirmala usually watches Sri Lankan Tamil TV channels, and shares certain sensibilities with her friends and colleagues at work, she usually joins her caste friends to share meals under the tea bushes. As a person belonging to a high caste, Kudiyanavar, one of the most highly respected castes in Up-country, she takes pride in her caste status. Nirmala even proudly said that the chance she got to speak for this study was highly criticized by other low-caste tea plucking women.¹⁶ Also, in Nirmala's line, apart from 3 families, all her neighbours belong to the low-castes of *Parayar*, *Chakkiliyar*, and *Pallar*, but she explained that she has never drunk a cup of tea at their place even if she goes there for any social functions at their place. If her family is invited for a wedding of low-caste person, they eat banana and biscuits, which are not cooked by them, with a soft drink,. For her, caste is an important social status which has been maintained throughout the plantation setting. It is important to bear in mind that the identity of Up-country Tamils is negotiated by a group of people who are homogeneous – they all belong to estates where they have worked and lived for many decades. However, it is clear that the prevailing caste system in Up-country commands social divisions and differences within the community.

Raja

Raja, an arts graduate, had been working as a Development Officer at the Nuwara-Eliya District Secretariat for 18 months. He was born and grew up on an estate of Kanthapola, in the Nuwara-Eliya district. His parents and grandparents were born in the same line-room. Raja did not know much about the birth details of his great grandparents, but he is fourth generation Indian Tamil and his parents worked on the Kanthapola tea estate until their retirement. Raja's father passed away three years ago and his retired mother and unmarried brothers, including Raja, still live in the same line-room.

In the A/L examinations, Raja passed with 'Distinction' (3 "A" pass) and was admitted to one of the Sri Lankan state universities. While studying he socialized with Sinhalese, Sri Lankan Tamil and Muslim students. It was a new experience for him

¹⁵ Every day they pluck tea in different areas which are more far from their residences. Their line-room is located in an isolated area and there is no public transport to their workplace.

¹⁶ The researcher has chosen workers randomly at their workplace and many women were also interviewed during her ethnographic survey.

since he never had the opportunity to interact with other communities until he went to university. He had enjoyed the social life there. Most of his friends were Sri Lankan Tamils, but his relationship with the Sinhalese and the Muslim was good, although not intimate. Since Raja majored in Political Science taught Tamil, he has many Tamil-speaking friends. “When I spoke with Sri Lankan Tamils, I felt more comfortable, than with people from other communities,” Raja said. Not only Raja, but also other estate residents who lived in Kanthapola felt more at ease with Tamil-speaking communities. The above account reveals that many estate people are still geographically isolated since they do not have the opportunity to leave the estate.

Raja reiterated that Indian Tamils who predominantly live in estates should be called Up-country Tamils since they have a separate identity which distinguishes them from other Sri Lankan communities. Raja had a strong sense of belonging to the Up-country Tamils which gave him emotional satisfaction and a sense of being a valued member of the group. For Raja, Up-country Tamils have a collective identity, sharing a common ancestry, historical memories, culture and religious practices among its members, as well as being attached to a specific territory. Here Raja claims his identity within the context of common culture, religion, language, place of origin.

Further Raja continued that the widespread view that even if friends of different ethnic background get along fine and help each other, deep inside they have a strong sense of their own group individual roots. He says “when two new university students met for the first time, the first information they would gather about one another would be their ethnic membership” (Personal communication, August 15, 2013). According to Raja experience, ethnic membership was the key determinant when people developed friendships, selected room-mates, or found life partners. For Raja, the fact that his generation has felt the sense of degradation, made him argue for inter-ethnic harmony between Tamil-speaking communities. Raja had not perceived his experience in these terms until he was admitted to the state university; for him this was simply the way things were in the past.

Vijayakumar

I met Vijayakumar early in my fieldwork. He was born in 1959, the youngest of five children, and grew up on a plantation. He is third generation Indian Tamil. Vijayakumar had worked as a labourer for 10 years in the same estate where he is now a *Kangani* (Supervisor / Overseer). Vijayakumar manages to speak Sinhala with the company management staff, but has not mastered writing in Sinhala. However, his children, Mathavan 16 and Mathu 14, grew up speaking Sinhala and Tamil since they attended the Kanthapola town school. Vijayakumar sees Sri Lankan Tamils and Indian Tamils as a separate ethnic group despite the fact that the same language is spoken by both groups. Here, it is important to note that “actual interethnic relations may very well diverge from stereotypes as they are presented in casual conversations; that there may be a discrepancy between what people say and what they do” (Eriksen 2010). Like many other estate Tamils, Vijayakumar considers Sri Lankan Tamils as “better dressed”, better groomed” and more civilized than them. Vijayakumar recalled the memories of his childhood at school. “Jaffna Tamil-teachers taught me how to come to school on time and the way of dressing for school, things which my parents had not taught me” (Personal communication, August 22, 2013). Further he says:

In my childhood, Grade 1 to Grade 5, all students were in one classroom and only a few teachers taught us. Among them, I respected most those who came from Jaffna. Jaffna teachers were well trained and competent and made great effort to improve the education of Up-country Tamils. However, nowadays the teaching appointments of estate -Tamils with O/L qualifications have reduced the quality of education in Up-country (Personal communication, August 22, 2013).

He worried that today the mastery of English by Up-country teachers is not adequate. According to him, this is one of the political strategies to suppress the Indian Tamils. While discussing about the relationship of Sinhalese with Up-country Tamils, Vijayakumar says:

Up-country Tamils are consciously aware that they live in the towns and plantations which are surrounded and dominated by Sinhalese. In addition, many of the government officers for the estates, including medical doctors, nurses, GNs, and estate management staff are Sinhalese who come outside the estates. We face many challenges when we approach the officers in the government offices where Sinhala is mostly used for communication. As a result, we fail to do things at time and frustrated much. As a result, many of us still do not have Birth Certificates, National Identity Cards, and Marriage Certificates.

To summarize the above portraits, the Up-country Tamils have lived through many decades as victims of exploitation, both by the British planters and then the private companies, as well as discrimination and marginalization by the government of Sri Lanka. For several decades, they were not part of political discussion, and considered a neglected community. Even today, third and fourth generation Up-country Tamils feel similar discrimination and disregard from the government and plantation management. However, Up-country Tamils have generally tried to secure their political and civil rights within a multi-ethnic Sri Lanka, not within Tamil Eelam. The people of Up-country are not engaged in competition with any other ethnic group. There was and still is little chance of massive violence occurring in central Sri Lanka (Bass 2008). They have never claimed land that belong to other ethnic groups- they seek only to have state recognition as an ethnic group and the right to have the same privileges and rights accorded to all Sri Lankans. In the Kanthapola area, all statements and practices of my respondents express a distinct social status of Up-country Tamils. In their everyday lives they did not demonstrate the willingness to return to India contrary to what outsiders perceive as being characteristic of the Indian Tamils who live in India. I see the younger generation among the Up-country Tamils are no longer in favour of the idea of being branded as “people of Indian origin.” Much young generation of Up-country Tamils who dwell in towns and estates in Up-country do not want to join the estates for jobs as their parents. Despite they do not have proper educational background, estate youth desire to work outside the estate, not because they have clearly defined career ambitions, but out of a simple desire for something better (Dunham et al. 1997 quoted in Hollup 1996). Even the young generation also labelled themselves that people who live in the estates are inferior and lower relating to other communities’ education, caste, lifestyle, appearance and behaviour.

Conclusion

Up-country Tamils' interactions with others, and their reflections on themselves, lead to the conclusion that Up-country Tamils remain a distinct ethnic group which is seen as inferior in the hierarchical order of the categorization of Sri Lankan ethnic groups. "The criteria for ranking ethnic groups are nevertheless different from class ranking: they refer to imputed cultural differences or even inborn racial differences, not to property or achieved statuses." (Ericksen, 2010) In the case of Up-country Tamils, there may be a correlation between ethnicity and class which means that there is a high likelihood that persons who belong to an Up-country Tamil ethnic group belong to a special social class which has its own group roots. However, today, among Up-country Tamils there is an awareness of creating a separate ethnic identity to fight for their political and civil rights. This is a clear indication that they have started to think about their community and are moving towards making Up-country their home.

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