

## Rethinking Emancipation: Meetei and Naoria Phulo

**Thongam Bipin**

***Abstract:** In 1931, Naoria Phulo (1888-1941), a Meetei from Assam, delivered a speech to a small group of his followers, after which, he and his followers were excommunicated by the Meetei community of Assam. They were excommunicated because they undertook the task of the revival of Meetei religion and cultures. Their effort for revival was a challenge to the larger Meetei community which were predominantly Hindu. For Phulo, this excommunication was an opportunity for emancipation from religious and cultural oppression of Hinduism and mayang.*

*Naoria Phulo's work in the un/making of Meetei society in the twentieth century is immensely powerful. The paper looks at his one such moment of un/making of Meetei in 1931, when along with his followers, he was ostracised by his Meetei community of Assam. The moment of ostracisation, for Phulo, was a moment of emancipation, clarity from Hinduism, rather than meek sulking for the same. The paper touches upon a number of important assertions of Phulo which shaped Meetei consciousness and thinking in the twentieth century.*

**Keywords:** Naoria Phulo, Meetei religion, Meetei emancipation, Hinduism and Meetei community



thongambipin@gmail.com

Thongam Bipin holds a PhD from University of Hyderabad. He is from Manipur and currently lives in Imphal.

## Life of Naoria Phulo

Naoria Phulo<sup>1</sup> was born on 28 August 1888 into a Meetei family in Cachar (Silchar) district of what is recognised as the present-day Assam state of the Indian Union. Apart from Manipur, Meetei people live in different parts of Assam and Tripura in India, as well as in Bangladesh and Myanmar. This widespread presence of Meeteis owes to the historical diplomatic ties of the erstwhile Manipur kingdom with its neighbouring kingdoms/states. Meetei people were also brought to these places, particularly the first three, as they were escaping from the devastating Burmese invasion (1819-1826) of the nineteenth century. Although it lacks clear historical explanation, many believe that Phulo's family landed in Assam as they were escaping the Burmese war. Though he was born into a Meetei family, and it is more likely that Phulo's family were already Hindus since the society at large was Hindu<sup>2</sup>, Meeteis "lived in Bengali fashion" (Nilbir, 116). The phrase "born into a Meetei family", instead of Meetei-Hindu or Hindu-Meetei, is often used to describe Phulo. It allows one to imagine a Meetei past, a past before the arrival of Hindus, a prescriptive political manoeuvring where the Hinduness in his identity was cast away.

As a community settled within the dominant Bengali-Hindu hegemony, any mark of difference from the "Bengali fashion" was received with contempt and became an object of shame and mockery. When in school, Phulo understood the price of being different from the dominant community and being a Meetei. He faced taunts from his Bengali friends for Meeteis' apparent lack of a script, language, religion, gods etc. It was in this context that he would later on form *Apokpa Marup*<sup>3</sup>, a new Meetei religious group, to move away from Hinduism, to revive not just religion but Meetei consciousness. Phulo worked as a teacher, as a clerk and as a sub-inspector. He left his sub-inspector post in 1931, after one year of service, to fully devote himself to his search for the new Meetei. When he was ostracised again in 1936 by a Hindu Pandit (Brahmin) from Manipur, it had no impact on him since he had already been ostracised once before.

When Phulo and his followers were excommunicated, he urged them to grasp the moment. The meaning and possibility of their excommunication were vast and enormous. For him, emancipation was not just a mere moment of self-discovery but a performance of that self-discovery in the public spaces. For him, emancipation was incomplete if it was hidden behind a mask. The potential of the performance of the self, and with a future political implication, Phulo broke away with a force from being a Hindu into an unapologetically performative Meetei. Perceptively, this performative Meetei could be understood as the initiator of Meetei revivalism and movement in the twentieth

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<sup>1</sup> Naoria Phulo is variously known and written by names such as Laininghan Naoria Phulo, Naoriya Phullo etc. His real name is Naorem Phulendro.

<sup>2</sup> See Singh Khuraijam, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> His Meetei followers from Manipur formed Meetei Marup around the same time.

century. This essay draws upon the contours of a performative Meetei while at the same time draws upon some of his other assertions. The essay also brings forth Phulo's idea of becoming Meetei. His idea of becoming Meetei is inseparably tied with filling a space, preferably a public space, with a Meetei identity. Phulo knew the importance of reclaiming space and he demonstrated that it can be reclaimed only if one is unapologetically performative. He followed into the idea that power wrestles in space and is fundamental for any form of communal life (Foucault, 2017).

### **Hinduism in Manipur**

Meeteis became subjects of Hinduism during the reign of king Pamheiba (1709-1748). The king coerced his subjects into converting to Hinduism (Kabui, 1991). The migration of Brahmins from India to Manipur and the influence of Hinduism had already begun in the sixteenth century. Pamheiba's predecessor Charairongba (1697-1709) was converted to Hinduism; however, the latter did not force his new religion upon his subjects. Within the span of two centuries, conversion of Meetei into Hinduism was close to complete. The burning of *Puyas*,<sup>4</sup> renaming and destruction of Meetei deities, temples and religious places, distortion and rewriting of history, translation of Sanskrit text into Meeteilon, and introduction of Brahminical culture and values were important events of this period (Kabui, 1991)<sup>5</sup>. It is also recorded that many buried bodies were unearthed and cremated as per the Hindu tradition to fulfil the whims of the King and his religious master.

There was an attempt during this period, until the early part of twentieth century, to assimilate the history of Manipur into the Indo-Aryan tradition by claiming Pakhangba, the first king of Manipur, as the descendent of Arjun of epic *Mahabharata*. It is also claimed that the present Manipur was the Manipur of the same epic. This has been challenged and rejected by many, and historical records have shown that Manipur as a term appeared only during the Hindu period and not before that. In the early twentieth century, taxes levied by the king from the people in order to become and remain Hindu, to undo ostracization imposed by the king in collaboration with the Brahmins, introduction of the notion of *mangba* and *sengba* (impure and pure) became inevitable features of this period.

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<sup>4</sup>Puya is broadly understood as a manuscript written in Meetei Mayek on Meetei religion, belief, customs, law etc. After the arrival of Hinduism, as much as 124 different Puyas were burnt by the king under the instruction of his guru, Shanti Das in the eighteenth century. Meeteimaichous(scholars) kept several Puyas in their personal possession, notwithstanding King's order to submit them in the palace for burning them.

<sup>5</sup> Also see, Deepak Naorem's piece "Myth Making and Imagining a Brahminical Manipur since 18<sup>th</sup> Century CE" <https://raiot.in/myth-making-and-imagining-a-brahminical-manipur-since-18th-century-ce/>

### **Hinduism and Decadence of Meetei**

This section reflects on the articulations of Naoria Phulo as a means to reclaim Meetei identity. In his critique of Hinduism, there is a strong emphasis on the need for reclaiming a space which is denied to the Meeteis. Phulo created a sense of crisis, a crisis inhabiting this period because of Hinduism. In general, revival of tradition requires building of a crisis narrative (Hobsbawm, 1983) the solution for which resides in the past. In this sense, the past is political and the invocation of a particular past depends on the crisis of the present. Phulo's crisis highlighted the deteriorating self-respect, economy and education of the Meetei community. Pre-Hindu Meetei tradition was taken as the solution for the crisis of the Meetei by Phulo. He attempted to establish a natural connection between the past and the present, and forged a desire to and assumed a responsibility to change the present as well as the future. Remapping of the Meetei crisis and the answers he sought underscores Chatterjee's (1994) "eastern modernity" which emphasizes escape from the present crisis to the glorified past for the solution to the crisis. The desired nation of the present is realised in the past. Phulo finds that Meeteis believed in the false narrative of *Mayang*<sup>6</sup>, whereby they consider their language inferior and insufficient; their gods and history insignificant; and, Meeteis' aspiration to be like *Mayangs*. W. McCulloh (1859) had observed that Hinduism of the Meeteis was largely a matter of fashion than a conviction.<sup>7</sup> Even though the crisis faced by Meetei people as a result of Hinduism was confined to the religious realm, it later spread to the realms of history, education, etc. when western education and scripting of the community were taken up seriously.

Phulo also observed that the lack of education and scientific knowledge were due to Hinduism. He was pained at the economic exploitation of Meeteis by Brahmins. He says, "*Tengbangbana 'logic logic', 'science science' haiduna nongthangi firaan hairi*" (Rest of the world are shouting and flying the success of logic and science while the Meeteis are possessed by Hindu rituals, songs and dance) (Phulo, 2010: 62). He blamed Hinduism for encouraging youths to take up *Sankirtan*<sup>8</sup> at the cost of their education. According to him a generation of youth have lost their future because of Hinduism's emphasis on ritual performance. Phulo made bold, controversial statements which may have been profane to some people (of that time). For example, he would say that Holi teaches thievery. According to him, the tradition of Meetei kids going to Meetei households asking for alms during Holi was a deliberate attempt of Hinduism to ruin the Meetei community. He asked what is this religion which destroys the life of a person and blames the same person for impoverishment. In a scathing critique of Hinduism and its role in the decadence of Meeteis, Phulo

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<sup>6</sup> Mayang is a Meetei word, a generic term for non-mongoloid and non-indigenous racial stock of India. Naoria Phulo uses the term to understand the oppression of Hinduism and establishes an irreconcilable relationship between Meetei and Mayang in his writings.

<sup>7</sup> Written in 1859, McCulloh's observation could be correct but by the turn of the twentieth century, this fashion was ingrained in Meetei consciousness. See, N. Lokendro Singh, *Unquiet Valley* (1998) and W. McCulloh, *An Account of the valley of Manipur and of the Hills Tribes* (1859).

<sup>8</sup> Devotional and ritualistic Hindu songs

pointed out that while Meetei are slaving for the *Mayangs*, the world could have made new scientific inventions.

The relationship between Hinduism, Meetei apathy and economic exploitation were explored further by him to create this crisis. Phulo believed that the decline of the Meetei economy was factored by three important reasons: one was the decline in intellectual power; second, lack of enthusiasm to improve knowledge; and, third, decline in economy (Singh Joykumar, 2012: 86). Brahmins had, according to Phulo, destroyed indigenous ritual practice and introduced new rules to exploit the economy of the Meetei people. Meeteis were forced to pay for unnecessary religious rituals in the form of money and donations for birth ceremonies, funerals, etc. (Singh Joykumar: 89-98; Phulo, 2010). He observed that Meeteis became over indulgent in non-productive religious activities such as *Holi*<sup>9</sup>, *Sankirtan*, *Pung-esei*<sup>10</sup>, etc. which were brought in by Hinduism.

Phulo's project was to escape from the crisis of the present. This escape was possible when Meetei community would become independent from Hinduism in every aspect. The formation of *Apokpa Marup* marked as an important moment for this departure (Nilbir, 1991). It envisaged a different trajectory of Meetei world from the hitherto Hindu hegemony. The primary objective of *Marup* was the revival of the traditional religion of Meeties. It is clear from his writings that his political and religious dispensations were part of the larger desire to be accepted as it should, and participate in the production of a scripted community (Blackburn, 2011).

Forced confinement of Meetei language, history and script, according to Phulo, into their private space was a religious measure for the proliferation of Hinduism. For example, Meeteilon was considered an impure language for religious rituals. He said, poignantly, "*Hek sibaga Meetei di Mayang maron lonbani*" (Meeteis speak in Sanskrit as soon as they die) (2010: 81). This indicates the general practice of using Sanskrit for rituals while denying Meetei as their own language. Therefore, the presupposition that Meeteilon was not a sufficient language gets established through such denials. Denial as a means to establish superiority of Sanskrit was also seen in education and general conversations, literature, etc. Discrimination against Meeteilon over the language of the *Mayang*, and Phulo's effort towards replacing the latter by the former was a significant political development of that time. This political move was against the general conception that Meeteilon was impure and therefore to bring the language into the religious sphere was blasphemous. Phulo's attempt to replace Sanskrit with Meeteilon in religious practices is symbolic of the resistance and conflict between two languages which occupied two different spaces of pure-Hindu and impure-Meetei space. This is also true in the case of history, education, script, and religion. Such significant markers of Meetei identity were made antithesis to the public while domesticating them in the private realm. During this time, religious and public spheres were inseparable. The concept

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<sup>9</sup> In Meetei society, Yaosang is a festival which is equivalent to Holi. They are often used interchangeably despite many trying to distinguish them.

<sup>10</sup> It can be literally translated as drums and songs. Pung-esei usually accompanies religious songs.

of public sphere and the possibility of its formation or the presence of it were overshadowed by religion. The dichotomised realm of public and private sphere, or, the outer and inner self in non-secular terms, will be used here to analyse Phulo's revivalism in particular and revivalism in general. Hindu religion stood as a discriminatory system that forbade the development of Meetei language, script and history in the public sphere. For Phulo, the dilapidated condition of education and economic status of Meetei were connected to Hinduism. This can be ascertained as an attempt to bring out the suppressed Meetei identity through Hinduism.

Phulo's engagement with Hinduism and the larger society created a discursive space within the space dominated by Hinduism. The public sphere of his time was highly autocratic as the space for dialogue between the dominating force and the dissenting voice was non-existent due to orthodox religious belief and strict obeisance to the king. Any voice that questioned the hitherto tradition and belief system was condemned, extending to the point of social ostracisation. Phulo's attempt to break into this rigid social sphere was met by similar regressive social forces. Due to his relentless efforts to build a democratic space for dialogue and change, his society was beginning to experience a change in the form of questioning the religious practices of Hinduism. Emergence of Phulo and his challenges to Hinduism shook the Hindu public sphere. Such challenges paved the way for revivalism of Meetei religion which was hitherto pushed into its private domain.

As noted earlier, Phulo's main tools that would reclaim/revive Meetei identity were language, script, education, and history. His concern for language was largely confined to the terrain of ritual practice, but he also demanded that Meetei students be taught in Meiteilon. He said that Meetei students cannot adapt to the language of 'the other' in schools, because of which they often discontinue their study<sup>11</sup> (2010: 24). However, his stand on language and the language of the ritual is evident when he says Meetei speak Sanskrit when they die. This needs to be understood as a reflection of the degree to which the Meetei were religiously colonised and influenced to consider Sanskrit as the language of God on the one hand, and Meiteilon as the language that lacked the capacity to converse with God—as the language of man, on the other. It was part of the larger hegemonic design to encourage Meetei to inculcate self-hate, for all things Meetei, therefore discouraging self-identification on one hand, and, encouraging acceptance of Hinduism and its other complicit tools on the other. This implicit design of the Brahminic hegemony and Hinduism was challenged, and it paved the way for revivalism. In his work on language and identity, he remarks that even though *Wahouron* and *Byakaran*<sup>12</sup> were similar in their nature of disciplinary propensity, they were irreconcilable entities because of their specific linguistic affiliations. For Phulo, *Wahouron* and *Byakaran* were useful for the study of Meetei and *Mayang* respectively.

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<sup>11</sup>Originally published in 1940.

<sup>12</sup>According to Phulo, *Wahouron* is a Meiteilon term equivalent to *Byakaran* which is understood as grammar in English. He suggests that *Byakaran* is a branch of study that studies the etymology of language and not the structure of language. Not going into the nitty gritty of grammar, Phulo's argument is clear here. *Wahouron* as the equivalent of *Byakaran* in Meiteilon can only study Meetei language.



There is an absolutising and non-interchangeable sense in his construction of these two categories. He substantiates it by taking the example of *esing* and *jal* which stands for water in English. He says if one needs to study the etymology of the word *jal*, one should take the help of the *Byakaran* and not *Wahouron*. He asserts with complete authority that *Wahouron*, and not *Byakaran*, will provide the etymology of the Meetei word *esing*<sup>13</sup> (2010: 101).

Perhaps, if we were to extend this logic by Phulo, intra linguistic study will not be possible according to his strict compartmentalisation of languages. Meeteilon is not devoid of foreign terms. However, is Phulo guilty of circumscribing language study in general? What were Phulo's limitations from which such a radical proposition of language study was produced? Phulo's articulation and writings were enmeshed with Sanskrit and Bengali words; however, what are the implications of such divisionism for him and Meetei revivalists, then and now? Did Phulo have certain people in mind when he wrote this? One of the possible answers to these questions would be based on the existing education system of his time that imposed *Byakaran* on the students of his community. The education system of the early twentieth century also shows that Bengalis and Bengali-speaking Meetei were the teachers in Manipur (J. Parrat, 2005). Due to the lack of textbooks in the Meetei language, students had to study Bengali. As it was practiced in schools, Meeteilon was/is studied using the principle of *Byakaran*. Although, this is one aspect of ascertaining his point of departure from the dominant language study, an important and crucial point is to situate within his politics of rejection of Hindu narrative of Meetei by asserting an independent history for the Meetei.<sup>14</sup> This assertion can be seen as a rupture in the form of resistance and an exit that was envisaged by Phulo from the dominant Hindu tradition of Meetei community.

Phulo's language question<sup>15</sup> is largely confined to ritual service and the reconstruction of Meetei identity. Meeteilon was considered impure for ritual performance and treated as an inferior language. Such misconception for him was a result of Hinduism and as a consequence of it, Meeteilon was pushed into the condemned Meetei inner realm. Therefore, *esing* is impure whereas *Jal* is pure<sup>16</sup> (Phulo, 2010: 130). Such notional integrity in the minds of Meeteis is instilled through the process of consent generating mechanism, in Gramscian sense, hegemony. Imposition of religion and then language, in a community, and then to make them believe in the superiority and rationale of it, function in the subtle terrain of hegemony. For Phulo, Meeteis are taught the language of the Mayang through religion, *Sankirtan* and education (2010). Consent generating

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<sup>13</sup>First published in 1934.

<sup>14</sup>See his point-by-point rejection of the claim that Meetei and Manipur are descendants of Arjuna and part of Mahabharat, first published in 1934 (2010).

<sup>15</sup>Phulo, unlike Lamabam Kamal and Khwairakpam Chaoba, did not feminise Meeteilon. He did not attribute or personify the language, instead saw the language as a medium through which certain form of emancipation and growth of Meetei community could be achieved. Language for him, then, was just a medium, a mode through which politics and resistance of the Meetei can be expressed.

<sup>16</sup>First published in 1940.

mechanism of hegemony disempowers community and individual, thereby assuming an authoritative position of unquestionable status. In such a complex functioning of hegemony, Meeteis' consent also lies in accepting the inferiority of their language.

In the beginning of *Eigi Wareng*,<sup>17</sup> written in 1940, Phulo laments the lack of serious books in his language, and the common notion that Meeteilon is useless (2010: 26). Because of such a notion, Meetei parents, instead of encouraging their wards in education, pushed them to read *Mahabharata*. Such ideas about Meeteilon worked as barrier against achieving education. From his proposition, it is clear that formal education should be imparted only in the language of the students. For Phulo, Meetei students' failure to complete education was a socially engineered failure and because of such failures Meeteis are made to believe that they are not good in education and instead forced to pursue reading *Mahabharata*, *Pungcholom*, *Sankirtan* etc. Meetei parents advise their children – “*Nakhoigi school haibadu karisu kannaba natte, echasa eshusha, mee oige hairabadi pung, esei, paala tammu*”(Your school is not important, my dear children, if you want to be successful learn pung, ritual songs) (2010: p. 28). Phulo held Hinduism responsible for such deteriorating mindset of the Meetei. He says, “*Gouriya dharmana Meeteigi fagadaba pumnamak sumthi saana saidatlabani*”(Gouriya religion [Hinduism] has destroyed everything that is good for Meetei completely) (2010, p. 29). Such a relegation of Meeteilon reached a point where Meetei of Cachar (Assam) began to think that learning ritual songs and playing *pung* constituted real education. Such religiously inclined activities were considered suitable for Meetei and *gyan* (knowledge) and *bigyan* (science) were reserved for the *mayang*. This division is symbolic of the hegemony exercised by the religion. Because of such a notion about themselves, Meeteis of Cachar generally hired teachers from Manipur to master the art. Interestingly, as Phulo attempts to highlight, the phenomenon of school dropout among Meetei children was not singularly because of language question but also due to religion, i.e., Hinduism. Hinduism, according to him, promotes non-educational activities, mostly related to religious practices such as devotion through *Sankirtan*, reading Hindu epics, etc.

Emphasis on religious activities performed in Sanskrit over education is simply a mimicry. Phulo says that it was just mere mimicry when Meetei sang Hindu songs in Sanskrit. The people who sang such devotional songs were unaware of their meaning though they could understand the rhythm and beats. They were mostly rendered from memory. Similarly, the audience came to witness the performance and not to listen because they did not know the language. Phulo questioned the logic of such devotion - one that does not permit its devotees to use their own language to reach god. His assertion was that such closure would be broken down once the devotees are allowed to pray/sing in their own language. Intersection of language, education and ritual practices here is not accidental. For example, the notion that Meeteilon is impure and therefore unfit for religious activities was inculcated through indoctrination for centuries, and more

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<sup>17</sup> It can be translated as “My Prose”. It is considered Phulo's important prose text for the revival of Meetei consciousness.



so, in the context of Cachar. For Phulo, such perceptions can be brought to an end when Meeteilon is introduced in schools and the language of religious practices is replaced.

### **The concluding moment of 1931**

When Naoria Phulo and his followers were socially ostracised by his own community in 1931, he called those Meeteis who would partake in socially ostracising Meetei people as slaves and stooges of Brahmins. He named a Meetei Brahmin Bapuhan for such an action. However, Phulo clarified that he and Bapuhan did not have any enmity; he neither have spoken anything on his new religious group, Apokpa Marup. He subtly made his case against the validity of such an action from the Brahmin and questions the power the Brahmins assumed in their hands. He described himself and his followers as those who were trying to amend the old road, in Meiteilon, *lambi amanba semjariba*. The road has become old because the people who used to ply the road have taken a new road.

In the speech Phulo delivered when he was ostracised along with his followers, he made an ardent appeal to his followers and asked them to throw away the knots of fear. In his words: “*Houjikti leibaktagi figei sengjarabanina, ibungosing pumnamaksu mapu ibungo gi mariida leppa matang youramalle haina ningjei. Leppabudi machingeidagi leppiri. Machingeida leppado leibakna khangdaba –chasingda yaodaba haibadu tukthok-ee.*” (Now we are free from the Hindu society, the time has come for us to stand for our God. You have stood for our God since a long time. However, it is different now. Earlier, we had stood for our god in hiding, away from the Hindu society). This quote is significant because, for Phulo, that moment of ostracisation was a moment of emancipatory potential, a moment of freedom, a freedom which they were all fearful of. It was also a moment of clarity and separation from the Hindu society. He also said that before this moment, they were hiding behind a deceptive mask of being a Hindu. Now they do not have to hide their identity and the work they do. They can absolutely devote themselves to their god.

Phulo makes an easily comprehensible binary of what is private and public performance of identity. For him, public space is Hindu and thus the performative identity was Hindu thereby making ‘authentic’ Meetei to hide behind it. Meetei becomes an ‘impure’ identity in its encounter with Hinduism for the reason that it is non Hindu. It lacks any other reasons. Meetei is made to dispossess from claiming that performative aspects of identity, therefore, coerces to imitate the Hindu. In this speech, Phulo was able to turn this binary and reclaim what is lost to Meetei and imagine a new emancipatory language for the Meeteis. He urged his followers “. . . *hee ani tongbasi chumde, ngamba hounade, hee amatamak tongsi.*” (Sailing two boats is wrong. You cannot sail two boats. Let’s sail only in one boat). This remark is important in the light of the previous quote. He demands from his followers to be singular in their identity instead of making a mix of both Hindu and Meetei. The singularity of identity and reclamation of performative Meetei identity were crucial in his attempt to revive the ‘*amanba lambi*’ of Meeteis. It is to revive and

embrace Meeteilon, Meetei customs, religion, history etc. and bring them to the public sphere. He questions the structure in which all aspects of the Meitei world are made impure in its encounter with Hinduism. According to him, this can revert back only when Meeteis themselves carry them into the space where Hindus forbid them.

Naoria Phulo's capacity to grab ostracisation as an opportunity to his advantage and change its meaning altogether for his community makes this moment exemplary for many communities seeking emancipation from the hegemonic/ dominant forces. In that sense ostracisation became emancipation for Phulo as he no longer had to hide his real identity.

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