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"Crisis of the Sacred: A Reading of Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana* through Hindu Mythology"

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Abstract:

We often ponder over the question of why people travel to far-off places seeking cures for their problems. Why do we attribute different gods and goddesses with special powers? Isn't it ironic that one God or goddess cannot fulfil all wishes? People travel miles to visit pilgrimage sites in the hope of curing their diseases. Isn't the God who resides in their local area sufficient for healing the same disease? Such questions provoke curiosity, leading us to explore the myths associated with specific gods. Why is a particular god known for blessing someone with wealth, but not for alleviating fever? To find answers to these questions, we delve deep into the origins of mythology and unravel its mysteries. In this paper, an effort has been made to uncover the Hindu mythology employed by Karnad in the play under study. An in-depth analysis of the meaning and significance of myth is made with a careful assessment of its role in literature. The primary method of analysis is close reading, supplemented by textual analysis and comparative research. The study begins with an overview of Hindu mythology and its role in Indian culture, followed by a detailed examination of Karnad's adaptation of mythological motifs and characters in *Hayavadana*. Mythology serves as a cultural backbone that shapes worldviews and narratives across generations. Karnad skillfully weaves Hindu mythology into contemporary storytelling and offers an exploration of the themes of sacrifice, identity, and entangled relationships. The play revolves around the intertwined lives of Devdutta, Kapila, and Padmini and showcases literature's role in dynamically reshaping Hindu mythology. Various mythological figures are incorporated in a non-traditional and mock-serious manner and the importance of sacrifice in Hindu mythology is also depicted. Carl Jung's concept of collective unconsciousness is also touched upon which demonstrates the role of myth and mythology in forming individual identity. Through Hindu mythology, issues like quest for completeness, societal expectations, and self-discovery are addressed. The practice of 'sati' and relevance of sacrifice in Hindu mythology are explored. The paper elucidates how mythology enriches literary narratives and offers profound insights into the human condition and makes an attempt to examine the adaptation of the dynamic Hindu mythology in contemporary literature and cultural discourse.

Introduction
Myth and Mythology

A myth is a narrative that encapsulates the traditions, belief systems, rituals, revered deities, symbolism, and customs of a societal group. These myths serve as a foundation for individuals and inspire them to navigate their lives. From birth to death, individuals traverse through these myths. Some are cognisant of the myths to which they belong, while others remain unaware. As Carl Jung asserts, "the collective unconscious appears to consist of mythological motifs or primordial images for which reason the myths of all nations are its real exponents. In fact, the whole of the mythology could be taken as a sort of projection of the collective unconscious" in his seminal book *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious* (1950).

Myths shape an individual's worldview and facilitate their integration into the local population. It is essentially a straightforward way of life inherent to one's upbringing and gradually evolving into a religious framework and collective unconscious.
The term "myth" originates from the Greek word 'mythos,' which denotes a narrative or plot. Myths encompass symbolic meanings and feature human, non-human, and even supernatural entities within their narratives.
"If the central character is a human rather than a supernatural being, the conventional tale is typically termed a legend, not a myth." (Abrams 231)

Myths represent narratives transmitted through oral tradition or documentation, either fictional or based on reality which pass down from one generation to the other. They become ingrained in individuals through childhood stories and prevalent day-to-day practices. Myths also elucidate the genesis and development of customs and deities and provide a foundation for their existence. A collection of myths shaping the belief system of a cultural group at a specific period is designated as mythology. Pattanaik puts mythology as,

"When scientific principles are used to unravel myth, when mythos is understood through logos, the enterprise is known as mythology." (Pattanaik 11)

Myths have consistently played a prominent role in English literature, both Western and Eastern. From Adam and Eve in Milton's *Paradise Lost* to the myth of Tiresias in Eliot's *The Waste Land*, literature has frequently turned to mythology. English writers have always found fascination in mythology and such is the case with Indian playwrights who often rely on Indian mythological themes. Indian mythology boasts a diverse array of male and female

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characters with the Vedas, Upanishads, Epics, and Puranas playing a seminal role in its formation.

India is characterised by a myriad of cultures and each possesses its own set of legends and myths. The palette of Indian mythology includes Hindu mythology, Jain mythology, Buddhist mythology, etc. and each holds its unique significance. This paper primarily focuses on Hindu mythology which is characterised by a multitude of myths featuring different Gods and Goddesses. Devdutt Patnaik highlights that during the British colonial era, the term 'Hindoo' or 'Hindu' was applied broadly to those who spoke the Hindi language in North India. Subsequently, the term encompassed various South Asian sects and religious beliefs that shared fundamental beliefs, ritual practices, and cultural symbols. From 1830 onwards, it specifically referred to the religion of high-caste Brahmins. Hindu mythology draws extensively from the texts produced by these Brahmins which encompass both secular and sacred content.

Hindu mythology, like other mythologies worldwide, has undergone profound alterations and reconstructions. The composition of Hindu mythology, initially shaped by Brahmanical bards, has not only been influenced by them but also impacted by Western perspectives, as well as the contributions of Buddhists and Jains. The incorporation of concepts such as heaven, hell, God, demon, sinner, prophet, evil, redemption, salvation, etc., into Hindu mythology reflects the discernible impact of Western influences. Additionally, in literature, writers have adapted Hindu mythology to align with the narrative demands of their texts.

In the case of *Hayavadana* numerous mythological figures are portrayed in an unconventional and humorous manner that showcase how literature contributes to the adaptive restructuring of Hindu mythology. This creative reinterpretation underscores the fluid nature of mythological narratives capable of evolving in response to diverse cultural and literary influences.

Hayavadana

As a discerning author, Karnad has not only shaped but also refined Kannada playwriting and transformed it from its previous state of naivety and simplicity. Karnad stands prominently among those playwrights who have contributed to the evolution of new drama through innovative dramatic presentations and techniques. To meet the pragmatic demands of theatre, Karnad strategically incorporates myth and history into his plays and deviates from the conventional Kannada themes explored by many playwrights and gives his works a contemporary veneer. The focus of the current study is Karnad's renowned play, *Hayavadana*, which is inspired by Thomas Mann's novella, *The Transposed Heads*. Mann, in turn, derived inspiration from the ancient Sanskrit collection of stories, *Kathasaritsagara* (Ocean of the Streams of Stories).

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Hayavadana narrates the tale of two friends, Devadatta and Kapila, the latter known for his strength and the former for his intelligence. Kapila hails from the Smithy background while Devdutta is the son of a Brahmin. Kapila becomes enamoured with Padmini, Devdutta's wife, a woman of sharp intellect, cleverness, and wit. Despite being married to the gentle and meek Devdutta, Padmini craves a partner with a robust demeanour. Devdatta feels insecure and urges Kapila to maintain distance from his wife. However, Padmini's insatiable desires prevent Kapila from bidding farewell to them.

Their visit to the Ujjain fair takes a tragic turn. Having observed Padmini's inevitable attraction to Kapila's muscular physique, Devdutta decides to fulfil a promise to sacrifice his head and arms to Rudra and Kali, respectively. This selfish act is an attempt to allow Kapila and Padmini to live together. Devdutta sacrifices his head to Kali, and Kapila follows the same.

Although the reader anticipates a catastrophic conclusion, this scene transforms into the climax of the story. Padmini implores Kali to resurrect both of them and her wish is granted. However, in the process of fixing the head onto the bodies, Padmini inadvertently causes confusion by placing heads to different bodies which sets the stage for a complex exploration of identity, morality, and survival. Ultimately, the narrative concludes with both Kapila and Devdutta killing each other in a duel.

Analysis

Karnad's plays possess a global appeal, attributed to their ability to universalize individual predicaments. By incorporating myths or legends of a community into his plays he makes his readers experience a sense of connection and find the narratives more instructive and enriching. Primarily, Karnad engages with the figures of Ganesha, Kali, and Rudra in *Hayavadana*.

The first mythological figure introduced in the play is Ganesha. A mask of Ganesha is placed on a chair and Bhagavata offers homage and seeks blessings from Ganesha for the successful enactment of the play. Ganesha's mythology revolves around Shiva and Parvati. Hindu mythology features various stories about Ganesha, including the circumstances of his birth, the transformation into an elephant-headed deity, the symbolism of obstacle removal, and his designation as the god of wealth.

A prevalent tale recounts Parvati's creation of a gatekeeper named Vigneshvara from the dirt on her skin to prevent intrusion while bathing. When Shiva attempted to enter, Vigneshvara thwarted him which resulted in severe cuts to Shiva's body. In a fit of rage, Shiva beheaded the gatekeeper. Learning of her son's death through the sage Narada, Parvati sought revenge on Shiva. At the behest of various gods, she agreed to end her vendetta only if her son was brought back to life. Shiva, in apology, dispatched attendants to find a head, and a deceased elephant's head, with a single tusk (eka-danta), was brought. This transformed

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Vigneshvara into the elephant-faced God, Ganesha. Shiva, in remorse, granted him his demon powers, and thus Ganesha earned the title Ganpati. Ganesha is also known by the names 'Ekdanta', 'Ganpati', and 'Vigneshvara' (Williams 133).

Ganpati holds a prominent place among Hindu deities. He is revered as the God who removes all obstacles. Worshipped as Vigneshwara, the remover of impediments, Ganesha is invoked by Hindus at the commencement of any activity. He is depicted as a corpulent, elephant-headed deity with a protruding belly and often riding a rat. While these practices may seem primitive and superstitious to non-Hindus and rationalists, believers view Ganesha as "the perfect symbol of unstoppable power (elephant head), prosperity (rotund body and potbelly), and protection (the rat, which is a pest, has been domesticated and turned into his vehicle)" (Pattnaik 10).

His image is commonly placed on gates and doorways that symbolise the opening of doorways to both material success and spiritual growth. To devotees, invoking Ganesha's name at the outset of an activity, along with placing his image at the entrance, is a ritual and symbolic expression of intention to the cosmos. This elaborate and profound expression is perceived as the initial step in the manifestation and fulfilment of the practitioner's goals. However, this perspective is rooted in the mind of a believer and may be beyond the comprehension of a rational mind. Without faith, these essential cultural elements reduce to mere amusing tales, impressive art, and curious customs.

In the context of a play, Bhagavata initiates a 'pooja', followed by the symbolic act of breaking a coconut.

BHAGAVATA. May Vighneshwara, the destroyer of obstacles, who removes all hurdles and crowns all endeavours with success, bless our performance now. (Karnad 1.1)

Ganpati, with his distinctive features such as huge ears, trunk, and big belly is philosophically interpreted by Hindus as a symbol of the openness of the mind for acute receptivity and alertness. Bhagavata seeks Ganesha's blessings for the success of his play.

Moreover, the transposition of Ganesh's head with an elephant's head is reflected in the play also. In the play, Padmini is torn between her love for Kapila's physical strength and Devadatta's intellectual prowess. When Padmini finds them beheaded in the temple, she seeks help from the goddess Kali. Kali grants her wish and asks her to fix the heads to the bodies. Transposition of heads highlights the complexity of human nature and desires. This myth has been portrayed to depict flaws and contradictions of human beings. Ganesha's new form becomes a symbol of wisdom, intelligence, and surmounting hurdles, on the other hand, transposition in the play leads to more confusion and repentance. It suggests that true fulfilment may lie in accepting and embracing imperfections and finding perfection in

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imperfections. These kinds of acts are mysteries in the hands of gods. Humans can only create havoc by imitating them.

In *Hayavadana*, mythology manifests itself through the figures of Goddess Kali and Lord Rudra. To secure Padmini as his wife, Devadatta pledges to sacrifice his arms to Goddess Kali and his head to Lord Rudra. Devadatta's choice of Kali and Rudra to sacrifice his head and arms is also rooted in Hindu mythology.

> DEVADATTA. If I ever get her as my wife, I'll sacrifice my two arms to the goddess Kali, I'll sacrifice my head to Lord Rudra…. (Karnad 1.14)

In Hindu Mythology, Kali is often perceived as the wrathful manifestation of Uma or Parvati, Lord Shiva's wife. She symbolises destruction and embodies fierce power.

"Kali personifies nature's wildness and its impersonal life-giving sexual process and life-taking violent process and in Western literature she is described as 'dark drinker of blood'." (Pattanaik 65)

The worship of Kali involves the offering of wine, meat, and blood with some temples still practising animal sacrifices, particularly in locations like Calcutta and Nepal. Kali's worship includes rituals that can be both symbolic and transgressive.

In the play, Kali is depicted in a highly unconventional manner. She appears to prevent Padmini from piercing a sword into her breast. She feels sleepy and yawns with mouth wide open and tongue lolling out. Bhagavata remarks that her followers no longer visit her and attribute this decline to her newfound propensity for fulfilling desires with ease. This shift in Kali's behaviour disrupts established belief systems, where the fulfilment of desires typically requires rigorous meditation and sacrificial offerings. By readily granting wishes, Kali creates a sense of chaos and mystery. Our collective unconsciousness is steeped in the notion that divine favour is earned through devout practices and offerings. Therefore, the sudden accessibility of blessings through mere prayer challenges ingrained beliefs and norms. When individuals receive blessings without undergoing the expected trials, it undermines the meaning of the desire fulfilled. Moreover, she is in a tearing hurry and asks Padmini to state her wishes quickly. It highlights the fact that urgency and impermanence characterise human wishes. Being a goddess, she knows that there is no lasting satisfaction of desires. Once one desire is fulfilled, another awakens.

In the same vein, Rudra is also a significant deity with a complex evolution. Originally a Vedic god, Rudra is portrayed as a storm god associated with the Maruts (warrior lords) or their father, known for his howling and formidable aspects. Characterised by his fierceness, Rudra is depicted as a wild god who shoots arrows without clear cause targets

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both gods and men. In the Puranas, Rudra's identity becomes closely intertwined with Shiva. Shiva assimilates every aspect of Rudra and encompasses manifestations of anger and elements linked to various myths. Identified with Shiva, Rudra becomes associated with Shiva's anger. In more recent times, Rudra is worshipped as the 'Tantric' form of Shiva. Tantric practices involve the worship of Shiva in his fierce and transformative aspects (Williams 248).

Now, the point of contemplation revolves around the relationship between Kali and Rudra and the rationale behind Karnad's incorporation of this mythology.
The connection between Rudra and Kali is established through their association with Shiva and Parvati. The tale of Parvati is further associated with Sati.

Sati in Hindu mythology unfolds as a tragic and poignant tale that highlights themes of purity, faithfulness and the complexities in relationships. Sati, the daughter of Daksha, undergoes a self-choice ceremony called 'svayamvara' to select her husband. Despite Daksha's initial reluctance, Shiva becomes her chosen spouse in a dramatic manifestation during the ceremony. The strained relationship between Shiva and Daksha intensifies over time. It led to a tragic event. Daksha organises a sacrificial feast and intentionally excludes Shiva. In protest and feeling rejected, Sati attends the celebration and ultimately ends her own life. The circumstances of her death vary in different versions of the narrative which includes Sati's burning herself or committing suicide in a Brahmanical fire pit.

Shiva, devastated by Sati's self-sacrifice expresses his grief through a destructive dance with her corpse on his shoulders. To prevent the universe's destruction, Vishnu intervenes, dismembers Sati's body with his discus. The pieces become 'tirthas', places of pilgrimage. After Sati's loss Parvati undergoes penance and is reborn to reunite with Shiva. This cyclical transformation is embodied by Kali, who symbolises the darker and more ferocious side of Parvati's nature. Consequently, Kali is often considered as a fierce manifestation of Parvati (Uma) represents the intense grief and anger of Shiva following Sati's tragic death (Williams 261).

In certain traditions, Kali and Rudra, as extreme aspects of Parvati and Shiva, are worshipped together. Devotees recognize the interconnectedness of these deities within the broader divine framework. Rudra and Kali are often linked with fierce and destructive aspects, in contrast to Shiva and Parvati, who embody more benevolent and harmonious qualities. Karnad's choice in employing this mythology is driven by a desire to accentuate the darker and more intricate facets of human nature and relationships.

Devadatta's offering of his arms to Kali and his head to Rudra is indeed related to the aforementioned Hindu mythology. His sacrifice becomes a distorted reenactment of this myth. Symbolically, by dividing himself, he presents his arms to Kali, a fierce goddess

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associated with destruction, and his head to Rudra, another form of Shiva linked to chaos. This act serves as a representation of the characters' struggles with identity, desires, and the consequences of societal expectations.

Devadatta is prepared to sacrifice his head and hands, which hold utmost importance to him.

> DEVADATTA. What's the use of these hands and this head if I'm not to have her?
> (Karnad 1. 15)

For a Brahmin, the primary purpose is to read Vedas and comprehend them with intelligence, while hands, through writing, offer an outlet for poetic expressions. Devadatta believes that without Padmini, all his talents become futile. This poignant connection reinforces the thematic exploration of sacrifice, identity, and the profound impact of selfish choices on personal relationships in Karnad's play.

Therefore, *Hayavadana* underscores the profound themes of rebirth, cyclical existence, and the multifaceted aspects of divine personalities within Hindu mythology.

Related to this, the concept to be explored is the importance of sacrifice in Hindu mythology. Sacrifice is a symbolic act of devotion and surrender to the divine. People believe that by offering something valuable, such as an animal or food, they can appease the gods to seek blessings, protection and fulfilment of desires in return. Devadatta's pledge to give his head and arms go far beyond what is expected in a sacrificial process. It depicts his utmost love for Padmini. But at the time of fulfilment it is more a selfish manoeuvre than devotion. During their visit to the Ujjain fair, Padmini gets a chance to spend extended time with Kapila. Karnad uses 'aside' as a device to convey both Devadatta and Padmini's inner thoughts. Devadatta laments at his predicament of being lame and incapable of understanding Padmini's desires. Padmini, for the very first time, gives her feelings for Kapila words.

> DEVADATTA. And why should I blame her? It's his strong body – his manly muscles.
>   And to think I had never ever noticed them all these years! I was an
>   an innocent – an absolute baby.
> PADMINI. No woman could resist him.
> DEVADATTA. No woman could resist him – and what does it matter that she's married?
> (Karnad 1.26)

It is evident that only in times of dire need and sheer despair does Devadatta think of Kali and Rudra. Disillusioned by the fact that Padmini likes Kapila, he decides to leave Padmini with Kapila and fulfil the words he has given to Rudra and Kali. They stop at a juncture where, on one side, is the temple of Rudra, and on the other, is the temple of Kali. Devadatta wants to go to the temple of Rudra himself and offers Kapila and Padmini to go to the Kali temple. Listing various dangers on the way to the Kali temple, Kapila forbids them from going there. Devadutta makes both of them go to the Rudra temple, and he himself

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goes to the Kali temple. He is reminded of his promise, which he had forgotten until their relationship was perfect. He is hopeless and dejected and thinks it better to sacrifice himself and make the gods happy. He wants to end his life in order to kill two birds with one stone. He does not sacrifice anything to Rudra but sacrifices his wife for his friend, Kapila, by letting her live with him. He forgets the clauses of his promise made to Rudra and Kali. He only wants to end his pain through sacrifice. It was Kapila who goes from door to door, finds Padmini, and arranges their marriage. Kapila, in a way, should've been another god for Devdatta, although he never acknowledges it. To this god, who fulfilled his deepest craving, he also made a sacrifice, and it was the sacrifice of Padmini to Kapila.

Devadatta sacrifices his head to Kali instead of arms; this clearly evidences that his sacrifice is more of a compromise and an escape from the pangs of jealousy. He just wants to get rid of his pangs of jealousy. He was happy with Padmini without the intrusion of Kapila. There was nothing wrong between the two, and he never reminded himself of his promise made to Kali and Rudra. It is the rejection of life, his resentment with the situation, and realisation of Padmini's infatuation for Kapila, that make him cut off his head in front of Kali. Under the veneer of fulfilling his promise, he tries to suppress the pain.

Kapila also ridicules the pious concept of Sacrifice. When Kapila finds Devadatta and his head, he takes the entire blame on himself. He thinks that Devadatta was upset with him and in anger, he has cut his head. To avoid facing the world, or even Padmini, Kapila also cuts off his head. He sacrifices his head to the goddess not because of any reverence or promise but for his friend. As Kali affirms it:

> KALI. This Kapila, died right in front of me – but 'for his friend'. Mind you! Didn't even have the courtesy to refer to me. (Karnad 1.33)

At the end of the play, the practice of 'sati' is portrayed. Sati is a concept and practice wherein a widow would immolate herself on her husband's funeral pyre. The term originally meant 'good woman' or 'pure one,' which referred to the purity and devotion of the wife. Over time, it came to specifically denote the practice of widow burning, which was viewed by some as a natural response of the wife to her husband's death.

"A sati is a woman who is so chaste that she comes to possess miraculous powers. Like the celibate man, the chaste woman became worthy of worship. She was equated to a goddess. The epic Ramayana drives the concept of female chastity to an extreme, where a slur against a woman's reputation becomes unforgivable." (Pattanaik 177)

In the play, when Kapila and Devadatta kill each other in a duel, Padmini asks Bhagavata to prepare a large funeral pyre for her. Padmini's decision to perform Sati at the end is influenced by a multitude of factors, which are both personal and societal. As a woman

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in a patriarchal society, she is expected to be dutiful and obedient to her husband. The act of Sati, while extreme, is seen as the ultimate display of devotion and loyalty to her husband. Despite the complexities of her relationships with Kapila and Devadatta, Padmini's love and devotion to them are undeniable. Padmini's journey throughout the play is marked by inner turmoil and conflicting desires. By choosing to perform Sati, she may see it as a way to resolve the inner conflict and confusion she experiences in her relationships with Kapila and Devadatta. Therefore, Padmini's choice to perform Sati reflects the complexities of her character and the cultural milieu in which she lives.

Conclusion

This research paper provides a comprehensive and insightful exploration of the interplay between Hindu mythology and Girish Karnad's acclaimed play, *Hayavadana*. The paper commences with a thorough examination of the nature and function of myth and further contextualises it within the broader scope of literature and cultural discourse. This conceptual groundwork lays the foundation for the subsequent in-depth analysis of the mythological elements present in *Hayavadana*. The paper skillfully navigates the diverse pantheon of Hindu deities and explores the significance and symbolic resonance of figures like Ganesha, Kali, and Rudra within the play's narrative.

Hayavadana weaves together historical and cultural origins of mythological archetypes with their dynamic reinterpretation. The paper demonstrates an understanding of how literature, as a medium, can both preserve and reshape the enduring narratives of myth by highlighting the fluidity and adaptability of these ancient stories.

The paper further underscores by its examination of the thematic complexities embedded within *Hayavadana*, such as the notions of identity, desire, and the transformative power of sacrifice. Insightful interpretation of the themes, grounded in the mythological framework, provides a multilayered understanding of the play's broader significance and its engagement with the human condition.

Through Devadatta's fateful decision to sacrifice his head and arms, Karnad prompts reflection on the nature of sacrifice and its underlying motivations. Devadatta's act, driven by jealousy and despair, serves as a poignant reminder of the complexities of human emotion and the consequences of selfish choices.

Moreover, Karnad's portrayal of Padmini's journey highlights the intricacies of identity and societal expectations. Padmini's ultimate decision to perform Sati reflects not only her devotion to her husbands but also the cultural milieu in which she exists and underscores the complexities of love, duty, and personal agency.

One particularly notable aspect is the exploration of the concept of "sati," a practice deeply rooted in Hindu cultural traditions. Padmini's choice to perform sati at the play's

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conclusion demonstrates sociocultural pressures and the inherent tensions within this controversial practice.

Karnad's masterful integration of Hindu mythology in *Hayavadana* exemplifies the playwright's ability to imbue traditional narratives with contemporary relevance. By juxtaposing mythic and modern elements, he creates a theatrical experience that is both intellectually stimulating and emotionally resonant and encourages the audience to reflect on the timeless questions of identity, desire, and the human search for meaning.

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