

Guru Dutt, an auteur or an existentialist: A Critical Evaluation of his Art

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Abstract: Guru Dutt's short but eventful life saw Hindi Cinema produce some of its finest works like *Pyasa* (1957) and *Kaagaz ke Phool* (1959). A pioneer in the art of Cinema, his works left an impact and influence on Indian filmmakers that continues decades after his death. Yet, it is regretful that art of such a prolific artist is talked more often in connection with either what late actor Dev Anand had said, that he could not stand failure, while author Nasreen Munni Kabir writes in her biography on Dutt, *GuruDutt: A Life in Cinema*, that he had an increasingly disillusioned and fractured state of mind. and that he was tormented by life, on the other hand it has been alleged that his leading actress, Waheeda Rahman, was the reason behind his untimely demise. Dutt's sister, Lalitha Lazmi refuted it in her interview, rather attributed the gradual change in him to his involvement with serious films that apparently led to his end, largely seen as suicide. Professor Ira Bhaskar, JNU considers Dutt as a mainstream Cinema Auteur, that gets complicated when writer M.K. Raghavendra in his book, *50 Indian Film Classics*, avers that these two iconic films do not explain concerns as socially determined as they belong to the auteur, desirous of personal expression, imbued with approach of a narcissist. The paper will rather explore how Dutt incorporated moral dilemmas and contemporary social issues, merged them with music that added to the narrative and created independent heroines, unlike stereotypes created those days. Besides, Britannica hails Dutt as one of the most accomplished stylists of Bollywood, of Bollywood's Golden Age because of his mastery over creating right mood through his imaginative use of lighting and shade. He was proficient at depicting evocative imagery and could weave multiple thematic layers into his narratives.

Keywords: prolific, mainstream, Auteur, narcissistic, narrative, stereotypes, Exalted.

Introduction:

A pioneer in the art of Cinema, Guru Dutt's works left an impact and influence on Indian

filmmakers, grim though it appeared, that's why film *Pyasa* did not win awards but it made place in Time Magazine's exalted 'All -Time 100 Movies'.

In an article entitled, *How Guru Dutt continues to enchant Indian Cinema*, Shriram Iyengar, (cinestaan.com Oct, 2016)

notes the impact Guru Dutt has made on Hindi Cinema, six decades after his demise. He says it can be seen in the angst felt by the Rockstar (musician) in the film *Rockstar* to the use of poetry as a mark of rebellion in *Haider*; the sign style often takes off from the pioneering cinematic canvas of the filmmaker....

Both Raj Kapoor and Waheeda Rahman, opined about films like *Pyasa* and *Kaagaz ke Phool* that such films were much ahead of times. They were too subtle and rich, and would have received greater recognition much later, when the audience were mature enough to appreciate and relate.

He was one of the first few people to be that rare combination of a fabulous actor and director. As a filmmaker he was very intense in showing deep emotions on screen and in his ability to highlight hidden nuances through dialogues and songs. He was a visionary and directed only 8 films which are generally considered Cult films.

Working within the boundaries of mainstream Hindi Cinema, his sensibilities were rich, modern and subtle. His directorial debut began with *Baazi* in 1951 where he met Geeta Roy and after a brief courtship for three years and despite the reluctance of both their parents they got married in 1953. It was followed by a producer-actor collaboration between Dev Anand and Guru Dutt in *CID* in 1956; while he had also directed *Jaal* in 1952 and *Baazi* in 1953.

This helped him to create the Guru Dutt Team that continued even after his demise. He was fortunate to work in the company of writer Abrar Alvi, Cinematographer VK Murthy and YG Chavan who edited his films, the legendary musicians and singers like OP Nayyar, SD Burman, Hemant Kumar, Geeta Roy and Muhammad Rafi as well as celebrated lyricists, Sahir Ludhianvi and Kaifi Azmi. He introduced beautiful Waheeda Rahman who along with other actors became his favourite, for example, the talented actor Rahman, and popular comedians of the time, Johnny walker, Tuntun and Minu Mumtaz. His dependence on certain actors in his films and even singer, Geeta, his wife who later came to be known as Geeta Dutt, prolific actor and director Dev Anand, irrevocably speak about his emotional attachment with them. He and his team made many successful films.

Dutt directed 6 films before *Aar Paar* (1954), *Sailaab* (1956) *Pyasa* (1957) and *Mr. & Mrs.55*(1955), that exhibit his handling of actors, dexterous camera movements and poetic visuals; the ability to seamlessly integrate songs into narrative and interest in outlines.

Filmmaker Bhavna Talwar who has recently completed the script of a biopic on Dutt observes,

If you look at his trajectory, you can see that the playfulness and simplicity and pandering to the audiences reach a point where he produced a film like *Sahib, Biwi aur Ghulam*, when Dutt as Ghulam examines the sorrow and loneliness of a woman married to a philandering, tyrant landlord.

EXISTENTIALISM IN DUTT'S FILMS

Dutt lived a poor life, saw unhappy life of parents including death of his brother that traumatized him severely. Author Yasser Usman informs that his sister reminisces

we had a disturbed childhood; (pp19)

she says about their father,

He believed in poetry which is not enough to survive.....remained detached

And only **the mother was the driving force.**

Dutt likewise became quiet, aloof, always lost in his own world. (pp19)

Pyasa as well as *Kaagaz ke Phool*, evoke pathos and existentialism of the main protagonist, portrayed by Guru Dutt himself as Vijay and Suresh Sinha. Both the films bring out the rootlessness and the loss of moral/ethical perception in Nehruvian era of modernization of India.

Abhijit Pathak in his article entitled

"Why GuruDutt, black and white film Existent Poetry is relevant in the Glossy India of today?"

evinces, that the dialectic of modernization had led many sensitive minds to feel a sense of loss, leading thereby to existential crisis.

Pyasa has borne the image of being a cult film in the way the existentialist subject of the rejection of a poet is tragically evoked. In the film, Vijay portrayed by Dutt, is shown rejected by everyone, be it his own brothers, his beloved (played by Mala Sinha) because he is a poet; such notion strengthens the popular belief that a poet

is a poor wastrel.

His poetry is not accepted, rather it is sold over to the scrap dealer.

Having no place to go, he visits red light area and Gulab, a prostitute (played by Waheeda Rahman) one gets to hear the most poignant echoes in the song,

Ye mahal-e, ye takhte, rawazon ki duniya.....

the hollow and ugly world is narrated very touchingly in this song. The poet is asking with a ring of melancholy in his voice,

'What would change even if I get this world?'

The writer Pathak avers regarding this song that it vibrates and enters soul of the audience like the words of a Sufi saint.

Another song

Jaane wo kaise log the jinke pyar ko pyar mila

is no less popular and evocative for its cadence and poignancy.

The protagonist, Vijay is ignored all through the film, in life and even after he comes back to life, he is rendered dead by the selfish people who had earned substantially from his poetry. The poet's alcoholism is not mere self-indulgence but stems from an impotent world around him. It is not a protest; Dutt a solitary existentialist, is seeking a reason to live, hence both he and Gulab, hand in hand abandon this society to live elsewhere.

Kaagaz ke Phool is about filmmaker who passionately makes films, he realizes he wants a new raw face, and launches Waheeda Rahman for the role of Shanti and in no time they both come close but since their relationship would not receive social approval they both part: his films flop and he does not get films to make. The

frustration of being Nobody from Somebody, coupled with poverty make his life so miserable that the climax sums up the actual message of the film; he is shown sitting in the Director's Chair and people recognizing him find him dead.

DUTT'S- INHERENT CREATIVITY

A closer look at Dutt's biography as presented by Yasser Usman will help us understand Dutt's latent creativity of an artist, even as a child.

His original name, Vasanth Kumar Shivshanker Padukone, was born on July 9, 1925, as he was a victim of an accident early in life, he changed his name into what he considered auspicious.

Ch-- A Disturbed Childhood, Calcutta, 1929

gives information like he started reading from the age of 4 and watched *jatras* that were like dramas without stage, that drew upon stories from epics and folk-tales.

He also watched (pp20), "Baul singers" of Calcutta playing *ektaras* and singing devotional songs.

His sister Lalitha remembers,

he was obsessed with shadow plays and would make numerous figures on the wall.

Initially he was at Bangalore and then shifted to Bombay where his parents were living. He thus got an opportunity to hone his varied skills there. He worked as Assistant for few films like *Chand* (1944), *Lakhrani* (1945), even choreographed dance sequences in *Hum Ek Hain* (1946) and later worked in premiere production house, Prabhat Film Company. He was fortunate to have worked with two leading Directors of

the time, Amiya Chakravarty and Gyan Mukherjee and of course with illustrious Dev Anand in his production house, Navketan Films who offered him role of a director in his production house films.

Veteran film producer and lyricist, Amit Khanna, who worked closely with Dev Anand for many years says, that many times Dev Saab and Raj Khosla used to talk about Guru Dutt. He remembered fondly that he and Guru would go together to watch English films and that Dutt believed strongly in the popular appeal of cinema. He was an artist for whom commercial success of his films was really important. (**Guru, the lead actor, 26 ch**)

Though it is often said that Dutt was a reluctant actor but some people suggested he actually wanted to be talked about as an actor-star.

Beginning with a small appearance in his first film *Baazi*, to Hitchcockian appearance as an unshaven, shirtless fisherman in the song 'Zor lagage haiya', in *Jaal*, it seems he had started considering the idea of becoming a full-fledged actor.

The author in the book informs how V.K.Murthy ushered the idea of Dutt donning the role of actor himself and to this he agreed only after taking his screen test.

About Dutt, his brother Atma Ram who also worked as his assistant in *Jaal*, said,

He was a very hard taskmaster and very dedicated to his work. On the sets it was

difficult to say what was on his mind. He tended to keep everything to himself and wouldn't communicate with the assistants, which made things rather difficult. So, he shouted a lot..... But looking back on his films one realises what a fine visual sense he had....and he was trying to communicate to the audience visually first, in his brilliant way. That was Guru Dutt's strength.

Indecisions and Guru; ch.6

(pp37)

The kind of films he was making had also affected him. His personality had changed-

Lalitha Lazmi

Prof. Ira Bhaskar says that Dutt was influenced by Hollywood melodramatist Douglas Sirk and his influence is envisioned in his strong female characters and his idea of criticising society and capitalism as well as writing, acting along with directing must have inspired him to do likewise.

Citizen Kane was a huge influence on Dutt and so was the drama of Orsen Welles, and also, the influence of German expressionist cinema. But equally, Dutt was deeply influenced by Indian traditions and Bhakti poetry. His inspiration also came from 1940s Indian cinema, comprising Bengali and Bombay cinema and from people like P.C.Barua and later Gyan Mukherjee who became his mentor.

One can see that while *Baazi* has a morally ambiguous character in the lead, (quite a rarity in 50s), *Pyasa* and *Kaagaz Ke Phool* the most acclaimed films of today by him deal with

existential anguish where the artist wants to rise above the material wants of life. These films received status of cult film the world over; while the former was critically acclaimed as well as a box office hit, the latter, miserably failed. Perhaps it was too grim for people to connect with a subject that was very close to his heart, which apparently contained some biographical details like the filmmaker's father's frustrated life who had faced difficulties owing to his artistic aspirations; hence film's ending too eventually got embroiled into a sad one.

The paper aims at a critical study of whether Guru Dutt's works prove him as an auteur or an existentialist.

Dutt's seminal film *Pyasa* reveals an unmatched work of an auteur.

Usman's biography **Ch 13—A Star is born** unveils that the inspiration behind *Pyasa*, was Dutt's father's own frustration of realising artistic aspirations originally written in his novel called *Kashmakash*.

The Film got premiered on Feb 22, 1957, at Bombay's Minerva theatre and was very well received. Recognition went much beyond Dutt's expectation. He said in an interview with *Screen*, that its success was the best reward of his career. He knew the subject was heavy, hence he was apprehensive that audiences would like it.

Film *Pyasa* had created a benchmark for him, and audience were amazed to see such an intense and serious film from Guru Dutt who was simultaneously dabbling in romantic comedies and thrillers at that time.

Ch 7, Au Revoir, Calcutta of the biography reveals that Dutt's mother did matriculation alongside her son in the same year, became well versed in eight languages, even translated a Bengali novel *Mithun* into Kannada, (pp45).

B.B. Benegal, Dutt's mentor reminisces in Munni Kabir's book, *Guru Dutt: A Life in Cinema*, (pp46)

He looked just like a snake charmer. There was no music playing as he was dancing; he was just thinking the music. The performance captured on camera gave him the confidence to finally take the plunge.

He knew he had to learn dance.

This intensity of emotions is reflected in Dutt all through his direction and acting.

Nasreen Munni Kabir quotes director Raj Khosla who said about Dutt's sense of detail,

Guru Dutt's inherent sense of detail was tremendous. That is the basis of all good writing and filmmaking, you look to the details and details will look after the rest. He was very careful about the details and that is why his characters come alive. For Guru Dutt, they were not characters, merely talking and acting-but what worried him was,

'What is my artist thinking at the moment in the story!

Such incident irrevocably reminds me of Eugene Ionesco, though born in 1912 in Rumania but had seen death as a child, experienced displacement owing to trouble between parents. His early adolescence is replete with happiness as well as separation from both parents. He lives

a very tumultuous life amidst anti-Semitism, Ionesco around the age of 15, recorded his fascination for the Punch- and- Judy show and all theatrical shows. In 1940s plays by Adamov, Beckett etc. has begun with drama having no story, but dealing with existential problems of loneliness, despair, terror, listlessness or boredom.

But while these European dramatists including Ionesco depicted the metaphysical and philosophical questions of human existence through various ways including collapse of language, Guru Dutt created a very potent, viable language, verbal and visual to critique the social turbulence and problems during Indian capitalism.

DUTT BLURS THE MAINSTREAM AND THE MARGINALIZED

In the film *Pyasa*, the lead character is a poet who is mistaken to be dead. He tries his best to prove he is alive but realises he is not required; hence he leaves their world and departs to form a separate identity with his beloved who too as a marginalized lives in oblivion and prefers to accompany him. It is thus about the poet and the prostitute, both who live marginalized lives and pine for identity, and love. Author underlines what

Prof. Bhaskar said in an interview,

In a way, one can see a running metaphor in the film, Prostitution; it is not really about a prostitute but about how capitalism prostitutes everything. That sets him apart from say,

Mehboob Khan, another great filmmaker of that time. But there is also a similarity with someone like K.A. Abbas who was writing for filmmaker, actor, Raj Kapoor. There were similarities in social concerns and issues in films like *Shri 420* and *Awaara* .

In *Kaagaz Ke Phool*, the successful film director, starts going downhill and realises how alone he is and unwanted. He loses name and love both, and towards the end he gets back to his studio and is to direct a film when all find him dead sitting there. This scene is considered to be a master stroke of director and a great example.

Prof Ira Bhaskar avers that 1950 is a very interesting phase in Indian Cinema in the sense that Guru Dutt's work is a critique of the nationalism and national agenda. Like in *Pyasa* it is surprising it was a successful film, considering it was an extremely critical film about capitalism.

Kaagaz ke Phool shows the protagonist having estranged relationship with his wife where his wife's parents become a stumbling block in the couple's relationship as unlike them, Suresh represents the working class and they being the rich elite class abhor him as they consider people of his class inferior. However, Leo Rahman avers that GuruDutt had seen strained relationship of his parents, especially hostility of his mother's family that is evidenced in Suresh's wife's parents in the film.

On this plane, film, *Kaagaz ke Phool* as well as *Mr& Mrs 55* share one common social

commentary about the rich people in 1950s. The protagonist, Suresh Sinha's (played by Guru Dutt,) father- in -law and mother- in- law espouse English culture, and are ridiculed as they are shown more concerned about the health and happiness of their pet dog rather than their daughter who in her callousness and indifference evades her duties towards husband and daughter. Moreover, her parents feel embarrassed in telling their friends and relatives that their son- in- law is a filmmaker; in *Pyasa* also the protagonist is shown useless being a poet.

In the latter film Seeta Devi (Lalita Pawar), Auntie of Anita (Madhubala), espouses Woman liberation and due to her exposure to England and its culture, as a misogynist, she incites women against marriage as she strongly feels, it reduces women to slavery.

Thus both the films in representing biculturalism, depict anglicized elites, who are Anglophiles that remain in a state of passivity, being ashamed of their ethnic culture in showing reverence to the English. These people foolishly cling to an empire that is no more.

While discussing the impact of colonized experience on native consciousness and the emergence of biculturalism, sociologist D. Maya says,

.....the social problems of the newly liberated nation, the erosion of indigenous cultures and values through continued western domination, the dilemma posed by biculturalism, the search for identity and alienation in the products of a

dual culture and the strident self assertion and urge for decolonization in the liberated Indian; all these are persistent themes in Post-independent Writings.

Thus, while few characters would represent biculturalism, the major characters on the other hand depicting and retaining their indigenous culture would be the egalitarian, hardworking and conscientious persons, ironically, become the 'other', the outcast in that society. Thus, this hardworking artist, played by Dutt dons the role of cartoonist in *Mr & Mrs 55*, the poet in *Pyasa* and the filmmaker in *Kaagaz ke Phool*.

It is not surprising as *Mr.&Mrs.55*, Nasreen Kabir endorses in Dutt's biography, **Inspite of the prevailing light-hearted and breezy tone of this comedy, the film anticipates the much darker mood of Guru Dutt's masterpiece, *Pyasa*.**

The blurring of the mainstream and the marginalized space is beautifully envisioned in Gulab, the prostitute who is imparted no less importance. She is attracted towards the protagonist and gets enchanted after seeing a troupe of devotional folk singers, Bauls performing a song,

'Aaj Sajjan mohe ang laga lo, Jan am safal ho jaaye'

And she follows Vijay up the stairs, this scene is very artistically articulated as the song picturizes Waheeda desiring her love for Vijay, in the manner of the devotee of Krishna; nevertheless, a distance is evinced between the two as she

goes near him and almost touches whom she loves but finally withdraws, considering herself unworthy of him.

Ravi Vasudevan, the critic underlines that the relation between devotee and object of devotion determines the space of this scene, it remains the structuring element in the extension and constraining of space. The critic demonstrates how authoritative gaze of the male is privileged, controlling the devotee, **seeking to arrest the shift in the coordinates of desire and authority.**

DUTT PRODUCED in 60s, MILDER, SUCCESSFUL BUT REALLY MEMORABLE FILMS

The film *Kaagaz ke Phool*, provided a harsh commentary on the social satire of hypocritical human world, but because the film flopped, he could not recover from the shock. However, he could recover his material loss from two other films, *Chaudhvin Ka Chand* (1960) and *Sahib Biwi Ghulam* (1962).

Both these films deserve mention for acquiring the reputation of being unusually simple, candid but charismatic storylines. The former is special as it shows Meena Kumari in one of her best performances, while GuruDutt and Rahman excel in their own ways. Waheeda Rahman appears again in both the films, accepting main role in the former while a subordinate in the other.

Dutt made a film espousing friendship, gratitude

and Love that prioritized human values over fulfilment of desires. The film revolves around Muslim Nawab and Tehzeeb and zenana culture. Rahman plays the role of rich man who is planning to marry and he and GuruDutt are very good friends, although GuruDutt feels eternally obliged to him for his material support while Rahman considers friendship above all considerations.

The richness of the storyline lies in the chord of friendship between the two men on one hand and piety of Waheeda Rahman towards her husband who is reluctant to leave her husband's house and is ready to live there her entire life serving him; here, once again the patriarchal authority and devotee motif gets strengthened. The film is a supreme example of sacrifice and human values where Rahman outsmarts the couple by ending his life after knowing about his friend's plan to marry off his wife to him. The film has an unmatched grandeur and *panache* and the director's craft is simply superb.

Continuing with the same motif of patriarchal authority and the subservient devotee, it would be apt to review GuruDutt's another classic, *Sahib Biwi Ghulam* where Meena Kumari essaying the role of Choti Bahu, living in aristocratic villa is often heard wailing at night. The film, however, very dramatically opens with Guru Dutt standing near a dilapidated construction from where he takes the audience onwards through a flashback.

Guru Dutt who is named Bhoothnath is the servant (Ghulam) who is quite perplexed and curious, more so he has never seen such a huge

villa and such richness.

One day however, he gets to meet Choti Bahu and is spellbound when he finds her so beautiful but is equally stunned to know that Chote Saheb, her husband never remains with her at night but visits Kothas; he gets to know the reason behind the heart-rending wailing at nights.

Choti Bahu is desperate to get her husband back to her at any cost so she asks the Ghulam, ie; Bhoothnath, to get her 'Mohini Sindoor', which she wants to use to attract her husband. The idea however fails. She tries to cajole him to stay with her upon which he retorts once,

'If I don't go out you know what will people say?'

'Ki begum ke pallu se bandha Hua Hai'.

The film undoubtedly is based on decay of feudalism in the British Raj when masculinity posed problems for women in the patriarchal order. Guru Dutt however, unleashes the pain and trauma of a lonely 'aristocratic' wife who later reduces herself to an alcoholic in order to get attention of her husband. This perhaps was one rare film by GuruDutt where he goes back to India almost three decades back, making it almost a period film. But as already witnessed in the above accounts of the film, his focus on the women, irrespective of class and social position makes the film special. It is a fact worth admiration that during this time Meena Kumari despite being a star accepted the role of an alcoholic, this step could have affected her career, yet she agreed.

The first time when she is made to gulp the

drink down her throat by Rahman, that scene is really revolting. The heart-rending plea of the wife is so perfectly matched in these poignant words of very famous song by Geeta Dutt,

Na jao Saiyan, chuda ke baiyaan, kasam tumhari, main ro padungi

Slowly, slowly she gets addicted while Rahman continues going out. Ghulam who literally worshipped her, cannot tolerate to see her self-ruin, it is a torture to him, he feels deeply pained and hates to see his 'deity' destroying herself. Meanwhile Rahman gets badly injured in one scuffle at a prostitute's place and gets paralyzed.

Choti Bahu's futile sacrifice, the injustice of patriarchy to the Bahu is metaphorically handled as the villa and its finances gradually get depleted, as if it is pointing out to political and social, inter-personal upheavals in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, suggesting 'something is rotten'.

The villa and its members live on false values and so the piety of a man-woman relationship is easily misconstrued that leads to Choti Bahu's sudden disappearance when she accompanied by Ghulam is going to meet a saint who can cure her husband's malady. There is complete silence on her disappearance and at the end of the film GuruDutt still standing around the dilapidated stones and bricks uncovers Choti Bahu's Gold Bracelet and gets to know the merciless killing that was kept as a secret.

Sahib Biwi aur Ghulam was nominated as India's official entry for Oscar Awards, but the academy apparently rejected it saying that the film

showing a woman drinking was not permissible in their culture.ⁱ

Conclusion

Guru Dutt died at the age of 39 leaving behind a revered legacy in such a short span of his career. A man of few words, who came to be celebrated for his brilliance only decades after his death, his contribution is truly phenomenal. Any discussion on good filmmaking is incomplete without referring to GuruDutt, and Indian Cinema will always be seen synonymous with him, be it the iconic films or the evergreen, soul stirring songs.

Unfortunately, *Pyasa* did not win any filmfare awards for 1957, while *Mother India* and *Naya Daur* did. These 3 films with distinct storylines shared common characteristics, like they were rooted in moral dilemmas and social issues which beautifully merged with entertainment and melodrama, carrying universal appeal.

The author Yasser Usman informs us that Guru Dutt's son Arun Dutt regrets,

It is sad and unfortunate that he never got the recognition he deserved. Neither the media, nor the industry gave him recognition then.

Even after 60 years Dutt's films have not lost their charm. A clear sense of timelessness in the films is felt as in the present times too one generally feels that the accelerated growth of materialism and consumerism in our society is resulting into loss of ethics and morality. To say that Dutt was a narcissist or that his films express his self-pity, would be incorrect.

Dutt's contribution as a filmmaker, as a director whose heroines are independent is quite significant; as they became emotional strength to the hero, thereby breaking the stereotype. Secondly, he invented the idea of songs that would not merely provide relief or echo message already conveyed, but would further the narrative of a film, with immortal songs like 'tabdeer se bigdi hui' of film *Baazi*, or 'ye duniya agar mil bhi jaaye to kya hai' (*Pyaasa*) film.

Writer Shivendra Singh Dungarpur who worked on author's biopic (UTV Movies 2008) observed, **The entire history of Kaagaz ke Phool is contained in that last frame of the Director sitting in the chair. The death on the screen mysteriously but tends to preempt his early demise; strangely, the real and the reel seem to coalesce into one.**

Dutt had experienced pain, suffering and love too. His works carry an incandescent quality about them. A poet to the core, in a short span of filmmaking, Dutt put stamp of his creative genius in the films he made and produced; his uniqueness will remain unquestioned for posterity.

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