

International Journal Research Publication Analysis

Page: 01-14

MARGINALIZED COMMUNITIES AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN INDIAN REGIONAL LITERATURE

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Article Received: 06 June 2026

Article Revised: 26 June 2026

Published on: 16 July 2026

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DOI: <https://doi-doi.org/101555/ijrpa.6740>

ABSTRACT

India's regional-language literatures have, for over a century, given form to the lived experience of communities that formal law was slow to recognise as rights-bearing at all. This paper examines how Dalit, Adivasi (tribal), and other marginalised voices in Hindi, Tamil, and Bengali literature articulate claims that correspond to what would later be codified as human rights: the right to bodily and post-mortem dignity, freedom from caste-mandated unpaid labour, the right to ancestral land and cultural self-determination, and freedom from the compounding burden of caste or tribal identity intersecting with gender. Drawing on close reading of Munshi Premchand's Hindi fiction, Bama's Tamil testimonio *Karukku*, Omprakash Valmiki's autobiography *Joothan*, Gopinath Mohanty's Odia novel *Paraja*, and Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's Bengali fiction, alongside verified peer-reviewed scholarship, the study identifies both a shared literary grammar of witness across these otherwise distinct linguistic traditions and significant regional and community-specific divergences in what is being claimed and how. The comparative analysis shows that caste-focused regional literatures tend to stage rights violations as specific, nameable acts of humiliation demanding corrective justice, while literatures of tribal displacement tend to foreground land and cultural continuity as the primary right at stake, and that women writers within both traditions articulate a double burden not fully captured by either caste/tribe-focused or mainstream feminist criticism alone. The paper argues that reading these regional literatures together, rather than within separate departmental and linguistic silos, offers a fuller account of how Indian literary realism anticipated the vocabulary of human rights later codified in the Indian Constitution.

KEYWORDS: Marginalized communities; human rights; Indian regional literature; Dalit literature; Adivasi/tribal literature; caste; gender; comparative literary study.

1. INTRODUCTION

India's constitutional commitment to equality, dignity, and freedom from discrimination, articulated in Articles 14 through 17 and elaborated in subsequent protective legislation, did not emerge from a legal vacuum. It emerged into a society in which regional-language literatures had, for decades already, been documenting precisely the forms of humiliation and dispossession that the Constitution would later name and prohibit. Long before Dalit or Adivasi rights entered the vocabulary of Indian public law in their present form, Hindi, Tamil, Bengali, Odia, and Marathi writers were giving literary shape to the experience of communities pushed to the margins of the social order: the Dalit labourer denied even the dignity of a decent death, the tribal family displaced from ancestral forest, the woman doubly burdened by caste or tribal identity and by patriarchal control within her own community.

This paper takes as its subject the human-rights discourse embedded in a deliberately cross-regional selection of Indian literature: Munshi Premchand's Hindi short fiction and its unsparing depiction of caste-mandated labour and untouchability; Bama's Tamil testimonio *Karukku* and its account of caste discrimination both within and beyond her own Dalit Christian community; Omprakash Valmiki's Hindi autobiography *Joothan*, one of the founding texts of the modern Dalit autobiographical genre; Gopinath Mohanty's Odia novel *Paraja*, an early and influential fictional treatment of tribal land alienation; and Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's Bengali fiction, read here as a comparative baseline that shows how a rights-consciousness rooted primarily in gender and domestic dignity, rather than in caste or land, took shape within the same historical period.

The comparative method adopted here treats region and community, rather than a single author or language, as the primary variable. This allows the study to ask not only what each literature says about marginalisation, but what is distinctive about the way caste-focused, tribal, and gender-focused regional literatures each construct the rights claim they are making, and to what extent those constructions converge on a shared literary grammar of witness.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarship on Hindi Dalit and Adivasi writing has been substantially advanced by Wessler [1], whose 2020 study in *Studia Neophilologica* traces the emergence of Dalit and Adivasi

literature as distinct Hindi genres from the 1990s onward, arguing that both genres are grounded in the authenticating claim of *anubhūti*, or lived experience, though he notes that Adivasi writing has been comparatively slower to achieve the institutional recognition that Dalit writing has secured. Kumari's [2] 2025 comparative survey extends this ground by placing Dalit and tribal literary consciousness side by side across multiple regions, identifying shared structural experiences of exclusion and exoticisation while insisting on genuine differences between caste-based and land-based oppression; her attention to women writers within both traditions is a valuable corrective to scholarship that treats either community as gender-neutral.

Tamil Dalit writing, and Bama's *Karukku* in particular, has attracted a substantial and growing body of criticism. Nayar's [3] influential 2006 article in the *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* reads *Karukku* through the genre of *testimonio*, the Latin American term for autobiography that speaks on behalf of a community rather than merely an individual, a framework that has since become close to standard in Dalit literary criticism. O. Devika and Bose's [4] more recent study applies the vocabulary of human rights directly to the same text, arguing that *Karukku* reconstructs Dalit claims to dignity against discrimination that Bama experienced both in her natal village and within the Catholic congregation she later joined — a double site of exclusion that complicates any reading of caste oppression as a purely Hindu phenomenon.

On the Hindi side, Sengupta's [5] 2024 study of Premchand's *Ghaaswali* develops a justice-theoretic distinction between the distributive justice — material compensation offered by a sympathetic upper-caste figure — and the corrective justice — legal or police redress — that Premchand's Dalit woman protagonist is denied, a distinction that proves useful, as this paper will show, well beyond the single story it was developed to analyse. Bhattacharjee's [6] study of Chattopadhyay's Bengali fiction, discussed at greater length in the author's earlier comparative study of Chattopadhyay and Premchand, is included here as a comparative baseline: it demonstrates that a regional literature can articulate a genuine rights-consciousness centred almost entirely on gender and domestic dignity, with caste and land occupying a comparatively marginal position, a pattern that stands in instructive contrast to the Hindi, Tamil, and Odia material examined in this paper.

Table 1. Summary of Reviewed Literature.

Author(s) & Year	Region / Language	Text(s) Examined	Key Findings	Limitation / Gap
Wessler (2020) [1]	Hindi; Adivasi belt (Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh)	Hindi Dalit and Adivasi short stories, poems, autobiographical texts	Traces the emergence of Dalit and Adivasi writing as distinct Hindi genres grounded in anubhūti (lived experience); notes a growing but incomplete institutional mainstreaming into syllabi	Focused on Hindi alone; does not compare across regional languages or engage the vocabulary of rights directly
Kumari (2025) [2]	Pan-Indian, comparative (Dalit and tribal)	Dalit and tribal literary movements across Maharashtra, Karnataka, Jharkhand, and elsewhere	Identifies shared structural experiences — socio-economic exclusion, exoticisation, denial of dignity — alongside genuine divergences (caste vs. land-based oppression) between Dalit and tribal literary consciousness	Broad survey rather than close reading of specific primary texts; gender is treated as a subsection rather than integrated throughout
Nayar (2006) [3]	Tamil (English translation)	Bama, Karukku	Reads Karukku as testimonio — autobiography that bears witness on behalf of a community — rather than as individual life-writing alone	Single-text study; does not extend the testimonio framework to other regional Dalit autobiographies
O. Devika & Bose (2023) [4]	Tamil (English translation)	Bama, Karukku	Applies human-rights vocabulary directly to Karukku, reading the text as reconstructing Dalit claims to dignity against both caste-Hindu and intra-	Short-form conference-proceedings article; treatment of the human-rights framework remains introductory

Author(s) & Year	Region / Language	Text(s) Examined	Key Findings	Limitation / Gap
			Christian discrimination	rather than theorised in depth
Sengupta (2024) [5]	Hindi	Premchand, “The Woman Who Sold Grass” (Ghaaswali)	Distinguishes distributive from corrective justice in Premchand’s depiction of a Dalit woman’s harassment, showing that literary reparation typically stops short of legal redress	Single-author, single-text; caste and gender are the focus, with little attention to region beyond the Hindi heartland
Bhattacharjee (2023) [6]	Bengali	Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay, selected novels and short stories	Reads Chattopadhyay’s women characters as asserting dignity through education while remaining within a domestic, reform-era framework	Confined to Bengali and to gender; caste and tribal marginalisation are outside its scope

3. Research Gap

The reviewed scholarship is, without exception, organised by single language, single community, or single text: Wessler [1] and Kumari [2] address Dalit and Adivasi writing together but largely within Hindi and in survey form; Nayar [3] and O. Devika and Bose [4] address Tamil Dalit writing through the single text of Karukku; Sengupta [5] addresses a single Hindi short story; Bhattacharjee [6] addresses Bengali fiction organised around gender rather than caste or tribe. No study in the literature reviewed here holds Hindi, Tamil, Odia, and Bengali regional literatures together within a single comparative human-rights framework that spans caste, tribal displacement, and gender as intersecting rather than separate concerns. This is the gap the present study addresses.

4. Problem Statement

Because Indian literary scholarship remains substantially organised along linguistic and departmental lines, a reader working within a single regional-language tradition risks concluding that the rights concerns articulated within that tradition — caste in Hindi and Tamil, gender in Bengali, land in Odia and the Adivasi belt — are the primary or even the

sole concerns of Indian literature's engagement with marginalisation. This fragmentary view obscures both the genuinely shared literary grammar that these otherwise distinct traditions employ to stage a rights claim, and the specific, non-interchangeable content of what each tradition is claiming. The absence of a cross-regional comparative framework is therefore not merely a gap in coverage but a distortion of the picture that any single-tradition study can offer.

5. Objectives of the Study

1. To examine how caste-focused regional literatures in Hindi and Tamil stage claims to bodily, post-mortem, and educational dignity, and to identify the remedies — distributive or corrective — that the texts imagine as available.
2. To examine how Adivasi/tribal-focused literature in Odia and Hindi articulates the right to land and cultural self-determination as distinct from, though related to, caste-based claims.
3. To examine how gender compounds caste, tribal, and class marginalisation in the selected texts, with particular attention to women writers' own accounts of a double burden.
4. To compare these community- and region-specific articulations against a Bengali comparative baseline in which gender, rather than caste or land, is the primary axis of rights-consciousness, and to draw out the implications of this comparison for the study of Indian literary humanism as a whole.

6. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study follows the qualitative, text-based comparative method conventional to literary-critical research. The primary texts selected are Premchand's short stories "Sadgati" and "The Woman Who Sold Grass" (Ghaaswali) for Hindi caste-focused fiction; Bama's *Karukku* for Tamil Dalit testimonio; Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* for Hindi Dalit autobiography; Gopinath Mohanty's *Paraja* for Odia tribal fiction; and Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's *Devdas* and the short stories discussed in Bhattacharjee's study for the Bengali comparative baseline. These texts were selected because each is a recognised, widely studied work within its own regional tradition, and because together they span the three principal axes — caste, tribe, and gender — identified in the objectives above.

As with the author's earlier comparative study of Chattopadhyay and Premchand, this paper does not employ, and does not fabricate, quantitative performance metrics such as accuracy or F1-scores, which belong to computational rather than literary-critical research and would not produce a meaningful or honest result if applied here. The method is thematic close

reading of the primary texts, supported and checked against verified secondary scholarship, with comparative synthesis conducted by placing corresponding scenes and rights claims from each regional tradition side by side (Section 10, Table 2).

7. Caste, Untouchability, and the Right to Dignity

7.1 Hindi Fiction: Premchand

Premchand's 1931 story "Sadgati" (Deliverance) narrates the death of Dukhi, a Dalit labourer who collapses while performing unpaid, caste-mandated labour for a Brahmin priest, Ghasiram, who will not touch Dukhi's body even after death; the story's closing image, in which the corpse is finally dragged away by a rope rather than carried with the minimal dignity owed to the dead, remains one of the starkest indictments of untouchability in modern Indian fiction. The story stages the denial of rights at two levels simultaneously: the denial of fair compensation for labour while Dukhi is alive, and the denial of even minimal bodily dignity once he is dead. Sengupta's [5] reading of the later story Ghaaswali develops a related but distinct pattern, in which a sympathetic upper-caste landlord offers the story's Dalit woman protagonist a form of material reparation after witnessing her harassment by lower-caste coachmen, while the corrective justice that would flow from police or legal redress against the harassment itself never materialises. Read together, these two stories suggest that Premchand's fiction consistently distinguishes between the dignity a sympathetic individual can restore and the systemic remedy that only institutional change could provide — and consistently withholds the latter, a choice that Sengupta [5] reads as itself a form of social critique rather than authorial pessimism.

7.2 Tamil Testimonio: Bama

Bama's *Karukku* (1992), examined in detail by Nayar [3] and by O. Devika and Bose [4], extends the claim to dignity into two distinct social spaces: the Dalit Paraiyar village of the author's childhood, where untouchability structures every relation with the dominant Naicker caste, and the Catholic religious congregation Bama later joins, where she discovers that caste hierarchy persists even within an institution formally committed to spiritual equality. O. Devika and Bose [4] read this double exposure as the text's central human-rights claim: that dignity denied on caste grounds is not remedied by conversion or by formal religious inclusion, and that a genuine rights framework must therefore look beneath institutional professions of equality to actual practice. Nayar's [3] testimonio framework adds that Bama's first-person narration functions not merely as personal memoir but as an act of witness on

behalf of her community, a mode of literary assertion that recurs, in different regional forms, throughout the texts examined in this paper.

7.3 Hindi Autobiography: Valmiki

Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* (1997; English translation 2003) extends the autobiographical mode identified by Nayar [3] in a Tamil context into Hindi, documenting the author's childhood in a Dalit Bhangi (sweeper-caste) family in western Uttar Pradesh, including the humiliation of being made to clean human waste by hand and of receiving joothan, or the leftover food scraped from upper-caste plates, as a form of charity that simultaneously feeds and degrades. Valmiki's narrative, like Bama's, insists on the specificity of remembered incident — named individuals, named villages, named acts of humiliation — rather than abstract description, a narrative strategy that both texts share with Premchand's fiction even though Valmiki and Bama write in the first person about their own lives while Premchand writes fiction about invented characters.

8. Adivasi (Tribal) Marginalization and the Right to Land

If caste-focused literature stages the denial of bodily and social dignity as its central rights claim, literature of tribal displacement stages the denial of land and cultural continuity as its own distinct, though related, central claim. Gopinath Mohanty's Odia novel *Paraja* (1945) follows a tribal family's efforts to recover ancestral land from a moneylender, dramatising the mechanisms — debt bondage, opaque revenue and forest law, the collusion of local administration with commercial interest — through which colonial and early postcolonial economic structures alienated tribal communities from the land that was inseparable from their cultural and religious identity. The novel's tragedy is structurally similar to Premchand's *Godaan*, discussed in the author's earlier comparative study, in that debt functions as the mechanism of dispossession in both; but where *Godaan*'s Hori seeks simply to own a cow within an existing agrarian order, *Paraja*'s tribal family seeks to remain on land whose loss threatens not merely economic survival but the continuity of a distinct cultural world.

Wessler's [1] survey of Hindi Adivasi writing confirms that this concern with land and cultural continuity, rather than with caste hierarchy as such, remains the organising theme of tribal literary expression as it has developed since the 1990s, even as Adivasi writers have, in Wessler's account, drawn on some of the same narrative and autobiographical strategies that Dalit writers pioneered. Kumari's [2] comparative survey makes the distinction explicit: Dalit literature, in her account, "often centres on... the struggle for social inclusion within a Hindu-

dominated society,” while tribal literature “centres on land alienation, the destruction of their traditional way of life due to development and deforestation, and the fight for self-determination and cultural autonomy.” This distinction, while not absolute — both literatures share, as Kumari notes, a common vocabulary of dignity and resistance — is borne out clearly in the contrast between Paraja’s land-centred tragedy and the caste-centred humiliation narratives of Premchand, Bama, and Valmiki.

9. Gender as a Compounding Axis of Marginalization

Kumari’s [2] account of the “double burden” faced by women writers within Dalit and tribal communities is amply confirmed by the primary texts examined here. Bama’s *Karukku*, beyond its caste and religious critique, repeatedly registers the specific vulnerability of Dalit women within their own community’s patriarchal structures, a concern echoed in Maharashtrian Dalit women’s autobiography such as Baby Kamble’s *The Prisons We Broke*, in which the author documents both the caste oppression her community suffered and the constraints imposed on women within the community’s own domestic and social life. Premchand’s *Ghaaswali*, in Sengupta’s [5] reading, stages a comparable compounding: the story’s Dalit woman protagonist is harassed specifically as a woman by lower-caste coachmen, and her subsequent treatment by the upper-caste landlord, however materially generous, remains paternalistic rather than restorative of her full agency.

Against this pattern, Chattopadhyay’s Bengali fiction offers an instructive comparative case in which gender operates largely without the compounding weight of caste or tribal marginalisation, since his heroines are drawn predominantly from the upper-caste *bhadramahila* milieu. Bhattacharjee [6] shows that Chattopadhyay nonetheless treats women’s claims to education and self-cultivation as a serious rights concern in its own right, suggesting that gender alone, even without caste or tribal compounding, constituted a distinct and serious rights concern in early-twentieth-century Indian literature. Reading the Bengali material alongside the Dalit and Adivasi women’s writing discussed above therefore clarifies what is specific to the double burden Kumari [2] identifies: not the fact of gendered constraint, which Chattopadhyay’s fiction shows was already a live literary concern independent of caste, but the compounding of that constraint with a second, structurally distinct axis of exclusion.

10. Comparative Analysis

Table 2 draws together the community- and region-specific findings of Sections 7 through 9. Read across the table, two patterns stand out. First, every tradition examined here relies on the specificity of named, remembered incident — a particular death, a particular denial of food or land or recognition — rather than on abstract description, whether the mode is fiction, as in Premchand and Mohanty, or first-person testimonio, as in Bama and Valmiki. This shared reliance on specificity suggests a common literary grammar of witness that operates across linguistic and community boundaries even where the content of the rights claim differs sharply. Second, the content of the claim does differ sharply and in ways that matter: caste-focused literature claims bodily, post-mortem, and educational dignity within an existing social order; tribal literature claims land and cultural continuity against the alienating pressure of an external economic and administrative system; and gender-focused literature, whether compounding caste or tribal marginalisation or operating largely independently of it, as in the Bengali case, claims recognition and freedom from moral or communal condemnation.

Table 2. Comparative Synthesis across Communities and Regions.

Community / Region	Representative Text(s)	Primary Rights Concern	Mode of Literary Assertion
Dalit — Hindi heartland	Premchand, “Sadgati,” Ghaaswali; Omprakash Valmiki, Joothan	Freedom from caste-mandated unpaid labour; right to bodily and post-mortem dignity	Realist fiction (Premchand) and testimonial autobiography (Valmiki) documenting specific, named acts of humiliation
Dalit — Tamil Nadu	Bama, Karukku	Right to education; freedom from intra-community and intra-religious (Christian) caste discrimination	First-person testimonio combining individual memory with collective witness [3]
Adivasi/tribal — Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Odisha	Gopinath Mohanty, Paraja; Hindi Adivasi short fiction surveyed by Wessler [1]	Right to ancestral land; cultural self-determination against displacement	Fiction and autobiographical narrative emphasising anubhūti (authenticating lived experience) over abstract argument
Women within Dalit/Adivasi communities	Baby Kamble, The Prisons We Broke; Bama, Karukku	Freedom from a double burden of caste/tribe-based and	Autobiography foregrounding domestic and communal patriarchy

Community / Region	Representative Text(s)	Primary Rights Concern	Mode of Literary Assertion
		patriarchal oppression	alongside caste or tribal subjugation
Bengali bhadralok milieu (comparative baseline)	Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay, Devdas, “Anuradha” [6]	Right to recognition and freedom from moral condemnation for women	Realist domestic fiction centred on individual conscience rather than institutional claim

11. DISCUSSION

The comparative findings bear on a larger question about the relationship between literature and rights consciousness in a multilingual society such as India's. Where a single-tradition study might conclude that Indian literature's engagement with marginalisation is primarily a caste story, or primarily a gender story, or primarily a story of tribal displacement, the cross-regional comparison undertaken here suggests instead that Indian regional literatures collectively developed several distinct, non-reducible idioms of rights-consciousness, each responsive to the specific structure of marginalisation it addresses, while sharing a common commitment to the evidentiary and narrative specificity that both Nayar [3] and Kumari [2] identify as central to testimonio and to Dalit/tribal witness more broadly.

This finding also bears on the limits of literary reform. As O. Devika and Bose [4] and Sengupta [5] both note in their respective readings of Bama and Premchand, the remedies that these texts imagine as available — individual sympathy, material compensation, personal conversion or departure — typically fall short of the systemic transformation that a fully adequate human-rights framework would demand. This is not a failure of the literature so much as an honest registration of the gap, still incompletely closed in contemporary India, between the constitutional guarantee of dignity and equality and its realisation in social practice. Reading Premchand, Bama, Valmiki, Mohanty, and Chattopadhyay together makes that gap, and its regional and community-specific textures, considerably more visible than any one of these traditions could make it alone.

12. Contribution of the Study

- Offers a cross-regional comparative framework spanning Hindi, Tamil, Odia, and Bengali literature organised specifically around human-rights discourse rather than around a single language or community.

- Identifies a shared literary grammar of specific, named witness across caste-focused, tribal, and gender-focused regional traditions, while preserving the genuine differences in the content of each tradition's rights claim.
- Extends Sengupta's [5] distributive/corrective justice distinction, developed for a single Hindi short story, to a wider comparative set, showing its applicability beyond the text for which it was originally proposed.
- Provides a reusable comparative table (Table 2) that could be extended to additional regional literatures, including Marathi, Telugu, and Northeast Indian tribal writing, in future research.

13. LIMITATIONS

This study is subject to several limitations that should be stated plainly. The texts examined were read substantially in English translation, with the exception of the Bengali material, and the specific textures of Tamil, Hindi, and Odia that translation cannot fully carry — dialect, register, the precise social weight of particular terms of address — are accordingly not fully recoverable here. The selection of five primary traditions, while chosen to span caste, tribe, and gender, necessarily omits others of comparable importance, including Marathi Dalit poetry, Telugu and Kannada Dalit writing, and the substantial and distinct body of Northeast Indian tribal literature, any of which could alter or refine the comparative picture offered here. As with the author's earlier comparative study of Chattopadhyay and Premchand, this is an interpretive literary-critical study rather than an empirical one, and its claims rest on the persuasiveness of textual evidence and argument rather than on quantifiable or statistically replicable data. Finally, the study relies on a curated set of verified secondary sources rather than an exhaustive survey of the very large body of Dalit, Adivasi, and regional literary criticism now available, particularly in Indian-language journals not indexed in the English-language databases consulted here.

14. Future Scope

Future research could extend the comparative framework developed here to Marathi Dalit poetry, whose distinctive protest idiom differs formally from the narrative and autobiographical modes examined in this paper, and to Northeast Indian tribal literature, whose relationship to the Indian state carries a political history distinct from that of the Adivasi communities of central India examined through Paraja. A study working with the original Tamil, Hindi, and Odia texts rather than with translation would allow the shared

literary grammar of witness identified here to be tested against linguistic evidence not visible in English translation. Finally, extending Sengupta's [5] distributive/corrective justice framework into a systematic comparative tool, applied consistently across a larger corpus of regional Dalit, Adivasi, and women's writing, would help establish whether the pattern identified in this paper — sympathy without systemic remedy — is as widespread across Indian regional literature as the present, necessarily selective, study suggests.

15. CONCLUSION

Read together rather than within separate linguistic and disciplinary silos, Hindi, Tamil, Odia, and Bengali regional literatures reveal both a shared literary grammar of witness — the reliance on specific, named, remembered incident to stage a claim to dignity — and genuinely distinct regional and community-specific articulations of what that claim consists of: bodily and post-mortem dignity in caste-focused Hindi and Tamil writing, land and cultural continuity in Odia and Hindi Adivasi writing, and recognition and freedom from moral condemnation in Bengali writing centred on gender. Women writers within Dalit and Adivasi traditions add a further, compounding layer that neither a purely caste/tribe-focused nor a purely gender-focused single-tradition study can fully capture. This comparative reading suggests that India's regional literatures, taken together, constitute a substantial and still under-examined archive of human-rights consciousness that took literary form well before the vocabulary of rights was available to name it directly, and that a fuller comparative study across India's many regional languages remains a task for future scholarship to complete.

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