

**'Women at work for war...women at work for
the things of peace'¹ :
Representations of women in the British
propaganda newsreel in India in the Second
World War,
*INDIAN NEWS PARADE***

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List of Acronyms

AIWC	All India Women's Congress
BLOIOC	British Library Oriental and India Office Collection
IMN	Indian Movietone News
INP	Indian News Parade
IWM	Imperial War Museum
IWMFVA	Imperial War Museum Film and Video Archive
RSS	Rashtriya Stree Sangha
SEAC	South East Asia Command
UK	United Kingdom
US	United States of America
VAD	Voluntary Aid Detachment
WAC(I)	Women's Auxiliary Corps (India)
WAS(B)	Women's Auxiliary Corps (Burma)
WVS	Women's Voluntary Service

¹ INP 93, Item 1, VISCOUNTESS WAVELL'S INSPIRATION TO THE WOMEN OF INDIA.

1. Introduction

On August 8th 1943 Sir Sultan Ahmed² introduced the second and most extensive newsreel undertaken by the (British) government of India. Unlike its short-lived predecessor, *Indian Movietone News*, Indian News Parade was to be 'directly run' by the Government of India. In his speech Ahmed expressed the official hopes of the project emphasising 'education', 'encouragement' and international 'exchange'. These ideas re-occur throughout the newsreel's authorised presentation of the British 'civilising' mission. Representations of women, their rights, behaviours and perceived treatment, were fundamental to the benevolent rhetoric of imperialism. This tradition continues in these wartime newsreels, and is examined here.

Indian News Parade came into existence through pressures of war, particularly after the escalation of the Far East theatre with the British defeats in Malaya and Burma in 1942. However, as Ahmed points out, this project is not just concerned with mobilisation and fighting morale. 'Education through film', Ahmed explains, 'is not only an instrument of war – it is even more an instrument of peace'. To Indian people straining under frustrated nationalism, and to a government acknowledging the last days of empire, 'an instrument of peace' did not simply mean the imposition of imperial sovereignty. It implied the preparation for independence. The tension generated by these conflicting ambitions occurs within the newsreels, in aesthetic choices, policies and content. Throughout, representations of women have extended political resonance for nationalist, religious and feminist agendas as well as for war and imperialism.

Although no women worked on producing the newsreels (apart from the probable exceptions of secretarial positions and the classic consultant role of wife/girlfriend) the represented women are not simply mere 'sites' on which battles of imperialist and national identity take place. The women who appear in this selected collection of actuality footage are actively involved in creating and recreating women's roles and leading diverse communities in active public service. The newsreels make these women visible to wider audiences with extremely limited experience of women in the media, especially women in other roles than the dramatic stereotypes favoured by feature fiction films. The newsreels were an opportunity to challenge dramatic female clichés. Nationalist women used the newsreels as an extension of their growing public and political visibility, Indian ranis used them to desperately retain their official importance, and the memsahibs appeared in them to promote female leadership, British interests and the input of women into a modern, global war.

Although some women are visible as individuals and community leaders in the newsreels, others are fleetingly seen. By focusing on these varied ephemeral remains of female images during this unique and tense period, this study magnifies these celluloid miniatures way beyond the ambitions of the patriarchal production team. Of the women's voices even less remains, partly because the general newsreel aesthetic is of silent footage supplemented by added commentary and music, and partly because the women depicted have limited public voices. Only a very few allusions to words spoken by the women appear within the commentary. My intention is to transform and concentrate these historical fragments to create a discursive text that can contribute to

² Government of India Member for Publicity and Information, speech recorded in L/I/1/685, British Library Oriental and India Office Collections, London (hereafter BLOIOC).

contemporary feminisms engaged in re-examining media history, British-Indian dialogues and rhetoric of gender and imperialism.

2. Indian News Parade

2.1: Outline and History³

Indian News Parade was produced for a government that was abolished in 1947. In 1939 India was still ruled by a viceroy who governed as the head of a small executive council. Crucial to his administration was the Indian Civil Service, an entirely male institution which consisted of (mostly) Oxbridge elite. The ultimate check on the viceroy's powers was the UK Parliament and the Secretary of State for India in London.

The Second World War was to radically transform the relationship of governments in India and Britain. As the theatre of war intensified on the Indian frontier, government intervention and sponsorship replaced 'laissez faire' traditions. British upper-class indifference to the ungentlemanly medium of film was also being challenged by dynamic American models. As the government led newsreel, *Indian News Parade* is deeply involved in this transformational process, although it tries to hide the disruption under layers of pomp and ceremony.

The first attempt at an all India newsreel distribution developed from a relationship between the government of India and *British Movietone News* (part of the Twentieth Century Fox Corporation). These imported newsreels were distributed to English-language institutions that catered primarily for Britons and the Indian educated elite living in urban centres. The addition of commentaries in Hindustani, Bengali, Tamil and Telugu enabled the newsreel to be incorporated into wider distribution networks within India, in particular the new Village Publicity Scheme, announced by the government of Bombay in 1941.

Ministry of Information (MOI) demands for official war film from India for Europe intensified and the Directorate of Military Training based in Bombay was expanded, becoming (reputedly) the largest organisation of its kind in the British Empire, making films in fourteen languages.⁴

Through 1942 and 1943 the government increased its interventionist role in Indian cinema and introduced a new quota requirements for which a weekly newsreel would be necessary. The government now took direct control of production and distribution for the established newsreel *Indian Movietone News*, intensifying manufacture and rebranding the product as *Indian News Parade*.⁵

³ For a detailed history see Philip Woods, 'The British Use of Film Propaganda in India in the Second World War', *Indian Horizons*, January-March 2001, 19-24, and "'Chapattis by Parachute": The Use of Newsreels in British Propaganda in India', *South Asia*, Vol xxiii, no. 2 (London: 2000), 89-109, and Paul Sargent, 'Indian News Parade: the first Indian newsreel', *IWM Review*, No.12, 1999 (London: Imperial War Museum).

⁴ Major S. T. Berkeley-Hill, 'Films in Uniform,' *United Services Institution Journal* (Oct. 1948), 387-91 (quoted P. Woods, 'Chapattis by Parachute': 99).

⁵ Drawing on sources L/I/1/691, L/I/1/684 British Library Oriental and India Office Collection (BLOIOC hereafter), the main collection of government of India papers from the Film Advisory Board and Philip Woods, ' "Chapattis by Parachute" ': The Use of Newsreels in British Propaganda in India, in *South Asia*, Vol xxiii, no. 2 (2000).

Indian News Parade appeared weekly in English and Hindustani, Bengali, Telugu and Tamil from September 1943 to May 1946. Eight cameramen were directly employed on the reels, working at different stations in India and at its demise in 1946, the Statesman reckoned the entire unit 'consisted of one hundred and sixty-four Indians and six Europeans, with all the necessary administration'.⁶

As a British Indian Government led initiative, *Indian News Parade* would be rejected with Indian independence. And before this, when the newsreel's wartime involvement in mobilisation and morale building was no longer needed, it ceased to be produced as a government concern in May 1946.

2.2 The Aesthetic of Indian News Parade

Shown alongside feature films, *Indian News Parade* took the documentary aesthetic into the same viewing arena as the fiction and mythological film, and fixed the newsreel for this short period as a regular element of the Indian cinematic experience. As such, it introduced a different type of representation of women, particularly Indian women, into Indian cinema. The format of *Indian News Parade* was derived from the pre-war British newsreel. It consisted of a string of items using predominantly silent images strung together with intertitles, Western orchestral style music and the linking of items and ideas through analogy and humorous comparisons within the commentary.

Despite *Indian News Parade's* continuity with pre-war aesthetic form, the outbreak of war on September 3rd 1939 meant that political relationships between Indian and British representatives had been dramatically and irreversibly changed. As in the First World War, Britain was dependent on Indian soldiers for their massive contribution to the armed forces in a modern European war. To buy good will (from America as well as India), tentative pre-war plans for Indian dominion status had to be accelerated, despite opposition from Churchill and British conservative opinion. This public acknowledgement of the hastening road to independence, and the censorship of Indian opposition to supporting the war effort, informed the choices made in creating the newsreels. These choices created a nervous and contradictory product.

The most obvious aesthetic disjunction is between commentary and visuals. The commentary has been created afterwards by professional writers to 'fit' the footage. It is overlaid over pictures of varying individuals and groups who are acting with diverse and opposing purposes. This disjointing word and image creates a gap that allows me to draw on aspects of women's representation directly stemming from actions and behaviour of the women depicted.

3. Women in Indian News Parade: Groups and Tropes

In this major section, I create a number of categories by which to cross-reference and compare the diverse signs of women in the newsreels. From repeated emblematic moments, a number of tropes arise, which merge to create hybrid forms or diverge to show varied manifestations of a particular motif. At times I have used these appearances to investigate wider historical issues, as my prime motivation in producing this work is to magnify and translate these fragments of women's history.

(For the purposes of this shortened extract, a selected and shortened few of the original dissertation's 'Groups and Tropes' are included here.)

⁶ 'Films and Propaganda' *The Statesman* 9 Feb 1948, included in L/I/1/710, BLOIOC.

3.1 'Manpower means Womanpower':⁷ A Woman's War

Women are mobilised for war in India in a variety of uniformed and organisational roles. The most represented military group is the Women's Auxiliary Corps (India) known as the WAC(I)s.

The WAC(I)s were formed in India in the Second World War, serving the army, the Royal Indian Navy and the Royal Indian Air Force. The WAC(I)s were a mixed racial organisation, although in keeping with the segregation of the time, the officer corps was predominantly British. There were 8,600 other ranks and 1,160 officers in the WAC(I)s by 1945⁸, but WAC(I) representation in the newsreels is much greater than their proportional size in the larger military effort, indicating that their presence was seen as useful for morale-boosting and the mobilisation effort.

Usually the WAC(I)s are screened taking part in parades. Women wearing military uniform and moving in a military manner is itself a novelty of the period. Wearing their varied uniform and hats, the different corps are inspected, saluted, cheered and acknowledged by military and civic leaders and the public. These women's units are an opportunity for feel-good items, in which the main story is their existence and appearance. For example, INP 111⁹ shows celebrations in a selection of Indian regions of the WAC(I)s third birthday. The commentary reinforces the anomaly of the existence of this group of women, emphasising that they are only a temporary manifestation of wartime pressure. 'When they return to civil life they will take back with them qualities of initiative and self reliance'. The forces are presented as educational in themselves, and women as the recipients of this effort of development. To fully emphasise the feel-good factor of the item, the piece ends with the cutting of a birthday cake, the women filmed from above as they form a spectacular pattern of hats and uniforms as they swarm around the cake.

The WAC(I)s contribute to the victory parades, as in INP 147¹⁰, where WRIN contingents march through Bombay. An different style of item is WACIS ALSO SERVE WITH THE ROYAL INDIAN NAVY in INP 81. The original unedited footage is held at the Imperial War Museum Film and Video Archive, and the original shot sheet notes explicitly state the public relations pleasure in the cultural mix of dress and appearance of the WAC(I)s. '(This mixture of girls wearing uniform sarees and uniform frocks should look impressive on the screen).' Images of the women at leisure have been edited from the newsreel item so the edited footage concentrates on WAC(I) duties in the cypher office. The visuals of the women at work contrast with the patriarchal commentary with its customary sense of humour and acknowledgement of sexual stereotyping.

These women keep secrets. That's supposed to be the one thing a woman can't do, but the Naval WACIs do it very well...If these girls carry over into peace time, sailors will soon have to call the Mate Miss instead of Mr...the WACI's job is done and they let the men have a chance.

⁷ INP 90, Item 2, BRITISH WOMEN TAKE OVER MEN'S DUTIES IN INDIA.

⁸ Gaylor, John, *Sons of John Company: The Indian and Pakistan Armies, 1903-1991*, (Tunbridge Wells: Spellbound, 1992).

⁹ INP 111, Item 2, WACIS CELEBRATE THIRD BIRTHDAY.

¹⁰ INP 147, Item 3, NAVY DAY IN BOMBAY.

This type of humour can be seen as having a saturnalian function, where authority is temporarily overturned in order to provide release for the repressed, and to preserve the status quo in wider matters. The commentary pretends that it believes the women only allow the men to have the opportunity to work through female superior benevolence.

Gurkha WAC(I)s are depicted in one item¹¹. Despite research at the India Office, the Imperial War Museum, the Gurkha Museum and the National Army Museum I have been unable to find any record of this unit. They are a signals corps, and the Nepalese women are shown learning radio use and pigeon handling. The training of the women by the officers (one a European male sergeant) is symbolic of the British propaganda of European patriarchy as educators and protectors of Indian women. Representations of Gurkhas had mixed receptions in different areas, as the group were perceived as unpopular in certain areas of Western India. The commentary uses US culture to create a name for the women's troop that should be memorable to an English speaking audience.

...meet Frankie Gurkha, Johnny Gurkha's signal-sister. If you don't catch on why they're called Frankie, ask any American to sing you one of their famous ballads.

By this extension, the commentary is bringing the Americans into the legacy of John Company. It was during the supremacy of the East India Company (before direct rule was imposed by the British crown) that the nickname Johnny was given to members of the Gurkha regiments.

Like the WAC(I)s, the Womens Auxiliary Service (Burma) was formed and managed in India, being 'technically the responsibility of the Burma Office'. However, unlike the WAC(I)s, this troop was initially made up of European women, mostly of 'officer class'. Marjorie Ussher wrote in a letter dated 5th December 1943 about her recent recruitment, 'the WAS(B)s are a grand crowd – entirely European – the only service of this kind out here. I just heard of it by chance – it is not advertised as they don't want hundreds of unsuitable people applying'¹². In its later manifestation Anglo-Burmese women, and perhaps Burmese women joined the staff.¹³ In a later period of recruitment, General Leese suggests the following requirement for new WAS(B)s:

- (i) Preferably with knowledge of Burma or India¹⁴

The WAS(B) item is intrinsically connected with South East Asia Command (SEAC) and its propaganda initiatives for troops in this theatre. Welfare amenities available to European stationed personnel were less generally available to the British soldier in Burma. Also, compared to the American soldiers in Burma with their 'grapefruit', 'apple sauce'¹⁵ and tinned beer, the difference in comfort was so great in the British ranks that disaffection even gave rise to a fear of mutiny. The

¹¹ INR 87 Item 3, AND NOW, GURKHA WACIS.

¹² Ussher Collection, European Manuscripts, BLOIOC.

¹³ Ussher Collection.

¹⁴ L/WS/1/406 WS33602 War Office Documents BLOIOC.

¹⁵ Letter dated 19th December 1944, Ussher Collection.

WAS(B)s were part of a comfort strategy to tackle this problem, organising a mobile canteen service to supply the eastern front right up to the front line, once getting in front of the allied guns as the Indian News Parade commentary points out,

As a matter of fact, at Imphal, they got in front of the Army, or at least the artillery, for they found shells whistling over their heads that were on the way to the Jap lines.¹⁶

Marjorie Ussher writes that the mobile canteens brought 'cakes and toffee and the 101 things we sell (toothpaste, soap, tinned food etc)'. The film shows the WAS(B)s cutting up a homemade cake, reminiscent again of the village fete in England, which seems a repeated trope of British benevolence. The commentary draws attention to its homely qualities, (that is, the qualities of the idealised British home).

It's a change from standard rations. Probably the calories are all wrong, but it tastes like the cake that mother used to make.

However, the use of white women to operate the canteens was not simply a comfort initiative in the sense of supplies. The women's 'femaleness', attracted the attention of the troops, especially as they were predominantly white and British, and this familiarity had become unusual in this landscape alien to the European soldiers. This power of entertainment held by the women canteen members was used for poetic inspiration in a poem published in *The Times of India*.

'Oh! Show me a woman Sergeant!
Show me a woman, please!
For I'd much rather see a live genuine she
Than purchase a tin of Kraft cheese
You can keep all your 'bully' and bacon
Your marmalade, pork and baked beans
I would rather observe a nice feminine curve
Than the lines in the army canteens'

This was not simply a case of visual pleasure as Marjorie Ussher comments to her family. 'More than anything they enjoy having a chat with us'.¹⁷ Speaking English and talking of familiar things was central to the comfort the WAS(B)s could provide. The WAS(B)s are shown serving British and Indian troops in Burma. (They also served West African troops, preparing their 1944 Christmas and New Year party.¹⁸)

The WAS(B) footage is also interesting for the active roles in which it shows women in India. Uniquely for representations of women in *Indian News Parade*, Nin Taylor is shown driving the canteen van. The women run. They go out onto the road, and serve groups of men, appearing to talk to them as equals, with none of the deferential body language that appears in some of the relationships between women and men in other items. Indian men may often have driven the canteen vans for the WAS(B) yet this public image is showing women as

¹⁶ INP 84, Item 2, WOMEN WHO WAIT.

¹⁷ letter dated 15th January 1944, Ussher Collection.

¹⁸ Letter dated 19th December 1944, Ussher Collection.

resourceful, active and part of front line battle strategy. The commentary makes the analogy that is implicit in their visual representation, that these women of the British empire embody the essential spirit that once won and will win back colonies:

The women who had come out of Burma had just one wish...to get back again. Well the only way of doing that was to go behind the Army. So that's what they're doing, in their canteen vans.

The Memsahibs are depicted in military role as well, with Lady Carlisle shown arriving by plane as the new chief commander of the WAC(I)s.¹⁹ (This trope of the dignitary arriving by plane is repeated in many newsreel items, emphasising both British modernity and its management of the vastness of India). Her education is jokily pointed out by the commentary, inspired by the books which she carries under her arm. The Countess of Carlisle's evidently spent the journey time in keeping up her war reading. Her education is cited as qualifying her to teach and order other women, together with her travelling, 'she's been twice to Japan', reflecting British propaganda opinion on class and learning.

Another Memsahib warrior leader with a strong personal style is Lady Welsh, Director of WAAF, who is shown on a tour of RAF Units in SEAC.²⁰ Lady Welsh alights in the classic air arrival shot, but immediately makes her presence felt with her informal and personal style. The footage emphasises her persona as an officer who likes to mingle with the ranks, a style of administration concerned with reducing the illusion of distance expressed by those in authority towards the people being managed. She is filmed visiting the hospital, the canteen, and the stores. The *mise-en-scène* reinforces her style of management. She is shown checking supply details of troop welfare, going beyond the usual depth of the officer photoshoot.

European women in the forces are shown arriving from England. Instead of recruiting WAC(I)s from Indian based women, groups such as members of the Womens Auxiliary Air Force are brought from overseas to 'TAKE ON MEN'S DUTIES'. In INP 90, the newsreel commentary seems to be trying to excuse their introduction, or at least explain it by an emphasis on the internationality of the conflict.

They call it a global war. It's so big, whole armies fight, and get just two lines in the newspaper. But for women like these, the global war would have been lost before it was begun.

3.2 'To make women conscious of their part in the nation's life' ²¹: Female Leaders of Independence.

The most frequently represented Indian woman in the newsreels is Sarojini Naidu, the nationalist leader. Naidu had great weight for the nationalist movement as she lent respectability to the women involved, through the respect accorded to her status, age, record and character. Because of this respectability she had been nominated as a leader during the Dharasana salt works protest in the 1930s, for which she had been sentenced to a year in prison. Her leadership

¹⁹ INP 71, Item 2, NEW CHIEF COMMANDER FOR THE WOMEN'S AUXILIARY CORPS.

²⁰ INP 136, Item 3, WOMEN AT WAR.

²¹ INP 58, Item 1, ALL INDIA WOMEN'S CONFERENCE AND POST WAR PLANS.

and imprisonment on behalf of the nationalist cause had inspired hundreds of women to emulate her and march in the streets.

The newsreel ostensibly looks forward towards a new post war state in INP 58, ALL INDIA WOMEN'S CONFERENCE AND POST WAR PLANS, although this film of the women's conference features some women whose importance lessens with independence, such as Lady Thackersey and the Maharani of Gwalior. Sarojini Naidu leads the opening procession, her respectable authority establishing the mood for the meeting. The All India Women's Conference (AIWC) had fought through the 1930s for legal change in the position of women in India, but male opposition to even moderate female reform was varied and strong, so it was important for the women politicians to make themselves as visible as possible to establish their own positions in the political machinery.

The AIWC were constantly urged away from feminist issues, such as women's suffrage, by both female and male politicians. Gandhi urged female activists to spend time in the villages learning about local customs so they would understand that the type of legal change which the feminist reformers wanted was irrelevant for most rural women. Nehru supported women's participation in public life, but was completely against collaborating with the British for women's rights legislation. The Nehru women leaders put the importance of nationalism before feminism, and Jawaharlal's sister, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, is paraphrased by the commentary in INP 58.

The very few men present...must have been relieved when Mrs. Vijayalakshmi Pandit told them the objects of the conference - not to fight men, not to imitate them.

In INP 58 this AIWC conference is presented as dealing with women's service in social areas and, even through the censorship of the newsreels, women's support of the nationalist movement.

as the new president Kamla Devi said (the object of the conference was)..to make women conscious of their part in the nation's life. For instance, in education, and the conference heartily backed the Sargent plan for post war schooling.

These representations of the middle and upper class nationalist AIWC women leaders were crucial to women's new public roles. Upper class leaders were now not only adding respectability to women in the streets but also to women on screen. In demonstrations and marches, the women had already become visible in public areas in a nationalist political context. Now, as identified individuals, they were being projected in large scale moving images throughout India. This celluloid representation was potentially damaging to a woman's reputation as Indian women actors in feature films were still associated with prostitutes, with high profile actresses still regarded as controversial.

Sarojini Naidu appears in a variety of roles. She is also present in a later *Indian News Parade* reel item of the first peacetime Legislative Assembly at New Delhi. She is the first person identified, described 'as a visitor'. Her importance as a figurehead is also resonant as a promoter of Hindu Muslim friendship and solidarity, and in INP 83 she appears in item 2, ID MUBAARAK, as one of three 'famous figures in the Hindu world (who) join in celebrating the greatest festival of the Muslim year'. This is a crucial role during a period of escalating tension between Hindu and Muslim nationalists.

Naidu is remarkable for the variety of roles in which she features in the newsreels. Unlike the most frequently depicted white woman of the newsreels, Eugenie Wavell, who has a very defined role as Vicereine, Naidu appears as a feminist, a supporter of Hindu and Muslim unity, a figure in the freedom movement and also as a writer (she is a well known poet). In INP 141 item 2, WORLD PERSONALITIES AT THE PEN CONFERENCE she arrives at the conference 'with friends'. Although Naidu's romantic verse seems rather dated in the 1940s, her well-known standing as a woman poet is radical and pioneering, and reflects the contributions to feminist consciousness being made by other Indian women as writers, artists and entertainers. Her level of activity reflects her broad leadership range, and her public representation in the newsreels provided a visible role for aspiring female philosophers, politicians, religious figures, community leaders and writers. Her work on the screen displays both her versatility and careful opportunism.

Despite the high profile of women writers in this film of the PEN conference, literacy levels in India in 1941 revealed only one literate woman for every four literate men. This discrimination makes the symbolic value of women such as Naidu more outstanding though less representative.²²

4. Conclusion

Indian News Parade proves itself a fertile ground for representations of Indian and British women in politics, despite its patriarchal structure and is of immense interest for studies of gender and imperialism.

But before making generalisations about any far-reaching issues in *Indian News Parade* it is crucial to remember that this is a product of war. Film, including documentary making, was an activity in which the British Government and the government of India did not invest prior to war conditions, and only then under the pressure of the escalation in the eastern theatre. In the post-war approach to independence, nationalists associated *Indian News Parade* too closely with imperialism to contemplate its continuing production. Because of this limitation, these representations of women reflect war conditions, which in British propaganda unusually emphasised the non-domestic working contribution that the woman was supposed to make outside the home.

Indian News Parade also became a tool in the preparation for independence, and Sarojini Naidu and other women nationalists exploited this ambiguity by their presence. The involvement of women in public politics has been accepted on an impressive scale in India²³, and *Indian News Parade* shows an early and significant stage of this important presence of Indian women in independence politics.

There are many more interesting examples of women's representations in these newsreels than it has been possible to include in this shortened extract, and if anyone would like a copy of the longer dissertation, I will be glad to supply this.

²² Statistics on literacy from Judith Brown, 'India', in *The Oxford History of the British Empire: the Twentieth Century*, (Oxford, 1999), 428.

²³ and Sri Lanka where Mrs. Sirimavo Bandaranaike was Prime Minister from 1960-1965.

Thanks to the Imperial War Museum Film and Video Archive

The issues of *Indian News Parade* examined for the purposes of this dissertation are those lodged with the Imperial War Museum Film and Video Archive (IWMFVA). The Indian newsreel collection consists of 127 issues released from September 1943 to April 1946, and 13 issues of *Indian Movietone News* released between September and August 1943.

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