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A Review of Language Planning, Policy and New Education Programme in Myanmar

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Abstract : Myanmar is among the world's most language-rich nations, with 135 spoken tongues in addition to its official language, Burmese. Recognizing this rich multilingualism, the Ministry of Education has undertaken significant reforms since 2014 to modernize the national language policy and education system. These efforts, supported by UNICEF's Language and Social Cohesion Initiative, have included 16 Facilitated Dialogues across different regions, extensive research projects, direct consultations, site visits, interviews, observations, and vocational training programs. These initiatives aim to address linguistic diversity while fostering social cohesion and educational equity. At the level of state, group writing and discussion, information gathering, problem solving in coordination with learning communities, delivery of multilingual programs, curriculum textbooks, teacher aids, policy roles and ways to involve citizens in policy debates were also worked. In the activities of Myanmar's national language policy, state representatives, Officials of Education Ministry, committees of Language and Culture, civil organizations and individuals, representatives of professionals and community are involved. From these activities, many rich ideas have been emerged for the best ways to create the language policy and educational system. The process of country's national language policy is related to reform education, economy, law and society as well. Notably, the government implemented the National Education Strategic Plan for 2016–2021, aiming to improve the standard and inclusivity of the national education system. This paper explores language planning, policies, and educational programs along with some of the challenges, key achievements and steps taken so far.

Index Terms **- Myanmar's multilingual society, language planning, facilitated dialogues, language policy and new education program.**

I. INTRODUCTION

Language is a crucial aspect of any nation's cultural identity, social cohesion, and educational development. In a multilingual society like Myanmar, language planning and policy are fundamental in shaping the school education system and influencing the broader socio-cultural landscape. Myanmar, with its diverse linguistic and ethnic groups, presents a unique and complex scenario where language choices intersect with historical, political, and educational considerations (Thein Lwin, 2011).

Language, with its multifaceted roles in shaping societies, is not merely a medium of communication but a potent force that mirrors and molds the identity, culture, and aspirations of a nation. In the diverse tapestry of Myanmar, a nation rich in linguistic and ethnic diversity, language planning and policy have always been integral to the broader socio-political landscape. The dynamic interplay between linguistic diversity, educational reform, and social cohesion has consistently posed intricate challenges and opportunities for Myanmar, especially within its changing educational framework.

This article aims to delve into the intricate network of language management and regulations in Myanmar. It emphasizes how these factors connect with the creation and execution of a new education plan. As Myanmar undergoes a transformative period in its history, marked by political changes and a reconfiguration of its educational landscape, it becomes imperative to critically evaluate the language planning and policy initiatives that underpin this transformation.

Myanmar's linguistic diversity is a hallmark of its cultural richness, with over 100 languages spoken across its regions. Amidst this diversity, the need for a comprehensive language policy that acknowledges and respects the multitude of languages spoken within its borders is undeniable. The article explores Myanmar's historical context of language planning, tracing the evolution of language policies and their implications for the educational system. It highlights the delicate balance between the promotion of indigenous languages and the acquisition of a lingua franca for national integration.
Furthermore, this article provide a comprehensive review of the new education programme recently introduced in Myanmar, examining its goals, objectives, and the role of language within this framework. The paper will analyze the challenges and opportunities posed by this programme in terms of language planning, highlighting the potential impact on the linguistic diversity of the nation and the pursuit of inclusive education for all.

In sum, this article aims to offer a nuanced perspective on the intricate relationship between language planning, policy, and the new education programme in Myanmar. By addressing the historical context, current developments, and potential future implications, it seeks to provide valuable insights into the multifaceted dynamics of language in a nation striving for unity, diversity, and educational reform. As Myanmar stands at the crossroads of its history, understanding the role of language in shaping its future is not just a scholarly pursuit but a crucial contribution to the ongoing discourse surrounding the nation's evolution.

II. MULTILINGUAL SOCIETIE AND LINGUISTIC PROFILE IN MYANMAR

The linguistic profile of Myanmar can be characterized by its multilingualism, with numerous languages belonging to different language families. Administratively, Myanmar is divided into seven states, seven divisions, one union territory, five self-governed zones, and one self-governed division. Although there is significant overlap between them, the states—Kachin, Kayah, Kayin, Chin, Mon, Rakhine, and Shan— are mainly linked to indigenous nationalities. Meanwhile, the regions—Yangon, Mandalay, Sagaing, Magway, Bago, Ayeyarwady, and Tanintharyi—are mostly populated by the ethnic Burmese community. The main ethnicities in Myanmar include Burma, Karen, Mon, Rakhine, Shan, Chinese, Indian, and, based on a 1988 ruling, Myanmar officially recognizes 135 official 'national races' (Joseph Lo Bianco, 2016).

The languages of Myanmar belong to several distinct families. Around 78% of the people speak Tibeto-Burman languages, 10% use Tai-Kadai languages, and 7% speak Mon-Khmer languages. These 135 languages are grouped into eight major ethnic language categories: Kachin, Kayah, Karen, Chin, Mon, Myanmar, Rakhine, and Shan. The seven language groups except Myanmar are spoken by over 23 million populations (Bradley, 2015). Additionally, immigrant languages such as Chinese, Malay, Bengali, Sylheti, Hindi, Urdu, Tamil, Bisu, Eastern Tamang, and lu Mien (Lewis, Simons, & Fennig, 2015) and several smaller languages with over 100,000 speakers each also contribute to Myanmar's linguistic diversity, which includes numerous nested dialects.

The national Burmese language acts as the common language, uniting the country with approximately 32 million speakers (Watkins, 2007). The Burmese is the national language adopted for communication, administration, education, media, and governance. The Mon language, from the Mon-Khmer group of Austroasiatic languages, is also prominent in Myanmar and neighboring Thailand. This linguistic variety underscores Myanmar's rich cultural heritage and complex identity.

III. LANGUAGE PLANNING AND POLICY IN MYANMAR

This section outlines language planning and policy in Myanmar. The details are as follows;

3.1 Justifications for the Necessity of Language Planning and Policy

Language planning and policy are essential for Myanmar, as in any other country. They help manage linguistic diversity, promote national unity, and ensure effective communication and access to opportunities for all citizens. Myanmar is a multilingual country with over 100 different languages spoken, and managing this linguistic diversity can be challenging. Here are some reasons why language planning and policy are necessary in Myanmar:

Preservation of Cultural Heritage: Myanmar's linguistic diversity reflects its rich cultural heritage. Managing languages and creating policy are instrumental in preserving and promoting these unique languages, which are integral to the identity of various ethnic groups.

National Unity: Myanmar has faced longstanding ethnic and linguistic tensions that have contributed to conflicts and divisions within the country. Adopting inclusive language policies that respect and recognize the different languages and dialects can foster a sense of national unity and promote social cohesion.

Education and Literacy: Language policy is closely linked to education. In a country with multiple languages spoken, decisions need to be made carefully about the medium of instruction in educational institutions. These choices can significantly impact educational outcomes and the literacy rates of different communities.

Administrative Efficiency: A well-thought-out language policy can improve administrative efficiency by determining which languages are used in government institutions, public services, and official documentation. This can help ensure smooth communication between the government and citizens.

Economic Development: Clear language planning can facilitate economic development by enabling effective communication between businesses, investors, and consumers. It can also support the growth of local industries and encourage foreign investment.

Minority Rights: Many ethnic minorities in Myanmar have historically faced marginalization and discrimination. Enacting language policies that protect the rights of minority languages can help address some of these inequalities and promote inclusivity.

International Communication: A coherent language policy can enhance Myanmar's ability to engage with the international community, including trade, diplomacy, and cultural exchanges.

Standardization and Modernization: In some cases, developing standardized versions of languages can aid in their modernization and adaptation to contemporary needs, such as in technical or scientific fields.

However, implementing effective language planning and policy is not without its challenges. Balancing the promotion of indigenous languages with the need for a lingua franca (a common language for communication) and managing potential conflicts between language communities require careful consideration and inclusive decision-making processes. In recent years, Myanmar has been undergoing significant political and social changes, and language planning and policy are likely to be key elements in the country's efforts to build a more inclusive and unified society. Key points regarding language planning and policy in Myanmar should include Official Language, Language Diversity, Language of Instruction, Language Conflict and Marginalization, Language Revitalization Efforts and Legal and Political Challenges.

3.2 Language Planning in Myanmar

Language planning involves the development of language policies and addresses various language-related issues. There are many aspects to language planning but mostly it is a response to language problems, with three main activities language such

as Status language planning, Corpus language planning, Language-in-education planning (Joseph Lo Bianco, 2016). Myanmar's diverse linguistic landscape necessitates ongoing efforts in all these areas of language planning. When the outcome of language planning is decided that becomes a language policy. Effective policies are those that are regularly assessed and adjusted to align with the evolving needs of society and its people. The most successful language planning combines "bottom-up" approaches, where community members, experts, and public officials collaborate on language decisions, with "top-down" actions, where national authorities provide clear guidance. Policies imposed without community involvement often fail to gain widespread acceptance.

Comprehensive language planning should recognize that language and communication are part of all social, personal, and economic life. The most effective approach to language policy is to integrate action at local, regional and national levels to address the community's linguistic needs comprehensively. This ensures that all actions are aligned and mutually supportive. This is the approach in Myanmar that is discussed in this brief report of 16 Facilitated Dialogues held in different states of the country and at the Mandalay conference. The key method for developing the national language policy has been through facilitated dialogues. To date 16 such dialogues have taken place. Since the initial meetings, the facilitated dialogues have been held in Naypyitaw, Yangon, Kayin state and in Myitkyina, Kachin state. A schedule of expanding these actions to all parts of the country is underway planned in 2016. Below is a list of facilitated dialogues:

-Indigenous and Ethnic Rights in Education. Yangon, 27-29 June, 2013
-Language Policy Forum, Eastern Burma Community Schools. Mae Sot, 12-14 February, 2014
-Education and Social Cohesion. Mawlamyine, 27-28 May, 2014
-Language Policy and Peacebuilding, Naypyitaw, 29-30 July, 2014
-Language Policy and Peacebuilding, Mawlamyine, 6-7 November, 2014
-Collective Policy Writing, Mawlamyine, 11-12 February, 2015
-National Coordination, Naypyitaw, March, 2015
-Deaf and Sign Language, Yangon, June, 2015
-Kayin State Policy, Hpa'an, June 2015
-Kachin State Language Policy, Myitkyina, June 2, 2015
-Deaf and Sign Language, Yangon, 27 October, 2015
-Kayin State Policy, Hpa'an, 23-24 October, 2015.
-Language Policy and Peacebuilding, mawlamyine, 22 October, 2015
-Kachin State Language Policy, Myitkyina, December 2-3, 2015
-Kayin State Language Policy, Hpa'an, December, 2015
-Kayin State Language Policy, Hpa'an, January, 2016
-Mon State Language Policy, Mawlamyine, January 2016 (Joseph Lo Bianco, 2016).

The process primarily relies on research, consultations, and collaborative decision-making conducted through "facilitated dialogues." These dialogues bring together three main groups:

1. Government officials, representing the state;
2. Community representatives, voicing the perspectives and concerns of ordinary citizens;
3. Experts, who present research findings and contribute specialized knowledge.

A mediator facilitates these discussions, guiding participants through conversations about language-related challenges, highlighting relevant research, and introducing potential solutions and best practices—whether from international experiences or other regions within Myanmar.

During these dialogues, participants work to resolve disagreements, examine research evidence, and evaluate practical alternatives. Topics of discussion span a wide range of issues, including multilingualism, literacy, equitable access to education, improving educational standards, mother tongue instruction, preservation of endangered languages, acquisition of the Myanmar language, the role of English, inclusive education, the needs of marginalized groups, and communication requirements in fields such as health, law, diplomacy, and commerce.

The facilitated dialogues have involved hundreds of participants from all walks of life. In their evaluations, participants were enthusiastic about the process. A conceptual overview of this approach is outlined below:

Sub-National Language: This pertains to discussions among Myanmar's ethnic groups regarding the role of their native languages in educating their children, providing services, and contributing to the local economy. This has been done so far in the Facilitated Dialogues across Myanmar. Part of this discussion is the relationship of local languages with the Myanmar language for national participation and with English. The state and township level is a suitable level to discuss language policy issues, including language use in education, the societal status of languages, and the development of language resources. To be most effective this should link to the Union level.

National Language: This focuses to provide all citizens with access to the national language, encourage reading and writing skills, and include English in the regular education system. Meetings held in Naypyitaw have played a key role in improving cooperation between national and state-level discussions on language policy. The planning extends beyond the education sector to address areas such as healthcare, legal systems, and economic development.

Extra-National Language: This concerns the significance of English and other global languages as tools for international engagement, including diplomacy, development, and trade. In today's interconnected world, global influences shape the linguistic choices of individuals and nations alike. Social media, communication technologies, travel, study opportunities, and employment abroad are all factors that strengthen the link between global languages and domestic language policies.

To sum up, guided by the Naypyitaw Principles, the goal is to establish a policy that promotes proficiency in the Myanmar language, broad understanding of English, strong backing for native languages, acknowledgment of ethnic education rights, and excellent reading and writing skills for everyone. This vision also seeks to nurture a culture of appreciation for linguistic and cultural diversity, alongside recognition of language rights in Myanmar.

3.3 Language Policy Formulations in Myanmar

Myanmar, a diverse and multilingual country, has a complex history of language policy formulations that have evolved over the years. The country's linguistic diversity is a result of its numerous ethnic groups, each with its own languages and dialects. This diversity has both enriched Myanmar's cultural tapestry and posed challenges for governance, particularly in language and education policies. To fully grasp Myanmar's language policy formulations, it's essential to explore its historical context, key policies, and their impact.

1. Historical Context: Myanmar's linguistic diversity is rooted in its ethnically diverse population, which includes several major groups, such as the Burman, Shan, Karen, Kachin, Mon, and numerous minority ethnicities. Over the centuries, these groups have developed their own languages and cultural identities.

2. British Colonial Rule: During British colonial rule (1824-1948), English language was dominant in administration and education. Native languages received little attention, and this neglect left a lasting legacy, impacting language usage patterns across the country.

3. Post-Independence Language Policy: Following independence in 1948, the newly formed administration faced the challenge of promoting national unity while respecting linguistic diversity. Key points in Myanmar's post-independence language policy include:

(i) National Language: In 196, the country's constitution established Burmese as the only national language, aiming to create a shared medium of communication among ethnic groups.

(ii) Language in Education: Burmese was promoted as the primary teaching language, with a strong emphasis on Burmese-language instruction in schools. This policy aimed to create a more unified educational system but faced resistance in ethnically diverse regions.

Under the Legal Framework of Language Policy, Myanmar's constitutions have consistently acknowledged the rights of 'national ethnic groups,' consisting of native minority communities, since gaining independence in 1948. The 1948, 1974, and 2008 Constitutions all incorporated provisions addressing these rights. The 1974 Constitution introduced clauses encouraging shared respect and the growth of native languages, cultures, and practices. These protections were broadened in the 2008 Constitution to include not only language but also literature, fine arts, and cultural heritage (Bradley, 2015). Further advancements were made with the enactment of the 2014 National Education Law and the 2015 Ethnic Rights Law. These laws clearly supported using and promoting indigenous groups' languages, writings, arts, traditions, and historical traditions. Facilitated dialogues, such as one held in Mawlamyine in May 2014, are essential in advancing these efforts. Throughout Myanmar's history, Burmese has remained the official language and the primary medium for education, administration, and the justice system, as stipulated in Article 216 of the 1948 Constitution, Articles 102 and 152(b) of the 1974 Constitution, and Article 450 of the 2008 Constitution. English, which was a co-official language from 1948, lost this status in 1974. The 1974 and 2008 constitutions allowed the supplementary adoption of indigenous minority languages in both education and the judicial system. These provisions were reinforced by the 2014 National Education Law, ensuring greater inclusivity and recognition of Myanmar's linguistic diversity (Joseph Lo Bianco, 2016).

4. Ethnic Tensions and Conflicts: Myanmar's rich ethnic diversity has frequently been accompanied by challenges and discord. Some ethnic minority groups viewed the imposition of Burmese as the national language and the emphasis on Burmese in education as efforts to assimilate their cultures. These tensions contributed to ethnic conflicts and insurgencies.

5. Recent Developments: In recent years, Myanmar has undergone significant political changes, including the transition to a quasi-civilian government in 2011 and subsequent democratic reforms. During this period, there was some progress in recognizing the linguistic rights of ethnic minorities, including the possibility of teaching and using their languages in schools. However, it's important to note that my knowledge is limited up to 2021, and the political situation in Myanmar has been highly dynamic.

6. Challenges and Future Directions: The formulation of an inclusive and equitable language policy in Myanmar remains a significant challenge. Key issues include:

(i) Preservation of Minority Languages: balancing between advancing the Burmese language and safeguarding minority languages and cultures is a delicate task.

(ii) Political Stability: Ongoing political instability in Myanmar, including the military coup in 2021, has disrupted efforts to address language policy and other governance issues.

(iii) Peace Negotiations: Peace negotiations with ethnic armed groups may include discussions on language rights and education in ethnically diverse regions.

A major breakthrough in working towards a comprehensive multilingual language policy was achieved at the Facilitated Dialogues in Naypyitaw in 2014 and 2015. Participants agreed that if language policy discussions were to take place across the country they should be coordinated and guided by a common focus, while still allowing for local variation. As a result they adopted the Naypytaw Principles, recommending that State level Facilitated Dialogues adapt these to suit local conditions. Finally, they called for a policy draft to be prepared in a collaborative way by mid to late 2016.

The Naypyitaw discussions concluded that the whole process offered significant national benefits in promoting national peace and reconciliation, supporting the education of minority children, improving social cohesion. These benefits are not only hoped for from the final result, but emerge from collaborative process of meeting together, discussing common problems guided by a facilitator, forging personal relationships, coming to understand each other's perspective and thinking about the role of communication across all sectors of society. The Naypyitaw Principles provide a framework for guiding language policies at the state, regional, and Union levels. These principles emphasize:

(1) Promoting the learning of the Myanmar language to ensure equal citizenship and social cohesion,
(2) Empowering ethnic nationalities in preserving and passing down their languages to future generations,
(3) Encouraging to participate actively ethnic nationalities in national life,
(4) Enhancing fair access to education, literacy, and academic excellence,
(5) Improving proficiency in Myanmar, English, and relevant local languages to help youth succeed in the professional job,
(6) Promoting knowledge of English and international languages for supporting trade, diplomacy, travel, and labor mobility, especially within Asean,

(7) Providing assistance for individuals with visual, hearing impairments, or other communication challenges to ensure accessibility, and
(8) Acknowledging and valuing the language, culture, tradition of the country's indigenous nationalities (Joseph Lo Bianco, 2016).

In sum, Myanmar's language policy formulations have evolved in response to its complex ethnic diversity and historical context. The promotion of Burmese as the official language, coupled with efforts to respect the linguistic rights of ethnic minorities, remains a key challenge for the country's ongoing political and social development.

IV. NEW EDUCATION PROGRAMS OF MYANMAR GOVERNMENT AND ITS CHALLENGES

The government of Myanmar has prioritized reforming its entire education system to ensure quality national education. To achieve this, the National Education Strategic Plan for 2016-2021, was introduced as a comprehensive, evidence-driven roadmap aimed at reforming the education sector. This long-term plan focuses on enhancing teaching, learning, vocational education, research, and innovation, ultimately improving student outcomes across all educational institutions (Myanmar Ministry of Education, 2016).

The Education Ministry has identified nine transformational shifts, which serve as high-level goals for each key area of the education sector. These shifts are designed to help Myanmar progress toward achieving its sustainable development goals for education. The conceptual framework for educational reforms outlines the key areas of change:

(1) Preschool and Kindergarten Learning: Making sure every child can access high-quality early childhood learning to kick-start their learning journey.
(2) Basic Education: Guaranteeing that every child can access and finish good-quality foundational education.
(3) Basic Education Curriculum: Providing a curriculum that equips students with relevant knowledge, skills, and competencies for both personal development and the country's social and economic demands in the modern era.
(4) Student Assessment and Examinations: Implementing a robust evaluation method to enhance students' progress and achievement.
(5) Teacher Training and Administration: Empowering teachers to use interactive teaching methods that benefit all students.
(6) Alternative Education: Offering quality-assured, nationally recognized alternative education programs for learners to achieve their goals.
(7) Technical Skills and Job-Oriented Learning: Broadening opportunities to join effective training programs that are responsive to labor market needs, ensuring graduates are job-ready.
(8) University Education: Ensuring fair access to top-quality advanced learning opportunities, leading to improved job opportunities and supporting a knowledge-driven economy.
(9) Administration, Skill Building, and Quality Control: Ensuring that education leaders use evidence-based decisions to enhance instruction and education in schools and institutions (Myanmar Ministry of Education, 2016).

These reforms aim to create a more inclusive and effective education system, setting the foundation for Myanmar's future development.

To effectively implement the nine Transformational Changes, the accountable divisions within the Ministry of Education and related ministries must work together strategically, ensuring coordinated actions across all education sub-sectors. This collaboration is vital to enhance efficiency and maximize the impact of government and donor investments in education. At this crucial moment, higher education will face increasing demands to foster critical thinking, innovation, and practical research that benefits both students and industries. It will also require substantial investments in infrastructure, such as improved internet, libraries, and laboratories, to support academic growth (Ministry of Education, 2014).

Building a strong education system is a long-term commitment, and Myanmar's government has been making both short-term and long-term efforts since 2011 to reform its education sector. Over the past decade, these reforms have yielded positive results, such as higher student enrollment due to the elimination of entrance fees and a growing education budget. The increase in funding has led to more schools, students, and teachers. Numerous new initiatives have been launched to enhance access to quality education, such as the CESR program, which establishes a strong evidence base for the National Education Strategic Plan, and measurable improvements in education service delivery, governance, and school infrastructure (Myanmar Ministry of Education, 2016).

While progress is evident, significant challenges remain in the education sector. It is essential to anticipate these obstacles and prepare to address them effectively. Reforms often come with various difficulties, but facing them with proper planning and preparation is crucial for overcoming these hurdles and continuing the path toward a better education system.

The primary difficulty is whether the goals of the updated curriculum can be effectively achieved. In isolated regions with poor transport and a lack of teachers, educators are often responsible for teaching multiple subjects. This makes it difficult to cover all subjects effectively, even under the earlier curriculum. The real difficulty is how teachers will manage to handle a broader curriculum with additional learning areas.

The second issue revolves around whether teachers will adapt and improve their teaching methods to fulfill the requirements of the new curriculum. In Myanmar's cultural context, teachers are traditionally seen as authority figures, and students are expected to show respect and obedience. This creates a barrier to encouraging critical thinking and inquiry, as many students are reluctant to ask questions. Additionally, implementing methods like the Child-Centered Approach may be difficult due to large class sizes.

The third challenge concerns the availability of facilities for teaching physical education, arts, and music. Additionally, there is the challenge of reforming the assessment system to move away from the exam-focused approach. Despite these obstacles, I believe

that there is always hope for progress with every reform effort. Building a better education system is a gradual process that requires patience and commitment. Myanmar is striving to develop different areas, including schooling, by establishing organized plans and procedures. I am hopeful that the education system will continue to improve and achieve greater success.

V. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In conclusion, reviewing language planning, policy, and the implementation of Myanmar's new education program highlights the important part that language plays in forming a country's education system. Myanmar's diverse linguistic and ethnic composition presents both benefits and difficulties in achieving equitable and inclusive education.

Through a comprehensive examination of existing language rules and the new education program's introduction, it becomes evident that Myanmar is making significant strides toward addressing historical disparities in access to quality education. The recognition of multiple languages and cultures within the education system is a positive step towards fostering social cohesion and preserving the country's rich cultural heritage.

However, challenges remain on the path to effective implementation. Ensuring equitable opportunities for every indigenous and linguistic groups, training teachers in multilingual education strategies, and the allocation of adequate resources are essential components of a successful language planning and policy framework. Moreover, ongoing efforts to engage with local communities, support language variety, and promote mother tongue use in early learning are vital for the long-term success of educational reforms of Myanmar.

Given the complex linguistic and social dynamics in Myanmar, ongoing review, evaluation, and adaptation of language planning and policy are necessary. Furthermore, collaboration with international organizations and experts in education and language planning can provide valuable insights and support for the country's educational transformation.

Thus, Myanmar's journey towards inclusive and effective language planning, policy, and a new education program is a commendable endeavor that acknowledges the value of language diversity and cultural heritage in the nation's development. With sustained commitment, cooperation, and a focus on addressing existing challenges, Myanmar has the potential to create a more equitable and inclusive educational system that benefits all its citizens and contributes to the nation's growth and prosperity.

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